

**An Arab Machiavelli?  
Rhetoric, Philosophy and Politics in  
Ibn Khaldun’s Critique of Sufism**

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Thoughtful and informed students of Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima* (1377) are well aware that in many places his masterwork is anything but a straightforwardly objective or encyclopedic summary of the available histories and other Islamic sciences of his day. Instead, his writing throughout that unique work illustrates a highly complex, distinctive rhetoric that is constantly informed by the twofold focuses of his all-encompassing political philosophy. The first and most obvious interest is discovering the essential preconditions for lastingly effective political and social organization—a task that involves far more than the outward passing forms of power. And the second is his ultimate end—the effective reform of contemporary education, culture, and religion in directions that would better encourage the ultimate human perfection of true scientific, philosophic knowing. In both of those areas, any understanding of Ibn Khaldun’s unique rhetoric—with its characteristic mix of multiple levels of meaning and intention expressed through irony, polemic satire, intentional misrepresentation and omissions, or equally unexpected inclusion and praise—necessarily presupposes an informed knowledge of the actual political, cultural, and intellectual worlds and corresponding attitudes and assumptions of various readers of his own time. It is not surprising that many modern-day students have overlooked or even misinterpreted many of the most powerful polemic elements and intentions in his writing—elements that originally were often as intentionally provocative, shocking, and “politically incorrect” (indeed frequently for very similar purposes) as the notorious writings of Nicolò Machiavelli (1536–1603) were in his time.

One striking illustration of these two key dimensions of Ibn Khaldun’s writing, both throughout the *Muqaddima* and in his earlier *Shifā’ al-Sā’il* (c.1373), is his critical approach to both the intellectual

and the manifold wider popular influences and expressions (especially the wider sociopolitical ramifications) that are associated with what modern writers often conveniently term *Sufism*—a vast complex of far-reaching creative currents in Islamic cultures and religious life in Ibn Khaldun’s time that were often closely associated with, or at least symbolized by, the distinctive terminology and teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi and his later popular interpreters. Recent historical research has highlighted and begun to illuminate in historical detail the ways that those same creative developments, which were fundamentally and consistently criticized by Ibn Khaldun throughout his life, were to become central in the spread of Islamic culture into Central Asia and China, South Asia and Indonesia, while inspiring many of the most distinctive cultural contributions and religious forms of life in the great empires of the Ottomans, Moguls, and Safavids. Unfortunately, the very different emphases and ideological presuppositions of twentieth-century Arab and other Muslim intellectuals have frequently tended to obscure the manifold ways that Ibn Khaldun’s own Mamluk Cairo was itself participating centrally in those world-historical developments that are such a central and recurrent target of his critical endeavors.

This study is devoted to outlining and explaining both the intellectual and the diverse social and political dimensions of Ibn Khaldun’s criticisms of contemporary Sufism. The first focus of the discussion is his devastating criticism—closely following classical philosophic approaches in the writings of Ibn Sina, Ibn Tufayl, and Nasir al-Din Tusi—of any and all *epistemological* pretensions and corresponding claims to true religious authority in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi and many other influential Sufi writers. The second, inherently more disparate, subject is his careful indications for the philosophical and learned elite among his readers of the potential *practical* “uses and abuses” of Sufi rhetoric and language in various religious and political contexts, often expressed through sharply contrasting emphases in his discussion of central historical characters (the Prophet, Umayyads, etc.) and symbolically key religiopolitical events. Since much of Ibn Khaldun’s rhetoric in those more practical contexts coincidentally (but for radically different reasons) parallels the familiar traditionalist language of Ibn Taymiyya and his later followers, we have highlighted the different political and social motives and ultimate intentions that actually guide Ibn Khaldun’s superficially similar criticisms and often damning faint praise in this domain.

## Epistemology as Political Theology: Key Features of Later “Sufi” Thought

I have frequently placed the words *Sufi* or *Sufism* in quotation marks here because for the vast majority of even scholarly readers who are not specialists in later Islamic thought, that generic term as it is commonly used today is not likely to suggest anything remotely approaching the immense *new complex of interrelated intellectual, cultural, and socio-institutional forms* that, in the rapidly expanding post-Mongol “East” (*mashriq*) of the Islamic world, were typically associated with the extraordinary spread of Islam as a truly world religion. As can now be seen in retrospect, those far-reaching historical developments definitively transcended in fundamental ways the earlier, much more exclusively “Arab” (linguistic, cultural, and institutional) historical forms and assumptions that still largely determine the guiding depiction of Islamic history and culture throughout Ibn Khaldun’s work.

Over the past two decades, growing multinational research by intellectual and religious historians from the many areas concerned has begun to reveal the central underlying role of the writings of the key figure of Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240)—as they were developed, systematized, and popularized by a host of remarkably creative and lastingly influential theologians, poets, teachers, and reformers—in continuing to provide the indispensable intellectual framework and religious justification for this much wider complex of new cultural and social forms.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, those ideas have both reflected and helped to shape the intellectually, culturally, and politically dominant self-conceptions of Islam among most of the world’s Muslims from the thirteenth to at least the nineteenth century. Indeed, nothing could be more alien and fundamentally contrary to this history than the familiar ideological symbolism of “decline,” “corruption,” and (negatively understood) “innovation” that has typically shaped the rhetorical presentation—and no doubt the underlying appeal—of Ibn Khaldun’s writings among so many Arab Muslim thinkers from the nineteenth century onward.

Since, as is now understood in considerable historical detail, the Mamluk Egypt of Ibn Khaldun’s own time was already marked by the same spectrum of cultural, institutional, and religious phenomena that were increasingly typical of the post-Mongol Islamic world, it is important not to limit the referents of the word *Sufi* throughout this study simply to the phenomena of the increasingly widespread and often politically powerful Sufi orders (*turuq*); to the wider transformations of

the poetic, visual, and architectural arts that reflected and inspired the practices and norms of those visibly institutionalized Sufi groups; or even to the more pervasive spread of the multiple forms of popular piety, devotion, festivities, endowments, and monuments that were associated with the religious roles of the saintly “friends of God” (the *awliyā*). In many places, the educational and politically critical institutions of Islamic learning and law and the corresponding norms of religious authority were also being simultaneously transformed—or at the very least, were the scene of an ongoing series of polemics and struggles for domination—which we can now see reflected in the writings and effective political and institutional efforts of such historically influential later figures as Qaysarī, Jāmī, Mullā Sadrā, and Shāh Waliullāh. If the eventually lasting influences and domination of these new intellectual and cultural interpretations of Islam, which found their primary inspiration for centuries in the voluminous writings of Ibn ‘Arabi, were not yet clear in Ibn Khaldun’s time, they were certainly prominent enough in the Cairo of his day (and no doubt among the intellectual elite of the Maghrib, as with figures like Ibn al-Khatīb) to form one absolutely central target for the ambitious project of intellectual and socio-political reform expressed in his *Muqaddima*.

Against that wider background, it is certainly no accident that many of the key aims and assumptions of Ibn Khaldun’s philosophic and political project stand out as diametrically opposed to the corresponding positions that were typically closely associated with the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi and his subsequent Muslim interpreters. The usual intellectual forum for expressing such differences of perspective, within the scholarly Islamic tradition, was through learned discussions of epistemology—how we human beings come to know and what we can and should know. Formally speaking, those controversial philosophic discussions (on all sides) always managed to arrive at a mutually agreeable rhetorical assertion of the reality and primacy of “divine prophecy” and its necessarily “revealed” forms of knowing. But that common formal assertion was simply a polite and safe way of underlining each party’s radically different and irreconcilable positions concerning the fundamental epistemological and political question of true religio-political *authority*—of who now, with no divine prophet present, could actually and reliably interpret that prophetic legacy in terms of *true* humanly accessible and reliable knowledge.

