

The Creation and Eternity of the Universe in the *Ṣūfī* Thought of Abd al-Ḥaqq ibn Sab'īn al-Andalusī: A Dialogue between Philosophy and Mysticism

Mahmoud Naamneh¹, Jamal Assadi², Khaled Sindawi³

Abstract

This study examines the innovative philosophical and *Ṣūfī* perspectives of Abd al-Ḥaqq ibn Sab'īn al-Andalusī (1217-1269) on the theological debate surrounding the creation and eternity of the universe. Centered on his treatise *Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyyā*, written in response to questions posed by Emperor Frederick II of Sicily, the article explores Ibn Sab'īn's synthesis of *Ṣūfī* metaphysics, Islamic theology, and Aristotelian philosophy. His distinctive approach, blending logical argumentation with mystical insights, diverges from both Greek naturalism and mainstream Islamic philosophical traditions. Through close analysis of primary texts and contextual examination, the study highlights Ibn Sab'īn's engagement with key philosophical and theological schools, including Mu'tazilite thought and the *Ash'arite* tradition, while addressing broader interfaith exchanges between Islamic and Christian intellectual traditions during the *Almohad* period. By challenging prevailing notions of eternity and creation, Ibn Sab'īn offers an alternative framework rooted in *Ṣūfī* ontology and epistemology. This work contributes to existing scholarship by illuminating Ibn Sab'īn's intellectual originality, situating him at the crossroads of philosophy, mysticism, and intercultural dialogue. It also underscores his relevance to contemporary discussions in *Ṣūfī* studies, comparative metaphysics, and interfaith relations.

Keywords: *Ṣūfī* philosophy, creation of the universe, eternity of the universe, Ibn Sab'īn, metaphysics, Islamic mysticism.

Introduction: An Overview of Ibn Sab'īn's *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyyā*

The term "philosophy" in the Islamic medieval context often referred to a set of intellectual disciplines that incorporated Islamic religious texts to explore metaphysical concepts such as creation, existence, and the nature of the universe. Unlike the contemporary understanding of philosophy as a largely secular endeavor, Islamic philosophy was deeply intertwined with theological inquiries, aimed at reconciling rational thought with divine revelation. Islamic philosophy evolved as a dynamic field within the broader framework of Islamic culture and intellectual traditions, encompassing various schools of thought, including *Ṣūfism*, *Ash'arism*, *Mu'tazilism*, and others. These schools represented diverse approaches to understanding metaphysical realities, often engaging in spirited debates that culminated in renowned works such as *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) by al-Ghazālī and *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*) by Ibn Rushd. Such texts highlighted foundational issues, including the eternity of the universe, the nature of the divine, and the tension between esoteric and exoteric knowledge. These debates fostered a tradition of rich intellectual diversity, with Islamic scholars delving into deeply rooted religious and philosophical perspectives (Leaman, 2002, pp. 211–212).

This intellectual tradition laid the groundwork for the contributions of 'Abd al-Ḥaqq Ibn Sab'īn, whose work *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyyā* represents a notable synthesis of *Ṣūfī* and philosophical thought. Born in Murcia, al-Andalus, in 613 AH/1216 CE to a wealthy family—some sources even claim his lineage traced back to the Prophet Muhammad—Ibn Sab'īn rose to prominence as a philosopher and *Ṣūfī* scholar. His early education encompassed Arabic literature, linguistics, and rational sciences, which prepared him for a career as both a mystic and an intellectual. Mentored by the *Ṣūfī* master Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Yūsuf, Ibn Sab'īn achieved mastery in *Ṣūfism* and later composed several influential works during his residence in the Maghreb (Al-Muzaydī, 2017).

Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyyā originated as a response to inquiries from Emperor Frederick II of Sicily (1198–1250), a ruler renowned for his intellectual curiosity and knowledge of various sciences, religions, and philosophies. Fluent in European languages and Arabic, Frederick was dissatisfied with the responses provided by European theologians and Muslim scholars to his philosophical and theological queries. Learning of Ibn Sab'īn's reputation as a *Ṣūfī* philosopher in al-Andalus, Frederick posed a series of profound questions regarding the eternity of the universe, the nature of creation, causality, and other metaphysical subjects (Nasr, 2006, pp. 156–158). Ibn Sab'īn's responses, preserved in *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyyā*, represent a sophisticated integration of *Ṣūfī* metaphysics, Islamic theology, and Aristotelian philosophy.

Ibn Sabʿīn's intellectual approach was distinguished by his use of Ṣūfī reasoning, rigorous logic, and mathematical precision. He balanced mystical language with rational discourse, a methodology that set him apart from his contemporaries. Drawing upon both Greek philosophical traditions and contemporary Islamic thought, Ibn Sabʿīn employed a unique style that redefined the boundaries of traditional gnostic and theological discourse. By merging Ṣūfī insights with philosophical rigor, he presented an innovative framework for addressing complex metaphysical debates.