Within that context and against the conflicting claims first of *kalām* theologians and then of increasingly pressing representatives of avow-

edly spiritual forms of knowing, earlier rationalist Muslim philosophers and scientists—most influentially, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Tufayl, and Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī—had already composed a well-known series of treatises, whose key ideas and well-worn rhetorical expressions are taken over almost verbatim by Ibn Khaldūn in both the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and his *Muqaddima*. Those distinctive philosophical approaches were designed to demonstrate (in terms of the particular norms and procedures of the philosophers) that *only* the intellectual procedures and norms of philosophy could arrive at genuine knowledge—and therefore a genuinely authoritative interpretation and understanding—of the prophetic legacy. The explanation of that scientific philosophical epistemology, from Avicenna onward, included the ambiguous rhetorical acknowledgment that procedures of spiritual purification and asceticism might possibly, in rare cases, lead to results coinciding with what was knowable philosophically. However, those explanations also made it clear that the only reliable and publicly demonstrable way of truly knowing—and hence of properly interpreting and applying—such interpretive claims was necessarily through the process of philosophical inquiry and reasoning.

In contrast with those familiar philosophic norms that were consistently accepted and defended by Ibn Khaldun, the underlying models of knowledge, religious authority, human perfection, and the ultimate aims of human endeavor are all radically different in the thought of Ibn 'Arabī and his later interpreters. Since we cannot realistically assume in today's readers an extensive knowledge of those positions that are the primary targets of Ibn Khaldun's intellectual criticism of Sufism, it may be helpful to mention summarily a few of the most fundamental points of difference that underlie Ibn Khaldun's critique. Simply listing these points is enough to suggest the profound ways in which the philosophic and religious issues at stake go far beyond disputes about particular aspects of those limited social and institutional forms that people today normally associate with Sufism. The following list, moreover, is simply for illustrative purposes and should in no way be construed as an exhaustive description of the religious and philosophic matters involved in this dispute:

- A central emphasis in the thought of Ibn 'Arabī and his interpreters is on the absolute universality of the processes of human spiritual life and growth, which are rooted in every person's awareness and understanding of the infinite divine signs "on the horizons and

in their souls” (Qur’an 41: 53). Although this process of spiritual growth and transformation certainly involves relative ranks of spiritual realization, its inherent universality is radically opposed to the fundamental distinction between demonstrative knowledge and mere opinion that underlies both the epistemology and the political philosophy of Ibn Khaldun and his philosophical predecessors.

- The process of spiritual development, being universal, is also necessarily and irreducibly *individualistic*—and hence radically *democratic* in the modern sense of that term. In other words, that process of ethical and spiritual purification that is central to *Dīn* (the key Qur’anic expression for this primordial and universal religious process) necessarily involves all people, and it proceeds by ascending stages whose forms are individualized and particular in each case. Unlike philosophy and science (as Ibn Khaldun understands them), this individualized, intrinsically experiential “knowing” can neither be taught nor transmitted according to any scholastic, publicly demonstrable model.
- This universal spiritual process is essentially manifested and grounded, like the divine “ever-renewed creation” that underlies it, in an open-ended *diversity*, *multiplicity*, and ongoing *creativity* of individual and collective expressions.
- Within this process, there is a fundamental role—for all human beings—of subtle aesthetic and spiritually ethical modes of perception whose experiential roots are necessarily within *every* individual, prior to the intellectual, cultural, and logical interpretation and manipulation of those perceptions.
- One basic cultural expression of this distinctive epistemology is the central spiritual role, as effective vehicles for spiritual self-discovery and creative expression, of poetry, music, calligraphy, and all the other related visual arts and disciplines.
- On a practical level, the essential human models, exemplars, and facilitators of this process of spiritual perfection are living, accessible, but most often *immaterial* mediator-figures (the root sense of *walī*) who either are no longer bodily in this physical world (as with the vast majority of the prophets and saints) or often are, even in their brief bodily time here, outwardly almost invisible or even egregious “failures” (as Ibn Khaldun frequently points out) if judged by the usual worldly criteria of social, intellectual or political accomplishment, nobility, and inheritance. Even more practically and socially,

this central understanding of spiritual mediation was reflected in the eventual profusion of tomb shrines, pilgrimages (*ziyāra*), and associated popular rituals and devotional practices throughout the later Islamic world.

- Intrinsic to this spiritual process is the necessary coexistence and intrinsic good of an ever-expanding multitude of paths, religious vehicles, saintly figures (*awliyā'*), and other spiritual guides. This extends to all the consequent social and cultural expressions of the fundamentally creative spiritual virtue (as described in the famous “hadith of Gabriel”) of *ihsān*—of first perceiving and then actively manifesting what is truly “good and beautiful.”
- Within the open-ended creative perspectives opened up by Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of Islam, along with its wider philosophic underpinnings developed by his later interpreters and commentators, it is clear that the role of *tariqas* or any other particular historical or social and cultural forms can reflect only a very limited expression of this wider divine imperative.
- Within the multiple revelations that illuminate this universal process, the necessary role of particular historical and cultural forms—such as the scriptural languages of revelation—lies above all in their necessary but relatively limited role in allowing the “decipherment” of the divine prescriptions and symbolic teachings that have been transmitted by the prophets. But from this spiritual perspective, that initial decipherment is itself only the beginning of the active, necessarily creative process—and irrevocably individual responsibility—of *translating* those revealed prescriptions into their appropriate, spiritually effective expressions in constantly shifting situations and new contexts.
- This brief catalogue may have one other use beyond helping us to grasp the fundamental issues that underlie Ibn Khaldun’s critique of the philosophic claims of Ibn ‘Arabi and his later adherents and interpreters. It may also help to explain just why Ibn Khaldun’s own extraordinarily creative and challenging philosophical writings—with their thoroughgoing articulation and vigorous polemic defense of the Arab roots and forms of the particular cultural and intellectual heritage that he sought to renew—apparently failed to find even a minimal foothold in those flourishing, prolific “Eastern” centers of post-Mongol Islamic cultural and intellectual life that were shaped in response to the widespread popularization of those radically contrasting ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi that we have just outlined here.

## Burning Ibn ‘Arabī’s Books: Ibn Khaldun’s Twofold View of Contemporary Sufism

Ibn Khaldun’s critical attitude toward contemporary Sufi movements—on both the practical, sociopolitical plane and the theoretical, intellectual plane—is carefully (if somewhat cryptically) summarized in the following fatwa:<sup>2</sup>

The path of the so-called Sufis [*mutasawwifa*] comprises two paths. The first is the path of the Sunna, the path of their forefathers [*salaf*], according to the Book and Sunna, imitating their righteous forefathers among the Companions [of the Prophet] and the Followers.<sup>3</sup>

The second path, which is contaminated by [heretical] innovations, is the way of a group among the recent thinkers [*muta’akhkhirūn*] who make the first path a means to the removal [*kashf*] of the veil of sensation because that is one of its results. Now among these self-styled Sufis are Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Sab‘īn, Ibn Barraĵān, and their followers among those who traveled their way and worshipped according to their [heretical] sect [*nihla*]. They have many works filled with pure unbelief and vile innovations, as well as corresponding interpretations of the outward forms [of scripture and practice] in the most bizarre, unfounded, and reprehensible ways—such that one who examines them will be astounded at their being referred to religion [*al-milla*] or being considered part of the Sharia.

Now the praise of these people by someone is certainly not a proof [of the validity of their views], even if the person praising them has attained whatever excellence he may have attained. For the Book and Sunna are more excellent and a better testimony than anyone.

So as for the legal judgment [*hukm*] concerning these books containing those beliefs that lead [people] astray and their manuscripts that are found in the hands of the people, such as the *Fusūs al-Hikam* and *al-Futūhāt al-Makkīya* of Ibn ‘Arabī, the *Budd* [*al-‘Ārif*] by Ibn Sab‘īn, and Ibn Qasī’s *Khal’ al-Na‘layn*—the judgment concerning these books and their like is that they should all be eliminated wherever they are found, either through burning them in fire or by washing them with water until all trace of the writing is effaced because of the general positive benefit [*maslaha*] for religion through effacing unsound beliefs. Therefore, it is incumbent on the public authority [*walī al-amr*] to burn these books in order to eliminate the general cause of

corruption [which they constitute], and it is incumbent on whoever is able to do so to burn them.