The significance of Ibn Sabʿīn's work lies in its demonstration of a "Ṣūfī specificity," which reimagines perennial questions of existence and creation through a distinctively mystical lens. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who adhered closely to established schools of thought, Ibn Sabʿīn forged a new path that combined esoteric insights with systematic argumentation. This duality allowed him to engage with contentious topics in a manner that was both spiritually profound and intellectually robust. His ability to intertwine mystical and logical elements underscores his pioneering role in Islamic intellectual history, particularly within the Andalusian and broader Arab-Islamic contexts.

Moreover, Ibn Sabʿīn's correspondence with Frederick II illustrates the rich intellectual and religious exchanges of the time. These dialogues highlight the "civilized" nature of interfaith and intercultural discussions between the Islamic and Christian worlds, emphasizing shared philosophical and theological concerns (Schimmel, 2006). Frederick's engagement with Ṣūfī thought, as exemplified by his questions to Ibn Sabʿīn, reflects the interconnectedness of these traditions and the mutual curiosity that characterized their interactions. Such exchanges underscore the universality of philosophical inquiry and reveal the profound influence of Islamic scholarship on medieval European thought.

For readers less familiar with Islamic philosophy and *Ṣūfism*, it is important to note that these disciplines were not isolated from broader intellectual currents but were deeply integrated into the cultural, religious, and scientific fabric of the medieval Islamic world. Islamic philosophy often served as a bridge between ancient Greek thought and European scholasticism, while *Ṣūfism*, with its emphasis on spiritual experience and divine love, offered an alternative yet complementary perspective to rational theology. Ibn Sabʿīn's work exemplifies this synthesis, addressing age-old questions of existence and causality with a distinctive voice that resonates across cultures and traditions.

Through this interplay of mysticism and logic, Ibn Sabʿīn's *Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyyā* stands as a testament to the intellectual vibrancy of medieval Islamic thought. His interaction with Emperor Frederick II exemplifies the profound cross-cultural exchanges of the era while also underscoring the lasting significance of such discussions in modern philosophical and theological thought. By situating Ibn Sabʿīn within this broader historical and intellectual context, this study seeks to illuminate his unique contributions to the fields of metaphysics, *Ṣūfism*, and interfaith dialogue.

The article is structured into several sections. Following this introduction, the first section studies Ibn Sabʿīn's intellectual background and the historical circumstances surrounding his correspondence with Emperor Frederick II. The subsequent sections examine his treatment of key metaphysical debates, including the eternity versus creation of the universe, causality, and the nature of divine knowledge. A dedicated section focuses on Ibn Sabʿīn's innovative synthesis of *Ṣūfī* mysticism and Aristotelian philosophy, highlighting how his approach diverged from both Greek naturalism and Islamic orthodoxy. Finally, the article concludes by assessing the broader implications of Ibn Sabʿīn's work for contemporary discussions in Ṣūfī studies, comparative metaphysics, and interfaith dialogue.

Through this structure, the article aims to illuminate Ibn Sabʿīn's unique intellectual legacy, emphasizing his role as a bridge between disparate philosophical traditions and his enduring relevance in modern philosophical and theological discourse.

The Courtesy in Ibn Sabʿīn's Letter and the Ṣūfī Perspective

What stands out in Ibn Sabʿīn's *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyyā* is the extraordinary respect and courtesy with which he addresses Emperor Frederick II. This politeness is not a mere attempt to gain favor or show deference but rather reflects the essence of Islamic Ṣūfī discourse, which consistently promotes tolerance and dissolves religious barriers. Ṣūfism emphasizes the unity of God and perceives all monotheistic religions as divine laws established by the same Creator. As the "Great Sheikh" Ibn ʿArabī articulates in his poetic works, such as the poem from his *Dīwān*, "*O Doves of the Tamarisk and the Willow Tree*," the universality of love transcends all religious forms:

My heart has grown to house each form it sees
A field for gazelles that roam in gentle ease
A monastery where the monks may pray
A temple for idols where worshippers stay.

The Kaaba's grace and pilgrims' sacred call
The Torah's truth, the Qur'an's guiding all

I follow love wherever it may steer
For love's my faith, my creed, my path sincere.¹
(Ibn 'Arabī, 1996). (Adab Wiki, n.d.)