Now this straightforward public legal statement of Ibn Khaldun's position as a Maliki *faqīh* (which also summarizes much of his more popular and practically oriented critique of contemporary Maghrebi Sufism in his relatively early *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) is not very different from the views that were later expressed—only from a more openly philosophical perspective—throughout his more famous *Muqaddima*. One can already see here (1) his recurrent basic distinction between the wider *practical* political, social, and ethical consequences of various forms of Sufism and their more *theoretical* literary expressions and justifications and (2) his acknowledgment of the widespread popular appeal and the powerful or learned contemporary defenders of the different forms of Sufism, on both those levels. In fact, the interplay of these two basic concerns and considerations explains both the centrality of his critique of Sufism in the *Muqaddima* and the rhetorical ambiguities and subtleties of expression, regarding particular Sufis and different dimensions of Sufism, that have often puzzled or misled more recent interpreters of that work.

However, since those modern commentators—usually relying on a superficial reading of a few key passages in the *Muqaddima* concerning prophetic epistemology and angelic or mystical inspiration<sup>4</sup>—have often persisted in considering Ibn Khaldun as a Sufi or at least a sympathizer with some forms of Sufism, the following passage from that work may be helpful in suggesting its fundamental continuity with the profoundly hostile attitude and understanding that was already evident in his *Shifā' al-Sā'il*. This passage is particularly important because it occurs in the middle of the key section on different kinds of “supernatural” knowledge that supposedly outlines Ibn Khaldun's “mystical” epistemology and thereby beautifully illustrates the biting irony and often sardonic humor with which he often touches on the characteristic practices and claims of contemporary Muslim mystics:<sup>5</sup>

Among the followers of the Sufis are a group of simple fellows [*bahālīl*] and idiots who resemble the insane more than they do rational people, although despite that they do possess the stages of sainthood [*walāya*] and the states of the righteous saints [*siddīqūn*]. . . . These people do not lack rational souls, nor have they been ruined, as with the insane. . . .

Now you should know that the state of these people is sometimes confused with that of the insane. . . . But there are distinctive signs by which you can distinguish them. One of them is that these simpletons never stop their *dhikr* and acts of worship [*'ibāda*] at all, although they don't do them according to the legally prescribed conditions. Another distinguishing sign is that they were created idiots from the very first, while insanity befalls (previously healthy people only) after part of their life. . . .

Another distinguishing sign is the extensiveness of their activity and influence among men, for both good and bad, because they do not have to depend on [legal] permission, because [legal] responsibility [*taklīf*] does not exist for them; but the insane have no [such] influence.

In light of this revealing passage, Ibn Khaldun's manifold criticisms of Sufism, both in its more popular and learned expressions, can all be understood as efforts to limit what he saw as the damage and negative results of this inevitable "foolish" activity and to channel its unavoidable popular expressions into what he considered to be a more positive and constructive direction.<sup>6</sup> The following section is therefore devoted to a brief survey of his direct and implicit criticisms of beliefs, practices, and religious ideals associated with contemporary Sufi movements. Against that background, we can then go on to explore the apparent contradiction between this typically wide-ranging critical outlook and the supposedly "mystical" elements in his prophetic epistemology, while also considering a few of the earlier attempts at resolving this puzzle. In fact, that supposed contradiction can easily be resolved on the basis of both the clues provided in the *Muqaddima* itself and their well-known historical antecedents in the writings of earlier Islamic philosophers.

From that programmatic philosophic perspective, we can then understand more accurately the actual aims of Ibn Khaldun's critique and the complex interplay between the practical and intellectual facets of his argument and the particular audiences that he was addressing in each case—including the way that those aims were also consistently illustrated in what we know of his own active public life and self-conception. Finally, we have concluded with a few observations concerning the potential wider relevance, for all students of the *Muqaddima*, of the rhetorical devices and philosophical intentions illustrated in Ibn Khaldun's multifaceted criticisms of contemporary Sufism.

## Ibn Khaldun's Criticisms of Contemporary Sufism

The central concern in Ibn Khaldun's critique of contemporary Sufism (just as with his wider critique of other Islamic sciences, such as *'ilm al-kalām*, and educational practices) is in fact nothing less than identifying the truly qualified "authorities" for interpreting and applying the Prophetic legacy—for interpreting it both with regard to popular religious beliefs and practices and with regard to its potential implications for human beings' ultimate, intellectual perfection and the repertoire of philosophic sciences and associated methods that Ibn Khaldun took to be necessary for achieving that perfection. Thus, Ibn Khaldun's constant focus (explicitly in the *Muqaddima* and less openly in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) is on the interplay, in both directions, between what he views as certain dangerous intellectual tendencies in Islamic thought and related wider sociopolitical developments that can be seen as both consequences of and contributing conditions to those unfortunate intellectual movements. That twofold intellectual and practical political focus is likewise reflected in the central notion of historical "lessons" [*ibar*] in the overall title of this work. Those edifying lessons are both a form of knowledge *and* knowledge with compelling implications for right action.

There can be no doubt that in Ibn Khaldun's time, by far the most influential and flourishing competitors with philosophy (as he conceived of it) for this central role as the arbiters and authoritative interpreters of religious revelation, in all the relevant domains, were constituted by Sufi institutions and practices and by their intellectual expressions and justifications claiming their own philosophic universality and comprehensiveness.<sup>7</sup> It is no accident, then, if so many of Ibn Khaldun's arguments against contemporary Sufism, in all its manifestations, echo Averroes's earlier vigorous philosophic critiques of Ghazālī and *kalām* theology.<sup>8</sup> And just as with Averroes's critiques, the fact that Ibn Khaldun often phrases his criticisms in a legalistic form and context should certainly not lead us to view him simply as an unthinkingly conservative, rigorist defender of the prerogatives and presuppositions of Maliki *fiqh*, much less of some more radical "traditionalist" (*salafī*) ideal.<sup>9</sup>

The other side of the pervasive spread and influence of Sufi institutions and ideas and their increasing support by political authorities—at least in Ibn Khaldun's Mamluk Egypt<sup>10</sup>—was the considerable sen-

sitivity of direct public attacks on those activities, a point that is already suggested implicitly in the defensive tone of parts of the fatwa translated above. Not surprisingly, Ibn Khaldun in the *Muqaddima* only rarely alludes openly (as in the long passage quoted above) to what he clearly saw as the tragic waste of scarce public and human resources in the Mamluk support of so many “simpletons” and their dangerously misguided activities. But instead of attempting to convert or suppress such individuals and institutions directly, his critical intentions in the *Muqaddima* are usually conveyed on a more learned, literary level either by allusions to reprehensible “excesses” or “heresies” (especially Shi‘ite ones)<sup>11</sup> that the attentive reader could easily apply to contemporary Sufi movements and writings or by the pointed omission or ironic inversion of standard Sufi interpretations and citations (especially of hadith or particular Qur’anic passages favored by Sufi authors) that he could assume to be familiar to most of his educated readers. Those religious and legal scholars who could grasp those allusions and their deeper motivations, Ibn Khaldun seems to have assumed, could also eventually be counted on to help channel the inevitable activity of the mass of uneducated “simpletons” in a more positive direction.

Once one becomes aware of this recurrent rhetorical procedure and its underlying principles and presuppositions—all of which are unfortunately almost invisible to modern readers unfamiliar with the work’s wider literary and cultural background—it turns out that the *Muqaddima* is permeated by a fascinating play of sardonic humor and irony, of constantly ambiguous, potentially critical expressions in which there are few “chance” or even simply objective phrases.<sup>12</sup> Thus, as in the representative case of his treatment of Ibn ‘Arabi, what may appear to us to be merely innocent summaries or uncontroversial historical observations frequently turn out to be intentional misrepresentations or pointedly self-conscious suggestions of “guilt by association” whose rhetorical character—and more immediate practical intentions and motivations—were no doubt readily apparent to most of Ibn Khaldun’s educated readers. This is especially evident in his recurrent polemic accusations of “Shi‘ite” influences or tendencies, a handy scapegoat that (quite apart from any question of its actual historical validity in each case) frequently allows him to criticize indirectly central features or intellectual underpinnings of Sufi movements and activities in his own immediate environment.<sup>13</sup>

## Ibn Khaldun's Direct Criticisms of Sufism

The relatively open and explicit objects of Ibn Khaldun's critique of contemporary Sufism (or of its ostensibly Shi'ite counterparts) can be summarized under the following five points. In each of these cases (with the partial exception of the third category), it is worth noting that the target of his criticism appears to be much less the truth and theoretical validity of the belief or activity in question—whether by traditional religious criteria or with regard to demonstrative philosophic norms—than what he implies are the *dangerous practical social and political effects* of such widespread popular beliefs in the society around him.