In *Ṣūfism*, religion is equated with love—divine love for the Creator. Ibn 'Arabī elaborates on this notion in his *Meccan Revelations*, distinguishing *Ṣūfī* writings, poetry, and scripture. He emphasizes that God, unclouded by speculation or abstraction, directly inspires divine knowledge. According to Ibn 'Arabī, the truths revealed to the heart are distinct from the rhetorical and figurative nature of poetry, which often employs allegory and ambiguity. Instead, divine revelation presents reality as it truly is, without distortion:

"The Almighty, from whom we receive knowledge by an emptying of the heart from thought and preparation for divine inspiration, gives us knowledge of things as they are in their essence... not generalized or ambiguous. The truths we see, whether singular or composite, or pertaining to divine reality, are free from doubt and error" (Ibn 'Arabī, 1972, pp. 264–265).

For *Ṣūfīs* like Ibn Sabʿīn, love is the divine force that brings creation into being, a notion that frames their understanding of the universe and the Creator's relationship with humanity.

It is worth noting that Ibn Sabʿīn's letter to Emperor Frederick II embodies this ethos of *Ṣūfī* courtesy and tolerance. Despite the emperor's position as a Christian ruler, Ibn Sabʿīn addresses him with a tone of profound respect and sincerity. Historical accounts suggest that after reading Ibn Sabʿīn's response, Frederick II sent him a monetary reward as a gesture of gratitude. However, Ibn Sabʿīn, in adherence to *Ṣūfī* ethics, declined the gift, emphasizing the principle of selflessness in *Ṣūfī* conduct.

The introduction to *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqilliyā* provides insight into both Ibn Sabʿīn's courteous approach and the reasons why Frederick sought him out. Ibn Sabʿīn begins the treatise by addressing the emperor:

"You asked, O noble and gracious leader, the seeker of guidance, may God guide you to righteousness, prepare you to receive it, and show you the path of truth through His light. May He lead you from the assumptions of conjecture to the certainty of obligation, and grant you discernment between truth and falsehood, concerning questions that have puzzled the wise of every era and the learned of every age. Each has spoken of them according to what came to mind and what knowledge they were granted, using broad and general language, with little precision or consistency in meaning. The seeker of guidance must be wary of harsh language and avoid ambiguous or equivocal terms without clarification or qualification..." (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1941, p. 262).

The quoted passage reveals a multifaceted context that deepens our understanding of the interaction between Ibn Sabʿīn and Emperor Frederick II. It underscores the intellectual, cultural, and philosophical dimensions of their correspondence, reflecting a unique moment of cross-cultural dialogue.

Firstly, the tone of respect and humility in Ibn Sabʿīn's address is striking. By referring to Frederick as a "noble and gracious leader" and a "seeker of guidance," Ibn Sabʿīn sets the stage for a dialogue rooted in mutual respect. This courtesy is not merely a reflection of political diplomacy but aligns with the *Ṣūfī* ethos of transcending religious and hierarchical barriers. *Ṣūfī* philosophy often emphasizes the unity of humanity in the shared pursuit of divine truth, and Ibn Sabʿīn's tone exemplifies this principle. His language, imbued with reverence and sincerity, fosters an intellectual openness that invites genuine engagement with the emperor's inquiries.

Secondly, the passage situates Frederick's questions within a universal intellectual tradition, emphasizing their relevance across time and cultures. Ibn Sabʿīn acknowledges that the issues raised—such as the eternity of the universe, the nature of creation, and the relationship between causality and divine will—have "puzzled the wise of every era and the learned of every age." By framing these questions as timeless and universal, Ibn Sabʿīn validates Frederick's curiosity and simultaneously situates himself within a global philosophical discourse. This approach highlights the interconnectedness of medieval intellectual traditions, where Islamic, Christian, and classical Greek philosophies intersected in the exploration of fundamental metaphysical questions.

Furthermore, the critique embedded in the passage sheds light on Ibn Sabʿīn's philosophical rigor and dissatisfaction with superficial or imprecise discourse. He notes that previous responses to Frederick's

¹ The authors did the English version of these lines.

inquiries relied on "broad and general language, with little precision or consistency in meaning." This critique not only underscores Ibn Sabʿīn's confidence in his ability to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive answer but also reflects the intellectual standards of his time. His insistence on clarity and precision is a hallmark of both philosophical and *Ṣūfī* methodology, which seek to unveil truth through rigorous reasoning and spiritual insight.

Moreover, the passage highlights Ibn Sabʿīn's emphasis on respectful communication. He advises against "harsh language" and warns of the dangers of "ambiguous or equivocal terms," underscoring the importance of transparency and sincerity in intellectual discourse. This reflects the *Ṣūfī* commitment to honest and thoughtful engagement, where the pursuit of knowledge is guided by both rational inquiry and ethical considerations. Ibn Sabʿīn's balanced approach exemplifies a philosophical and spiritual tradition that values dialogue as a means of bridging gaps between differing perspectives. Finally, the passage sheds light on Frederick II's intellectual ambition and the cosmopolitan nature of his court. His willingness to seek answers from an Andalusian *Ṣūfī* like Ibn Sabʿīn reflects his openness to engaging with diverse intellectual traditions. This dynamic illustrates the cross-cultural exchanges that characterized the medieval period, where Islamic and Christian scholars often found themselves united in their quest to address shared metaphysical concerns. Frederick's dissatisfaction with the responses of other scholars highlights the unique role Ibn Sabʿīn played as a thinker capable of navigating complex philosophical and theological questions with depth and originality.