- One of the most common targets of Ibn Khaldun's criticism is the common popular belief in a redeeming "Mahdi"-figure (or other related forms of messianism), which is typified in his long section (Q 2: 142–201) debunking both the hadith foundations of such beliefs and their further development in Shi'ite and Sufi contexts.<sup>14</sup> The main aim of his criticisms there is not so much the intellectual pretensions underlying that belief as it is the recurrent political delusions flowing from the popular spread of such ideas among those he calls "common people, the stupid mass," which have led many Mahdist pretenders—both sincere and fraudulent—into fruitless uprisings and revolts without any hope of successful and lasting political consequences.<sup>15</sup> Typically enough, Ibn Khaldun elsewhere stresses the critical importance of such popular messianic beliefs in the successful political efforts of both Muhammad and the later Fatimid Shi'ites and even acknowledges the sincerity and sound ethical intentions of certain Mahdist figures closer to his own time. Thus, it becomes clear that his primary intention in such passages—in light of those earlier successes and notorious failures (as well as his own repeatedly unsuccessful youthful political undertakings)—is to draw the attention of his thoughtful and attentive readers to the deeper, indispensable practical, political, and intellectual preconditions for any effective and lasting political activity and reforms.
- A second basic feature of Ibn Khaldun's critique is his denial, which is more often implicit than explicit (except with regard to Shiism), of the existence of the "Pole" (*qutb*) and other members of the spiritual hierarchy<sup>16</sup> and—what is again more practically important—his constant care to avoid any allusion to the relevance or necessity of living saints or spiritual intermediaries as guides to the awareness

and understanding of the ultimate ends of religion and revelation.<sup>17</sup> The absence of any allusion to such widespread claims and associated religious practices is all the more striking in that some such belief seems to have been virtually universal in Ibn Khaldun's own society—underlying the public respect, at least in Egypt, for the saints and popularly esteemed holy men manifested by most political authorities of the day—without any perceived contradiction of the authority and competence of the learned scholars of the religious law within their own limited domain. In Ibn Khaldun, this silence cannot be explained by some *salafī*-type abhorrence of “innovation” and fantasized notion of the perfection and eternal adequacy of the outward expressions of the original revelation, since he goes to great pains, in both the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and the *Muqaddima*, to stress the necessity of a rightly guided historical evolution and adaptation of the revelation in order to realize the concrete, this-worldly benefits (*masālih*) actually intended by the prophetic Lawgiver. The corresponding claims of many charismatic Sufis—or the popularly assumed spiritual powers of so many deceased prophets and saints—to provide such guidance and insight in the spiritual realm are not really criticized so much as they are totally and quite intentionally *passed over in silence*.

- The third recurrent object of Ibn Khaldun's criticism—although here that term is perhaps too mild in light of the public book-burning unambiguously prescribed in his *fatwā* quoted above—are all the philosophizing and intellectual tendencies in later Sufi thought.<sup>18</sup> Not only does he carefully avoid quoting any of those influential works directly, although their more poetic and popular religious expressions were certainly familiar to all his educated readers. But the very terms in which he does allude to such writings (and to their authors, especially Ibn 'Arabi) are carefully designed to dissuade any curious reader who might otherwise be tempted to find them intellectually and philosophically interesting. In this particular case, at least, Ibn Khaldun's hostility and thoroughgoing misrepresentation can hardly be explained simply by the supposed practical dangers and implications of such recondite texts. Rather, he goes out of his way to avoid the suggestion of any other sound intellectual, philosophic alternative to his own Peripatetic ontological and epistemological premises, which are repeatedly presented throughout the *Muqaddima* (and in more allusive summary form, already at the beginning of his earlier *Shifā' al-Sā'il*).

- A fourth basic feature of Ibn Khaldun's hostile treatment of Sufism involves his repeated emphatic discussion of it (and especially of later, relatively contemporary Sufi writers) within the context of magic, astrology, and sorcery—either of deluded prediction of future events or in treating the external, this-worldly wonders or miracles worked by saints and holy men. Again, what is practically most important here is not whether Ibn Khaldun really thinks that all such supposedly “supernatural” phenomena are in fact frauds, products of chance, or the result of sound practical wisdom and insight.<sup>19</sup> What is really crucial, as with the preceding point, is what is left out. The unsuspecting reader is intentionally left with the highly misleading impression that such problematic activities and claims are in fact central aims and practices of Sufism or are at least somehow encouraged and justified by later Sufi writings—while Ibn Khaldun could easily have cited hundreds of Sufi works (including especially the particular “heretical” books that are explicitly condemned in his own fatwa) criticizing such pretensions and focusing on the true aims and presuppositions of human spiritual life, as developed at length in the Qur'an and hadith. Again, there is no sign that Ibn Khaldun's stress on this “magical” superstitious aspect of Sufism and popular religious belief is motivated by any *Salafi*-like desire to “reform” Islamic spirituality by entirely eliminating such popular and magical innovations. Instead, what is eliminated here—no doubt quite successfully—is any suspicion of an intellectually and philosophically serious alternative to Ibn Khaldun's own understanding of the proper forms and interrelations of Islamic philosophy and religious belief.
- A final recurrent theme in Ibn Khaldun's criticism of contemporary Sufism (and in fact the central theme in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) is its supposed development of ways of life and practices that involve a dangerous departure from what he portrays as the unreflective, purely active piety of the original Muslim community, along with (most important for his own time) later Sufism's alleged separation of conscientious religious and ethical life from active, intelligent participation in the wider socioeconomic and political life of society. His repeated claims about this dangerous recent separation between purely contemplative and socially beneficial pursuits are illustrated, for him, by such typical later Sufi practices as *dhikr* and *samā'* (as opposed to supererogatory prayer and Qur'an recitation), spiritual initiation (the *khirqā*) and the initiatic role of the Sufi shaykhs

(again accused of suspicious Shi'ite origins), and the widespread public institutionalization of Sufi centers and foundations (such as *khānigāhs*, *zāwiyas*, tomb shrines, and pilgrimage centers for saintly figures). Once again, a closer look at Ibn Khaldun's discussions of such "innovations" reveals that it is not really the religious departure from the unreflective, active piety of the Companions that he is criticizing—since he gives cogent natural and historical reasons why such complex social and ethical differentiation had to take place in settled agrarian and commercial societies in any case—but rather (1) the much more practical and down-to-earth consequences of diverting substantial societal and human resources to the pointless, imaginary distractions and pastimes of such large groups of "simpletons" as well as (2) the perhaps even more debilitating long-range consequences of their attempt to lead a moral and religious life that was somehow separate from what they allegedly viewed as the "corrupting" sphere of political and military power and authority.

### **Ibn Khaldun's Indirect Criticisms of Sufism**

With each of these criticisms, however, what is even more striking in Ibn Khaldun's treatment of Sufism (whether in what he distinguishes as its early or later phases) and its underpinnings in the Qur'an and hadith is precisely what he does *not* mention. He carefully and ironically omits the fundamental scriptural themes and passages that were popularly understood to support the typically Sufi (and often more generally Islamic) forms of contemporary spiritual practice and interpretation. In fact, Ibn Khaldun's unmistakably pointed omissions of central Sufi emphases on the metaphysical realities and spiritual teachings of the Prophet and his key disciples and successors (which are recurrent themes that are familiar to modern readers in any of the classics of later Sufi literature, such as Rumi's *Masnavi*) are carefully conjoined with an equally specific focus on those things that Muhammad and his Companions said and did that can instead be explained entirely in terms of political leadership and insight, practical wisdom, and exclusively this-worldly ends. The following is only a representative selection of a few such important passages from the *Muqaddima*, concentrating on examples clearly involving conspicuous implicit criticism of key contemporary Sufi tenets or practices.

The first and perhaps the most ironic illustration of this typical rhetorical device occurs at the beginning of his book in Ibn Khaldun's invocation of the Prophet as "him for whose birth *the existing world* was in labor before."<sup>20</sup> In this single brief phrase—which the unsuspecting reader might initially take as a stock allusion to the common later Sufi belief in the preternity of the cosmological "Muhammadan Reality"<sup>21</sup> or Perfect Human Being (*al-insān al-kāmil*)—Ibn Khaldun insists instead on both the normal humanity of Muhammad and, more important, on his understanding of the fundamental philosophic thesis of the eternity and stable, causally determined structure of the present world order. These assumptions form an essential basis for the rest of his new science and for the philosophic sciences in general. For the philosopher, what he says here is equally true of each and every natural being in that eternal world order, by no means just Muhammad.

A similarly trenchant irony is evident in Ibn Khaldun's striking claim near the beginning of his book (Q 1: 66) that "God inspired us with this [new science] through divine inspiration [*ilhām*], and He led us [in discovering and presenting it]," an assertion that ironically echoes the widespread claim of many Sufis (perhaps most influentially in the key writings of Ibn 'Arabi) to special divine inspiration and validation for their works and spiritual insights. However, Ibn Khaldun's own philosophic understanding of the very different (that is, true and false) forms of "inspiration" in question, following Avicenna, is gradually made clearer in his *Muqaddima* (as is detailed in the discussion of his epistemology below), until he himself stresses (3: 256–57) the universality and practical necessity of this sort of extremely nonmystical inspiration for *all* scientific inquiry (that is, as the source of the syllogistic middle terms in all human reasoning).

Even more evident (and likewise emphasized in the opening invocation of the book at Q 1: 2) is Ibn Khaldun's single-minded focus on the visible historical factors of political success and group solidarity in Muhammad's prophecy. Among other things, this consistently political focus leads him to pass over in silence the extensive Qur'anic verses and hadith that stress Muhammad's (and other prophets' and saints') special closeness (*qurba*) to God, along with all those related spiritual virtues and degrees of realization that in prevailing Sufi conceptions formed the common bond between the prophets and the *awliyā'* (the saints or Friends of God) and that constituted the spiritual hierarchy of the *awliyā'* as the authoritative spiritual interpreters of the Prophetic legacy in the Muslim community.<sup>22</sup>

Not only does Ibn Khaldun ignore the comprehensive presence of

such themes throughout the Qur'an and hadith, but he repeatedly goes out of his way to explain away apparent criticisms of this world and the quest for political authority attributed Muhammad and the early imams (Q 1: 364–67; Q 2: 107), focusing instead on a solitary and unusual hadith that insists that “God sent no prophet who did not enjoy the protection of [or wealth among] his people.”<sup>23</sup> Passing over the host of well-known hadith that suggest the contrary and the multitude of repeated Qur'anic (and other scriptural and historical) references to prophets and saints—Muhammad included—who were rejected and despised precisely *by* their own people, Ibn Khaldun repeatedly reminds his readers instead of those recurrent factors that visibly account for the worldly political success or failure of any “prophet” or would-be leader and reformer.<sup>24</sup>

Another significant case of this typical ironic approach to the widespread Sufi understanding of key hadith and Qur'anic passages—both in what Ibn Khaldun openly emphasizes and in what he fails to mention—is his peculiar use of the famous Prophetic saying that begins, “I was given six things [not given to any prophet before me].”<sup>25</sup> Not only does Ibn Khaldun mention *only one* of those six things (the *jawāmi' al-kalim*, which he takes to refer only to Muhammad's effectively unmatched Arabic rhetorical gifts and influence) in this wider polemical context, but his interpretation is once again an unmistakable and absolute rejection of Ibn 'Arabi's central theory of the “Muhammadan Reality” as the eternal spiritual totality of all the noetic divine “Words” that have been manifested in the various prophets (and saints), both regarding its intellectual expressions and its far-reaching practical spiritual consequences.

The purpose of revealed religious law, Ibn Khaldun insists (Q 1: 352), is “*not* to provide blessings” but rather to promote specific this-worldly public interests (*masālih*). As a jurist, he identifies concretely those visible worldly interests that are exemplified in many different instances of Prophetic prescriptions. Thus, his major argument for the superiority of religious laws over “governmental, restraining laws” (Q 2: 126–28) has to do purely and simply with their *practical efficacy*, without any mention of their possible spiritual or other-worldly ends. They are more effective, he explains, because of the enforcing influence of shared popular belief in posthumous rewards and punishments and because of their “more comprehensive” popular inculcation as an unconscious moral habitus rather than through each individual's rational calculation or fear of worldly exposure or punishment.

A particularly important and revealing passage (Q 1: 403–04) is Ibn

Khaldun's admission that some "men mentioned in Qushayrī's *Risāla*" may be considered among the true "heirs" of the Prophet, presumably alluding to the famous hadith that "the learned [or knowers: *'ulamā'*] are the heirs of the prophets." Later Sufi writers and apologists, including Ibn 'Arabi, had gone to great lengths to demonstrate that the genuine Sufi saints (*awliyā'*), and not the historically learned legal scholars or theologians, were the truly "knowing" heirs intended by this hadith. So the inattentive reader could easily take Ibn Khaldun's reference to Qushayrī here (and in a similar passage earlier in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) as an apparent defense of that central Sufi claim.<sup>26</sup> But in fact, the actual larger context of this statement in the *Muqaddima* makes it clear that (1) he is praising only the Companions' and early Muslims' restriction of their religion simply to unreflective practice, to a pure moral *habitus* without any deeper claim to universal spiritual or theoretical knowledge, and (2) he is describing a practical moral *habitus* that has little or nothing to do with particularly spiritual virtues or corresponding practices but a great deal to do with the communal qualities and politically powerful "group feeling" (*'asabiya*: a term that is definitely not in any Qur'anic or other traditional list of spiritual virtues) that help explain the worldly political successes of the early Arab Muslim community.

To drive home this point and dispel any possible pietistic and spiritual misconceptions of the explicitly nonspiritual "virtues" that he has in mind, Ibn Khaldun repeatedly chooses to cite the father of al-Hajjāj Ibn Yūsuf (Q 1: 46–48 and 231–32) as a model of this peculiar sort of internalized religious knowledge. Once again, the ironic significance of this illustration can be grasped only against the background of the widespread popular (and by no means exclusively Sufi) conception of al-Hajjāj (whose life and historically successful political activity for the Umayyad cause exemplify many of the practical political insights at the heart of Ibn Khaldun's guiding concern) as an exemplar of the unbridled injustice and arbitrary cruelty that had come to be popularly associated in Islamic learned traditions (not without some reason) with almost all ruling political authorities. This is indeed one of the most characteristically Machiavellian allusions in the entire *Muqaddima*.

Another especially revealing passage is Ibn Khaldun's treatment (Q 2: 96ff.) of the central Islamic theme of injustice (*zulm*), which he restricts to the political actions and consequences of rulers, going out of his way to deny the legal applicability of this concept to other individuals. In making this strange restriction, he passes over the repeated Qur'anic discussions of "injustice" precisely with regard to each human *soul's* relation to itself, which is one of the fundamental bases of spiri-

tual practice, whether Sufi or otherwise. Moreover, his discussion of the supposed lack in Islamic law of religious “detering punishments” for that sort of unseen, inner psychic injustice even more revealingly leaves out of account the whole central Qur’anic discussion of each soul’s complex accounting of rewards and punishments (precisely for such inner, socially invisible actions) in the next or spiritual world. Indeed, Ibn Khaldun’s continuous studied silence on the eschatological, postmortem dimensions of the soul and spiritual human being<sup>27</sup> certainly goes to the heart of his repeated criticisms of later Sufism and of those broadly neoplatonic philosophic currents with which Sufi philosophizing (like much Shi‘ite spiritual thought) was often associated.

Ibn Khaldun’s discussion of singing and music (Q 2: 352–61) as the “last” craft to develop in civilization—rather than as one of the primordial expressions and realizations of humanity’s spiritual nature and origin—is again a revealing sign not so much of any religiolegalistic opposition to music or its innovative uses in Sufi practice<sup>28</sup> as of a more essential philosophic deafness to realms of meaning and cognitive dimensions of beauty or harmony (whether musical or otherwise) that did not easily fit into his own conception of philosophy. In contrast, those same aesthetic and spiritual dimensions and practices—as was highlighted in this article’s opening summary of key points in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī and his interpreters—constituted one of the central appeals of Sufi thought and metaphysics in both its speculative and its more popular ritual expressions in poetry, lyric, music, and all the manifold forms of *dhikr*.