In brief, the quoted passage encapsulates the rich intellectual and cultural context of Ibn Sabʿīn's engagement with Frederick II. Through his tone, philosophical rigor, and *Ṣūfī* principles, Ibn Sabʿīn exemplifies the potential for cross-cultural dialogue to transcend religious and ideological divides. This interaction reflects the intellectual vibrancy of the medieval world and simultaneously underscores the enduring relevance of mutual respect and thoughtful engagement in addressing universal questions. Ibn Sabʿīn's response, rich in intellectual rigor and informed by *Ṣūfī* principles, illustrates his unique ability to engage with the emperor's challenging questions. His language, blending respect and scholarly depth, exemplifies the "civilized" dialogue between Islamic and Christian intellectual traditions, particularly in the field of comparative metaphysics and theology.

Naturally, these letters held significant political importance due to the sensitive context in which they emerged. During the Almohad era in al-Andalus, there was a pressing need for interfaith dialogue with neighboring states, particularly Sicily. These letters served as an intellectual bridge, connecting the Almohads with the Christians in Sicily (Al-Jābirī, 2006). This article focuses on a single question posed by the King of Sicily to Ibn Sabʿīn: Is the universe eternal, or was it created? This question was part of a larger set of inquiries that the Sicilian king directed to Ibn Sabʿīn.

The study draws upon the first critical edition of *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Siqilliyyā*, edited by the Turkish scholar Muḥammad Sharaf al-Dīn Yā al-Taḳāyā in 1941. This examination provided insight into the rich and contentious issues addressed by Ibn Sabʿīn, analyzed through a rigorous scholarly methodology. To contextualize the philosophical debates, various Greek and Hellenistic works by thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Parmenides, and Galen were also referenced.

In *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Siqilliyyā*, Ibn Sabʿīn engaged with numerous gnostic and metaphysical topics. This article focuses on a single, critical question—the eternity or creation of the universe—while leaving room for the exploration of other topics in future research. Ibn Sabʿīn also addressed or intersected with these issues in other works, such as *Bad' al-ʿArif* (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1978) and a collection of his letters compiled by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī under the title *Rasā'il Ibn Sabʿīn* (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1956). The primary goal of this article is to critically examine Ibn Sabʿīn's unique contributions to the metaphysical debate on the eternity or creation of the universe, displaying his integration of Islamic philosophy and *Ṣūfī* thought. By analyzing his arguments, this study highlights his ability to bridge rational inquiry with spiritual insight, positioning him as a significant figure within the intellectual exchanges of his time. His engagement with Emperor Frederick II underscores the universality of philosophical inquiry, transcending religious and cultural boundaries. Through rigorous engagement with Greek, Hellenistic, and Islamic traditions, Ibn Sabʿīn's work provides a nuanced perspective that enriches the broader discourse on metaphysics and cross-cultural dialogue, emphasizing its enduring relevance to contemporary philosophical and theological discussions.

Eternity or Creation of the Universe: The *Ṣūfī* Perspective of Ibn Sabʿīn

The question of whether the universe is eternal or created remains one of the most profound debates in philosophy, spanning ancient Greek thought to medieval Islamic discourse. This discussion probes the origins and beginnings of the universe, the nature of existence, and the intricate relationships between the Creator, creation, and purpose. It transcends purely metaphysical inquiry, reaching into theological, philosophical, and even cosmological dimensions.

Philosophers from diverse traditions have addressed this issue through various frameworks. In ancient Greece, thinkers such as Aristotle, Parmenides, and Galen grappled with these questions. Their ideas,

grounded in natural philosophy, often stood in contrast to interpretations derived from religious texts, which became central to discussions among adherents of multiple faiths. Within the medieval Islamic world, this debate engaged theological schools such as the Ashʿarites, Muʿtazilites, and Šūfīs (Hourani, 1991; Al-Jabiri, 2011).

Amid these debates, Ibn Sabʿīn offered a perspective that diverged significantly from both Islamic and Greek traditions. In *Al-Kalām ʿalā al-Masāʾil al-Šiqillīyyā*, Ibn Sabʿīn crafted an innovative approach that juxtaposed Greek philosophical arguments with Islamic theological thought. His analysis engaged with these perspectives and synthesized them, formulating a distinctive position that departed from the dominant paradigms of his time (Trimingham, 1979).