Finally, Ibn Khaldun’s pervasive hostility to Sufism extends even to his ostensibly “aesthetic” judgments on Arabic mystical poetry, as in his revealing remark (Q 3: 339) that

To the degree that a poem gets closer to nonsense, it is further from the level of eloquence, since they are two extremes. Because of this [that is, because it *is* nonsense], poetry on divine and prophetic matters [*rabbāniyyāt wa nubuwwāt*] is generally not very accomplished.

This is also, he goes on to add, because such spiritual poetry—typified, in Arabic-language spiritual contexts, by the still powerfully influential devotional songs of al-Busīrī or the mystical lyrics of Ibn al-Fārid—deals with commonplaces “spread among the masses [*al-jumhūr*].” Here his criticisms about the “triteness” of such poems and their supposed “lack of meaning” really translate his own attitude toward their *contents* rather than their aesthetic qualities, since such crite-

ria would in fact apply even more strongly to many of the other Arabic poetical genres that he goes on to discuss at great length and often with informed passion. Again, he carefully avoids even citing such popularly beloved, almost omnipresent Arabic mystical poetry in this literary section, although—or perhaps precisely *because*—such lyrics were surely far more influential in popular religious devotional practice and ritual than the learned Sufi intellectual treatises that he wanted to have burned.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Apparent Contradiction: Ibn Khaldun's Prophetic Epistemology**

In light of this critical reaction to contemporary Sufism throughout the *Muqaddima*, it is surprising both that a few modern writers have nonetheless persisted in presenting Ibn Khaldun as a “Sufi” or some kind of mystical sympathizer (a view that does have a certain, albeit purposefully ambiguous, textual basis in his work) and also that many recent commentators have treated the entire subject of Sufism as only a marginal detail that is limited to the handful of short sections explicitly devoted to that subject. Just as with the similarly widespread neglect of the fundamental place of classical Islamic philosophy in all of Ibn Khaldun's work (despite the classic, foundational study of that comprehensive dimension by Muhsin Mahdi), this oversight can only be explained by more contemporary readers' general historical ignorance, in this case, of the central sociopolitical role of Sufi-related conceptions and practices in the understanding of Islam throughout all levels of Islamic society, from the Maghrib to southeast and central Asia, during Ibn Khaldun's time. That far-reaching intellectual and historical ignorance is further complicated by the radically different social and intellectual problematics that are assumed by most modern Muslim thinkers who encounter Ibn Khaldun. For indeed, if, as pointed out throughout this study, the *Muqaddima* itself must largely be understood as a complex, ongoing debate between the two very different opposing conceptions of Islam—on all the relevant levels of theory and practice—that are suggested by Ibn Khaldun's own guiding Aristotelian philosophy in contrast to those highly influential Sufi thinkers (such as Ibn 'Arabī) whose works he explicitly wished to eliminate, then one can only wonder what is left when *neither* side of that primary philosophical discussion is adequately taken into account.

In any event, some attentive readers have remarked on the apparent contradiction between the recurrent criticisms of contemporary Sufism that we have noted in Ibn Khaldun's fatwa, parts of the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, and most of the *Muqaddima* (a thoroughly critical, often hostile attitude that is corroborated by what we know of his actual life and autobiography) and what might initially seem to be a positive appreciation and acceptance of mystical and prophetic spiritual knowledge (apparently going "beyond" what can be known by purely rational and demonstrative means) that is curiously outlined in the two complementary discussions of prophetic epistemology and its ontological underpinnings that are provided at the beginning of chapters 1 and 6 of the *Muqaddima*. If one reads these epistemological sections in a naive and historically uninformed way, this apparent contradiction is really glaring and unavoidable. It is not just a sort of personal moral or practical inconsistency, as though Ibn Khaldun (like so many other religious and philosophic thinkers) had simply failed to carry out in his own life something that he allowed for in theory. In fact, on the one hand, he does seem to suggest that in those two peculiar sections there is a wider possibility of some kind of suprarational inspired knowledge and spiritual "unveiling" (*kashf*), while on the other hand, he misses no occasion throughout the rest of his *Muqaddima* to combat any and every theoretical claim and practical attempt to realize and act on the widespread Sufi and other claims to such privileged spiritual knowledge. Before going on to outline, under the following two headings, a broader interpretation of these two key passages and their complex rhetorical intentions, it may be helpful to examine briefly two earlier detailed attempts at actually resolving this seeming contradiction.<sup>30</sup>

Miya Syrier, in a long article on "Ibn Khaldun and Islamic Mysticism,"<sup>31</sup> attempts a chronological explanation of this problem, based in part on a study of the different recensions of the *Muqaddima*. Ibn Khaldun's intellectual interest in Sufi thought and his "undeniable leanings toward Absolute Monism," according to this theory, came mainly later in his life during his stay in Egypt and therefore remained largely on the theoretical plane. Apparently, according to this hypothesis, he did not have the time or sufficient motivation to carry out that interest in practice or even in an appropriate revision of the earlier, more forcibly rationalistic and Aristotelian views that (as the author admits) are also evident in most other parts of his work. There is no sign, in this case, that this commentator was aware of the complex and likewise intentionally ambiguous traditional treatment of these same key epistemological

questions by Avicenna and Tūsī (and among earlier Islamic philosophers more generally), which in fact provided the immediate intellectual and rhetorical background for Ibn Khaldun's problematic discussions of Sufi claims regarding prophetic and mystical epistemology.<sup>32</sup>

Eric Chaumont's subsequent thesis on the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and Ibn Khaldun's "critique of philosophy"<sup>33</sup> developed an even more radical position. Systematically taking issue with the guiding arguments and broader philosophical interpretations of Muhsin Mahdi,<sup>34</sup> he maintained that Ibn Khaldun, like Ghazali, was in fact somehow a Sufi and devout Muslim believer who totally rejected all the claims and approaches of the Islamic philosophers—hence his "refutation of the philosophers" in chapter 6 of the *Muqaddima* is to be taken in a literal and absolute sense. In this view, any apparent traces of a philosophic outlook in the *Muqaddima* have to do only with the narrower heuristic assumptions of historical science, but Ibn Khaldun personally believed in the superiority of Islamic revelation and spiritual inspiration on all planes, going beyond what could ever be given by philosophy in every respect. The thoughtful reader is left wondering why this Ibn Khaldun failed to act on his own supposedly positive view of Sufism (as in the vociferous book-burning fatwa discussed above), why he devoted much energy to criticizing Sufism in essentially all its contemporary manifestations, and why he demonstrated a great interest in the repeated and usually positive restatement of the far-reaching claims, premises, and methods of the Islamic philosophers throughout the *Muqaddima* (as indeed he did in summary form in his earlier *Shifā' al-Sā'il*).

These apparent contradictions can be readily resolved in light of what Ibn Khaldun himself assumes—and carefully explains in many other places throughout his *Muqaddima*—concerning (1) the basic distinction between the distinctively human *theoretical*, speculative understanding (with its corresponding sciences and intellectual methods) and the manifold *practical* and deliberative functions of reason and (2) the necessarily complex relations between the application of human practical reason and the universal political and ethical functions of revelation, with regard to grounding belief and practice of the religious law.<sup>35</sup> In fact, as illustrated in the following section, the resolution of this contradiction also reveals more positively the essential interconnection between the explicit theoretical contributions and clarifications provided by Ibn Khaldun's new science of society in the *Muqaddima* and the more problematic question of the practical aims and motivations of those reforms.

However, the possibility of actually resolving these apparent contradictions, as Ibn Khaldun himself points out, also depends on two or three basic abilities or predispositions that were certainly not shared by all of his potential readers. The first of these is close attention to the seven valid reasons that he outlines for why someone would ever bother to write a scientific book in the first place.<sup>36</sup> The second key ability, and certainly the most important, is what he describes as the distinctively human ability to think “several steps ahead”<sup>37</sup>—an ability that is certainly required if one is to grasp the reasons underlying the many apparent contradictions or nonsequiturs that are intentionally spread throughout the *Muqaddima* on virtually every page. And the indispensable third factor, at least for readers who would want to pursue the multiple suggestions in the *Muqaddima* concerning the true intellectual perfection of human beings, would be some acquaintance with the writings of earlier Islamic philosophers,<sup>38</sup> especially Avicenna, Averroes, and Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī.<sup>39</sup> Readers who approached the *Muqaddima* without all three of these essential prerequisites—a group that probably included most of Ibn Khaldun’s potential audience—might be momentarily bothered by some of the apparent contradictions or unexplained assertions in this book, but as many uninformed modern commentators have done, they would most likely come away relatively secure in the same set of unexamined beliefs and attitudes that they had brought to their reading in the first place.<sup>40</sup>

## The Distinction of Beliefs and Demonstrative Knowledge

However, even for readers without any prior knowledge of philosophy, Ibn Khaldun gives a more than adequate explanation of the basic grounds for his critique of contemporary Sufism in his repeated explanations of the fundamental distinction between beliefs or *opinions* (religious and otherwise), on the one hand, and demonstrative *knowledge*, on the other.<sup>41</sup>

Beliefs, opinions, and social norms serve above all to orient action and volition, both individually and collectively, and most of the discussions of Islamic subjects (including Sufism) throughout this book are meant to be understood from this very practical and clear-sighted perspective. As Ibn Khaldun illustrates at great length throughout the actual historical sections of his *K. al-‘Ibar* (and not simply in the *Muqaddima*), such popular opinions vary greatly through history and vari-

ous communities. What is politically essential about them is not whether they are true or false—categories that are properly applicable only to matters of reality subject to philosophical demonstration—but rather whether they are widely believed and followed and are therefore *practically effective* in assuring the common sociopolitical ends of human laws.<sup>42</sup> One of his most significant remarks in this connection is his insistence (Q 1: 72–73) that prophecy does not exist by natural necessity but rather *through religious laws* whose efficacy and very existence depend above all on the persuasive powers of imagination in creating the politically indispensable supporting ground of popular belief and consensus.<sup>43</sup>

Since much of the *Muqaddima* is devoted to a careful analysis of the political effects of various Islamic beliefs and the corresponding forms and presuppositions of effective rhetorical persuasion, with the evident aim of distinguishing the positive or useful from the dangerous and destructive,<sup>44</sup> this same perspective can readily account for the two recurrent points of intentional ambiguity that are apparent in Ibn Khaldun's discussion of Sufism. First, the widespread popular belief in the direct spiritual inspiration and mediation of the Sufi saints can be conceived as "good" insofar as it had come to be perhaps the primary underpinning of wider popular belief in the validity of Muhammad's mission and revelation in Ibn Khaldun's own society. This readily explains why Ibn Khaldun discusses the epistemological foundations of prophecy and Sufism in similar (and outwardly positive) terms, while at the same time he does everything possible to undermine and debunk—for his more perspicacious readers, at least—what were popularly taken to be the corresponding claims of the saints and certain living Sufi shaykhs to be the authoritative guides and interpreters of the Prophet's message. The same motivations even more clearly underlie his lengthy attempts, especially in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, to differentiate between what he sees as the positive ethical and political consequences of certain restricted forms of Sufi rhetoric (namely, those popularly inculcating strong inner habits of unconscious obedience and faithfulness to the general ethical precepts of the religious law) and what he typically presents as the historically later and politically dangerous framework of individualistic practices and spiritual, other-worldly metaphysical interpretations that had become so widely associated with that supposedly "primitive," unquestioning moral state of belief ostensibly shared by all the Companions and earliest Muslims.

Ibn Khaldun's treatment of the *theoretical*, epistemological preten-

sions of contemporary Sufism is (as his unambiguously hostile fatwa suggests) far more radical and uncompromising. His entire survey of the intellectual scene of his time in chapter 6 is built on the fundamental distinction (at 6: 9; Q 2: 385–86) between the *rational*, philosophic sciences (which are common to all civilizations where they are found since they are based on human beings' intrinsic "ability to think" and on the corresponding regularities of the natural order) and the contrasting variety of *conventional*, traditional religious sciences (or more properly, crafts)<sup>45</sup> (which are based on principles established by the effective political authority of a particular religious law). All of chapter 6, when it is read carefully, can be understood as a detailed attempt to help thoughtful, critically minded readers to distinguish the proper forms of both kinds of "science" from the wide range of misleading or degenerate pretenders and imitations that had grown up in both areas. Within each category (genuine philosophical sciences and of religiously based crafts), Ibn Khaldun generally begins with the relatively sound and valid sciences and then moves through increasingly distorted and dangerous pseudosciences—culminating in both cases with writings or practices that he explicitly ties to contemporary Sufism.<sup>46</sup> The conclusion—which he brings out explicitly in his summary at Q 3: 258 (ch. 6: 37)—is that Sufism should not be included among either the religious crafts or speculative philosophic sciences since it is a spurious, dangerously misleading attempted hybrid of both. However, by the end of this survey, Ibn Khaldun has made it clear to his more thoughtful readers that the very limited positive effects of contemporary Sufism have to do *only* with its indirect political and ethical impact on popular religious beliefs and have nothing at all to do with any philosophic or scientific validity of its more recent "theoretical" proponents.<sup>47</sup>

## Philosophic Prophetology and Speculative Sufism

The intentionally ambiguous language that is used throughout Ibn Khaldun's discussions of prophetic epistemology and its relations to Sufism (at the beginnings of both chapter 1 and chapter 6 of the *Muqaddima*) had its classical Islamic expression throughout the works of Avicenna<sup>48</sup> and found its most elaborate earlier development (in the sense in which it is used here) in Tūsī's elaborate, highly defenses of Avicenna's rationalistic political outlook against Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī's theological criticisms of those same arguments.<sup>49</sup> Since a detailed read-

ing and analysis of these two key sections of the *Muqaddima* would require at least a short book, here I give a brief summary of the basic features of Avicenna's philosophic interpretation of prophecy and the ways that it is understood and applied by Ibn Khaldun, especially with regard to Sufism.

Avicenna's treatment of the specific qualities of prophecy (*khasā'is al-nubuwwa*), in each of his systematic works (including the *Ishārāt*), is divided into three areas that correspond to three distinct powers or activities of the human rational soul. For Avicenna (as for Ibn Khaldun), these "prophetic" attributes and activities are always explicitly grounded in an analysis of real, universal aspects of human souls.<sup>50</sup> In that perspective, the fundamental ambiguity of interpretation (scriptural or otherwise) has to do with showing how anyone can actually know and demonstrate that any particular epistemic claim or activity is in reality "prophetic" in a *true* sense. Most readers have read and continue to read these intentionally ambiguous sections of the *Muqaddima* simply as an apologetic philosophic justification or explanation of their own preexisting beliefs in prophecy or in claims for the mystical inspiration and powers of particular holy individuals, without stopping to ask the more awkward—but practically and politically inescapable—question of what that explanation might actually imply about the possible reliable *verification* or true interpretation of any particular prophetic or mystical belief and truth-claim.

First of all, the highest form of prophecy, for Avicenna, is the "intellectual" level, which he defines in terms of his theory of the "sacred intellect" (*'aql qudsī*), a hypothetically extreme form of the process of "intuitional inspiration" (*hads*) by which the theoretical intellect in fact always arrives at the awareness of the missing middle terms (of the demonstrative syllogism) in its process of intellectual investigation. The critical implication of this theory and ultimately its far-reaching motivating intention is that it positions the accomplished *philosopher* (that person who is actually consciously able to elaborate the chains of rational conception and demonstrative reasoning appropriate to any given field of knowledge) as *the only truly qualified interpreter* of any claims that a "prophecy" has any rationally knowable and demonstrable contents, whether those prophetic contents are presented in explicitly demonstrative form or (as is almost always the case) in the form of imaginary, symbolic representations.