What sets Ibn Sabʿīn's approach apart is his shift from conventional Šūfī methodologies, which heavily relied on spiritual illumination and mystical experiences. Instead, he introduced a synthesis that combined elements of Muʿtazilite theology, natural philosophy, and Šūfī metaphysics. By doing so, he reshaped Šūfī discourse, demonstrating its intellectual rigor alongside its spiritual profundity. This departure positioned Ibn Sabʿīn as a key figure in Islamic intellectual history, one who approached philosophical questions with a blend of mystical insight and rational inquiry. This shift marked a departure from figures like al-Hallāj and al-Suhrawardī, who emphasized spiritual effusion and hierarchical mystical frameworks.

Ibn Sabʿīn adhered to *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of existence), a doctrine central to his thought. He made significant contributions to the discourse on *ʿilm ladunī* (divine knowledge) and developed a distinctive Šūfī methodology known as *al-sabʿīniyyā*, which gained prominence in al-Andalus and North Africa. Despite his influence, Ibn Sabʿīn faced criticism from scholars who accused him of excessive monism and weakening theological orthodoxy. Some critics even labeled him heretical. These polarized responses, however, only underscored his intellectual significance and his ability to engage with complex metaphysical issues.

The debate over the eternity or creation of the universe was central to medieval Šūfī thought and particularly evident in the works of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (1164–1240). Ibn ʿArabī profoundly influenced Islamic philosophy and Šūfī traditions, as evidenced in works such as *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyā* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. He viewed the universe as contingent, existing through God's continuous creative act. His philosophy emphasized the inseparability of the divine and the created, offering a vision of unity and interdependence (Ibn ʿArabī, 1370 AH; Zargar, 2011).

While Ibn Sabʿīn shared Ibn ʿArabī's commitment to *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he took the concept further. Rejecting the philosophical hierarchies of existence proposed by earlier Šūfīs and philosophers, Ibn Sabʿīn dismissed such distinctions as illusory. Unlike Ibn ʿArabī, who allowed for gradations of being, Ibn Sabʿīn argued for an absolute monism that left no room for duality. His interpretation of existence and causality directly challenged classical Greek philosophy, particularly its notion of an eternal universe.

In *Al-Kalām ʿalā al-Masāʾil al-Šiqillīyyā*, Ibn Sabʿīn critiques Galen's assertion of an eternal universe, arguing that it contradicts the divine nature and attributes. He posits that the universe, with its celestial bodies and motions, necessitates a "Prime Mover" who is eternal. This mover initiates motion in a world that is inherently contingent. He writes:

What is the philosopher's belief regarding the universe? Does he see it as eternal, or created, or is he uncertain? If he claims it is eternal, what is his proof? If he is uncertain, and the evidence seems equally balanced, what are these conflicting arguments? (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1941, p. 260).

This passage encapsulates Ibn Sabʿīn's method of engaging with philosophical arguments. He rigorously challenges their premises while grounding his conclusions in theological principles. He contends that an eternal universe undermines the concept of a singular, eternal Creator. By tracing the chain of causes and effects back to the "Prime Mover," Ibn Sabʿīn affirms the universe's created nature. The originality of Ibn Sabʿīn's perspective lies in his ability to transcend the dichotomy between classical Greek naturalism and Islamic theological orthodoxy. By mediating between these traditions, he constructs an argument that integrates their elements while asserting a uniquely Šūfī worldview. His synthesis of rational inquiry and mystical insight underscores his role as an intellectual bridge between disparate philosophical traditions.

This article's exploration of Ibn Sabʿīn's treatment of the eternity or creation of the universe opens new avenues for further research. In particular, it invites deeper investigation into his intellectual relationship with figures like Ibn ʿArabī. While direct connections between the two have not been extensively documented, their shared Andalusian origins and overlapping metaphysical concerns suggest an area ripe for inquiry. Ibn Sabʿīn's critiques of Greek philosophy, coupled with his radical

interpretation of *wahdat al-wujūd*, position him as a thinker who simultaneously inherited and reshaped the intellectual legacy of his predecessors.

Furthermore, Ibn Sab'īn's treatment of motion and causality highlights his intellectual depth. He distinguishes between self-initiated motion (*ḥaraka dhātīyyā*), natural motion (*ḥaraka ṭabī'īyyā*), and celestial motion (*ḥaraka aḥlākīyyā*). While self-initiated motion is voluntary and natural motion is governed by physical laws, celestial motion reflects the unified will of the eternal mover. Ibn Sab'īn argues that celestial bodies, lacking cognition, cannot sustain motion without the influence of a transcendent force.

This perspective challenges both Greek naturalist views and Islamic philosophical orthodoxy, offering a novel synthesis of metaphysical reasoning and Sūfī principles. By grounding his arguments in the necessity of a Prime Mover, Ibn Sab'īn constructs a framework that reconciles theological and philosophical perspectives.

Ultimately, Ibn Sab'īn's contributions reflect a deliberate synthesis of philosophical inquiry and Sūfī spirituality. His critique of naturalist views, his development of the concept of motion, and his insistence on the necessity of an eternal mover highlight his role as a critical thinker at the intersection of classical philosophy and Islamic thought. Through these contributions, Ibn Sab'īn addressed the theological challenges of his time while enriching the broader discourse on existence, causality, and metaphysics in medieval Islamic philosophy.

The Philosophical Influences on Ibn Sab'īn: Between Ancient Greek Philosophy and Islamic Philosophical Thought

Ibn Sab'īn references various naturalist Greek philosophers throughout his *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyyā*, positioning their theories as fundamentally distinct from his Sūfī framework and the broader Sūfī conception of the world's eternity (*qidam*) and creation (*ḥudūth*). Sūfī thought, as articulated by medieval Muslim mystics, is often summarized as "a creation through which humans emulate their Creator" (Farrūkh, 1981, p. 173). In contrast, Greek naturalist philosophers, such as Parmenides and Galen, generally viewed the world as eternal in its entirety, subscribing to a "heavenly bodies as movers and moved" framework. This divergence between Sūfī creationism and Greek naturalism forms the foundation of Ibn Sab'īn's critique.

Among the naturalist philosophers, Aristotle occupies a unique position in Ibn Sab'īn's writings. Unlike his counterparts, Aristotle did not categorically assert the eternity of the universe. Instead, he posited that all motion in the universe is ultimately caused by a single Prime Mover (*al-muḥarrrik al-awwal*). This nuanced stance earned Aristotle Ibn Sab'īn's respect as a figure of "true scientific authority," distinct from other Greek philosophers. Aristotle's idea of the Prime Mover, however, served as a starting point for Ibn Sab'īn to critique and expand upon, integrating it into his distinctly Sūfī perspective.

Ibn Sab'īn critiques the weaknesses in naturalist theories, particularly their assertion of the world's eternity without providing definitive evidence. He viewed this lack of epistemic certainty as a fundamental flaw. While some philosophers invoked the "mover and moved" framework, Ibn Sab'īn rejected their conclusions, considering them devoid of rigorous proof. As detailed in *Al-Kalām 'alā al-Masā'il al-Ṣiqillīyyā*, Ibn Sab'īn approaches the issue with a distinct method, integrating logical demonstrations. He posits that every motion originates from a prior mover: the first mover, being eternal, imparts motion to subsequent entities. This original mover is self-sufficient and uncaused, embodying the essence of motion itself, which is then transmitted to later entities such as celestial spheres. Each subsequent mover is both a recipient of motion and a transmitter of it, creating a chain of causality that ultimately returns to the eternal Prime Mover.

In this context, Ibn Sab'īn writes:

"If we assert that the motion arising from the mover requires, by condition of relation, a mover, and the proof is established that the first mover is eternal and that motion itself is eternal, then what we posit without a mover must involve a transition from one state to another. Such a transition can only occur in the realm of generation and corruption." (1941, p. 250).

This statement highlights Ibn Sab'īn's departure from the Greek naturalist view of motion as an intrinsic property of celestial bodies. He instead frames motion as contingent upon an eternal external cause. For Ibn Sab'īn, the notion of self-sustained celestial motion, as posited by naturalists, contradicts the principles of contingency and causality, which require an independent, eternal mover to maintain coherence in the cosmos.

In contrast to the naturalists, Ibn Sab'īn's Sūfī framework draws upon metaphysical principles articulated by figures such as Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, who approached the question of the world's eternity from a mystical and spiritual perspective. Ibn 'Arabī emphasized divine love (*ishq*) as a central force in creation, framing the universe as contingent upon God's continuous creative act. This view diverges sharply from Greek notions of static eternity. Ibn Sab'īn, while influenced by Ibn

ʿArabī’s concept of the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), moves beyond it to propose an absolute monism that rejects even subtle hierarchies of existence.

Ibn Sabʿīn’s treatment of motion and causality reflects his attempt to transcend the limitations of Greek naturalism and Islamic theological orthodoxy. By dissecting the concept of motion through the framework of identity (*hawīyyā*), he develops a unique metaphysical argument. He asserts that the universe, with all its celestial bodies, cannot generate motion independently or through an internal force. Instead, motion must originate from an external, eternal mover (*muḥarrik qadīm*) who imparts order and continuity to the cosmos. This external Prime Mover resolves the inconsistencies Ibn Sabʿīn identifies in naturalist theories, particularly their reliance on eternal motion without a demonstrable cause.

To clarify this argument, Ibn Sabʿīn categorizes motion into three forms:

1. Self-initiated motion (*ḥaraka dhātīyyā*), which is voluntary and deliberate, such as a human deciding to move left or right.
2. Natural motion (*ḥaraka ṭabīʿīyyā*), which is involuntary and bound by physical laws, limiting simultaneous multidirectional movement.
3. Celestial motion (*ḥaraka aflākiyyā*), which is uniform and dictated by the eternal mover. Celestial bodies do not possess cognitive ability, unlike living beings, and their consistent, circular motion reflects the unified will of the eternal mover.

Ibn Sabʿīn elaborates on these ideas, asserting that any motion without an external cause would eventually dissipate due to its internal limitations. This leads to his fundamental assertion that the circular motion of celestial bodies, such as planets and stars, indicates a single, eternal mover that governs the universe. This concept diverges significantly from Aristotle’s Prime Mover, as Ibn Sabʿīn incorporates spiritual dimensions, framing the Prime Mover as both the initiator of motion and the metaphysical unity underlying existence.

He writes:

"Know that the proof you sought, which I described to you through the craft of synthesis, will be explained with the aid of God Almighty. The sage saw that occurrence after nonexistence could only be understood in terms of succession. In summary, it cannot be comprehended without the idea of time preceding it, and time, as he stated, is a derivative of the world. Time is the measure of motion in terms of succession, of before and after. Therefore, if this is true, and time is inseparable from the occurrence of events without precedence, then it is impossible to posit the occurrence of the world without the succession of time." (1941, p. 250).

Ibn Sabʿīn’s perspective also intersects intriguingly with Ibn ʿArabī’s ideas on celestial motion. While Ibn ʿArabī contextualizes circular motion within his mystical cosmology—linking it to divine will and the unfolding of existence—Ibn Sabʿīn focuses on causality and philosophical rigor. Their shared emphasis on circularity as a symbol of unity underscores a broader intellectual dialogue between mysticism and philosophy in the Islamic world.

Ultimately, Ibn Sabʿīn’s contributions reflect a deliberate synthesis of philosophical inquiry and *Ṣūfī* spirituality. His critique of naturalist views, his development of the concept of motion, and his insistence on the necessity of an eternal mover highlight his role as a critical thinker at the intersection of classical philosophy and Islamic thought. By offering a framework that integrates logic with faith, Ibn Sabʿīn transcends the limitations of his Greek and Islamic predecessors, making a lasting contribution to the discourse on metaphysics and cosmology.

A New *Ṣūfī* Perspective

Ibn Sabʿīn presents a groundbreaking *Ṣūfī* interpretation of the eternal Creator and the temporal universe, offering a distinctive critique of classical Greek and Islamic philosophical traditions. His vision, which scholars have termed “alternative *Ṣūfism*,” provides a bold counter-narrative to prevailing metaphysical discourses. Studies such as al-ʿAdlūnī (2006) and Dīb et al. (2022) explore this divergence, particularly in Ibn Sabʿīn’s innovative use of *Ṣūfī* terminology in works like *Tajalliyāt al-Muṣṭalah al-Ṣūfī*.

Ibn Sabʿīn takes particular aim at the Greek naturalist philosophers, who argued for the eternity of the universe through their “cosmic spheres and motion” framework. He dismisses these views as lacking the rigorous proofs required for such claims. However, he makes an exception for Aristotle, whose concept of the “Prime Mover” as the ultimate origin of motion aligns more closely with sound reasoning. Ibn Sabʿīn elevates Aristotle as a significant reference point for his argument that the universe’s motion necessitates a singular, eternal mover (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1941, pp. 253–254).

A key pillar of Ibn Sabʿīn’s critique lies in his rejection of the idea that motion could arise from non-existence. He asserts that motion is an activity of existence, not non-being, and hence cannot emerge

from nothingness. Furthermore, the Prime Mover, in his view, cannot be a corporeal entity, as bodies are inherently dependent on external forces to initiate motion. Instead, he posits that the Prime Mover must transcend corporeality, existing as the eternal force behind all cosmic motion. This leads him to conclude that the Creator, as the Prime Mover, is eternal and predates all temporal entities (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1941, p. 249).

Ibn Sabʿīn's cosmology divides existence into two realms: the natural (terrestrial) and the celestial (heavenly). The natural realm consists of both composite and simple entities, the former existing materially while the latter exists conceptually. The celestial realm, however, is characterized by perpetual motion and change. He condemns the idea that celestial bodies can maintain their motion without an eternal external cause, reinforcing the necessity of a Prime Mover (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1941, pp. 245–246).

This argument is further enriched by Ibn Sabʿīn's engagement with foundational classical texts, particularly *Samaʿ al-Kiyān* by Maslama al-Majrīṭī. This influential treatise delves into essential philosophical concepts, including form, matter, and motion, offering a comprehensive framework that shaped the intellectual landscape of medieval Islamic thought. The importance of al-Majrīṭī's contributions has been extensively analyzed by scholars such as Kahane et al. (1966, pp. 574–593), Holmyard (1924, pp. 293–305), and Marín (2011, pp. 184–191), whose studies illuminate the profound impact of his ideas on cosmological and metaphysical debates. This intellectual lineage underscores the depth and originality of Ibn Sabʿīn's philosophical approach.

Building on al-Majrīṭī's insights, Ibn Sabʿīn argues that forms exceed the number of bodies in the cosmos, with each body capable of holding only one form at a time. The replacement of one form by another destroys the former, underscoring the transient nature of corporeality. This aligns with his assertion that only the eternal Creator possesses absolute constancy (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1941, p. 246).

In his conclusion, Ibn Sabʿīn underscores the necessity of the Prime Mover, asserting that the rotational motion of celestial spheres cannot originate from within, as intrinsic motion is inherently finite and transient. Instead, their unified and perpetual motion reveals the influence of an eternal external force. This Prime Mover, according to Ibn Sabʿīn, serves as the singular cause of cosmic harmony, embodying unity, constancy, and perfection (Ibn Sabʿīn, 1941, pp. 248–251). Ibn ʿArabī's works, such as *Inshāʾ al-Dawāʾir* and *Tanzīl al-Aflāk*, offer complementary insights into these metaphysical dynamics, emphasizing the interconnectedness of divine agency and the ordered motion of the cosmos (Ibn ʿArabī, 2003; 1998).

Ibn Sabʿīn's synthesis of Sūfī mysticism, Aristotelian metaphysics, and Islamic theology offers a profound framework for understanding the interplay between temporality and eternity. His insights bridge mystical intuition and rational argumentation, solidifying his legacy as a pivotal thinker in Islamic intellectual history.

Conclusion

This study has examined Ibn Sabʿīn's *Al-Risāla al-Ṣiqillīyyā*, a remarkable treatise that bridges philosophy and Sūfī mysticism while addressing the complex theological and metaphysical inquiries posed by Emperor Frederick II of Sicily. These enduring questions—on the eternity versus creation of the universe, the dynamics of the Prime Mover, the nature of creative power, and the essence of forms and divine knowledge—demonstrate Ibn Sabʿīn's exceptional engagement with both Greek and Islamic philosophical traditions. His responses, rooted in rigorous logic and Sūfī insights, reveal a synthesis that transcends conventional frameworks, offering a perspective that harmonizes reason with spirituality.

The *Ṣiqillīyyā* serves as a testament to medieval Islamic intellectual achievement, displaying Ibn Sabʿīn's innovative methodology. By integrating Aristotelian principles, Islamic theology, and Sūfī metaphysics, Ibn Sabʿīn forged a distinctive approach that challenges prevailing paradigms, particularly the concept of an eternal universe. His assertion of the cosmos as created and contingent on an infinite and eternal source—God—positions his work as a critical contribution to metaphysical discourse.

Beyond its historical significance, this analysis highlights Ibn Sabʿīn's relevance to contemporary discussions in comparative philosophy, theology, and interfaith dialogue. His ability to reconcile diverse intellectual traditions underscores the universality of philosophical inquiry, offering insights that resonate with modern debates on the relationship between reason, faith, and metaphysics. The *Ṣiqillīyyā* invites us to explore questions of existence and causality through a lens that bridges spiritual intuition and rational thought, providing a valuable framework for addressing both timeless and current intellectual challenges.

Through this exploration, the article contributes to a deeper appreciation of Ibn Sabʿīn's intellectual legacy, situating him as a pivotal figure in Islamic thought and a vital participant in the broader philosophical and cultural exchanges of his era. His work not only enriches our understanding of

medieval Islamic philosophy but also inspires ongoing dialogue in fields where reason and spirituality converge.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study has focused on the *Ṣiqillīyyā* philosophical and *Ṣūfī* dimensions, it opens avenues for further exploration. For instance, future research could examine unresolved questions in Ibn Sabʿīn's metaphysical framework, such as the implications of his views on divine knowledge for contemporary epistemology. Additionally, his integration of *Ṣūfī* mysticism with rational inquiry could be analyzed in the context of modern debates on the compatibility of science and spirituality. Moreover, investigating the broader impact of Ibn Sabʿīn's correspondence with Frederick II on interfaith dialogue and its potential applications in current interreligious studies could yield valuable insights.

By situating Ibn Sabʿīn's thought within both historical and modern contexts, future studies can continue to illuminate the enduring significance of his intellectual legacy and its relevance to today's philosophical and theological challenges.

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