Hence the archetypal representative (or at least the only truly

qualified interpreter) of this specific cognitive, intellectual aspect or form of “prophecy” is none other than the accomplished philosopher—and more particularly, Avicenna himself.<sup>51</sup> With those ordinarily and popularly regarded as “prophets” (including Muhammad), the upshot of this theory is not to label as untrue the vast majority of their revelations that apparently do *not* qualify as rationally demonstrative knowledge but rather to focus the thoughtful interpreter’s attention on the alternative *practical* functions and aims of those popularly accepted historical “revelations” in providing precisely the sort of *politically and ethically necessary beliefs* and purely conventional or imagined premises whose understanding is the major focus of Ibn Khaldun’s work. In fact, Ibn Khaldun (like Averroes before him) goes to some lengths to eliminate any possibility or suggestion of a deeper ontological grounding of those particular revealed principles that do *not* conform to the contents of rational demonstrative sciences but that often do constitute guiding normative beliefs on the level of the collective popular religious imagination (*wahm*).

Avicenna—in the famous last chapters of the *Ishārāt* and in his commentary on sections of the *Theology of “Aristotle”* (a version of some of Plotinus’s *Enneads*) that were favored by some Islamic mystics—had already applied this epistemological schema to the claims of some Sufis that they had known a direct experiential “witnessing” (*mushāhada*) of the truth. Such inner witnessing, he concedes, might coincidentally happen to be true (*mushāhada haqqa*) but *only* when its contents coincide with what can be rationally *demonstrated* by reasoning (*qiyās*). That rational criterion of truth, he stresses, certainly does not always coincide with the various complex emotions and sensations or imaginations that were popularly associated with such Sufi terms as *mushāhada* and the ecstatic visions and claims of mystics more generally. Although Avicenna did not explicitly stress the negative and critical implications of his account—since he may well have wished to attract toward philosophy some of the support and interest of those initially drawn to speculative mysticism—Ibn Khaldun is typically somewhat more forthcoming in underlining those negative epistemological consequences.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, in his version of Avicenna’s understanding, the claims of the mystics and other famous religious figures to practice an “unveiling” (*kashf*) of the future turn out to be, where valid, entirely explicable in terms of *rational* foresight and accurate analysis of normally under-

standable earthly conditions,<sup>53</sup> and he repeatedly ridicules any claims to inner knowledge of spiritual reality—beyond the philosophically intelligible regularities that underlie all visible earthly phenomena—as clearly the product of vain imaginings.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, his frequent description of Sufi experiences as forms of *wijdān* (ecstasy) must be understood in light of his application of the same term in describing the emotional effects of drinking wine (Q 2: 300) and in portraying the *wijdānī* effects of military music (Q 2: 42–43) as “a kind of drunkenness.” It combines what he clearly sees as typical of Sufism in general—a dangerously deluded combination of personal irresponsibility and the mistaking of shifting inner emotions and arbitrary imagination for divine knowledge.<sup>55</sup> As usual, what is important in Ibn Khaldun’s treatment of this question, within its wider polemic framework, is everything that he does *not* deal with explicitly—the Sufis’ actual preoccupation with levels and manifestations of a spiritual reality that transcends the Aristotelian ontological schema that he assumes; the elaborate philosophic schemas by which they sought to ground and explain those suprasensory fields of spiritual reality; and the centrality of those spiritual questions (such as the immortality and postmortem survival of each individual soul) for fundamental teachings of Islam in areas where the great Sufi teachers claimed to offer indispensable and authoritative guidance to the *trans*-historical intentions of the prophets. However, Ibn Khaldun’s vehement insistence (in the fatwa that begins this discussion) on the religious obligation to burn and utterly destroy some of the most intellectually sophisticated and influential Islamic treatments of these spiritual subjects should provide more than sufficient commentary on his systematic silence here in the *Muqaddima* concerning those fundamental Sufi epistemological and metaphysical claims.

The second key aspect of Avicenna’s treatment of prophecy—and of the corresponding associated claims and activities of Islamic mystics—has to do with his discussions of the activities and influences of the *imagination*. In this respect, much more than in first case of rational, philosophic knowledge, Avicenna emphasizes the universality of the phenomena in question. Thus, to the extent that our “imaginal” perceptions, whether in ordinary dreams or in prophetic visions, claim some intelligible knowledge content, he stresses the absolute necessity of a demonstrably reasoned interpretation (whether called *ta’wīl* for prophecy or *ta’bīr* for dreams and visions) that is grounded in what can be independently known by the rational sciences and their logical methods.

However, once again Avicenna does not openly stress the way that this essential philosophic qualification or “description” of inspiration and revelation is not in fact a sound justification of popular beliefs but rather is a severe *limitation* of all prophetic claims. It intentionally tends to eliminate the pursuit of all “imaginary” symbolic and aesthetic means—clearly including most of the arts as well as religion—as a viable and reliable way to true knowledge and to any sound authority that is based on claims to an objective knowledge of reality.

Practically speaking, what is far more important in Avicenna’s discussion of the religious dimensions of imagination (for example, in his many short epistles interpreting and justifying prayer and other basic religious practices) is his suggestion of its pervasive and far-reaching *ethical and political effects* and especially of each prophet’s remarkably lasting influence on the collective imagination of others—the ongoing mass of unthinking believers in the revelations of a particular religious lawgiver. This lasting political effect, he repeatedly suggests, is the *true*, historically tangible, and self-evident “miracle” of each prophecy. It should not be necessary to underline the manifold ways in which virtually all the *Muqaddima* (and Ibn Khaldun’s *History* more generally) can be conceived as an extended commentary on Avicenna’s allusive suggestions concerning these more practical sociopolitical and ethical prophetic functions of imagination. Perhaps most striking in this regard is his systematic avoidance (in this domain, at least) of any of the publicly contending distinguishing criteria between the “revelations” of prophets and saints<sup>56</sup> (or between either group and true or false pretenders, social reformers, magicians, and so forth), apart from the following two *politically* decisive points—(1) their ability to assure and maintain the lasting belief of their followers and (2) their ability to direct and mobilize effectively the actions of the masses following from those beliefs.

As for the third property of prophecy that is discussed by Avicenna—its “physical” (or natural: *tabī‘ī*) effects and influences in this world—that philosopher and his successors (especially Tūsī) had already stressed that (1) such activities are grounded in the natural order and corresponding powers of the soul and (2) those same powers (even in their more extraordinary forms) are widely shared by a multitude of human beings with *no* religious or mystical pretensions (such as magicians, sorcerers, and diviners), who can and do use them for all sorts of good and bad ends. Once again, Ibn Khaldun likewise focuses in detail on the *this-worldly* effects and uses of those natural powers, while ef-

fectively and systematically eliminating any possible supranatural explanations or uses that might otherwise be taken to support the wider claims of contemporary Sufis and related popular devotional practices. Perhaps even more significant is his intentional attempt to portray the activities and claims of the most influential and prestigious Islamic mystics of his own era (such as Ibn ‘Arabi) as in fact falling primarily into this suspect territory of pseudoastrologers, magicians, and charlatans.<sup>57</sup>

A further indication that these core relations between (1) Avicenna’s and Ibn Khaldun’s accounts of prophecy and mysticism and (2) Ibn Khaldun’s detailed development of the thoroughly rationalistic implications of Avicenna’s thought in this area are not purely accidental is provided by Ibn Khaldun’s careful silence concerning three more typically neoplatonic features of Avicenna’s thought that al-Ghazālī and later Sufi thinkers had repeatedly used to construct a pseudophilosophic justification for the superiority of Sufism as a path to the spiritual truth. (Not coincidentally, at least two of those novel theories are important features of Ibn ‘Arabi’s and other later Sufi adaptations of Avicennan philosophic themes, and all three were vehemently and repeatedly criticized by Averroes throughout his commentaries on Aristotle.)<sup>58</sup> The first of these was Avicenna’s assertion of his own metaphysics or divine science as a distinct field of knowledge that was *independent* of the conclusions of physics and also necessary as a preliminary foundation to assure the truth of the other philosophic sciences. In contrast to this novel assertion of a foundational role of this “divine science” (which could easily be taken to justify claims for the extraphilosophical forms of metaphysical knowledge and investigation favored by many Sufis), Ibn Khaldun’s accounts of the rational sciences always follow Averroes in stressing the key foundational role of physics (all the sciences of the natural world) and the *autonomy* of its investigation of all the natural orders of being.

Even more conspicuous by its absence in Ibn Khaldun’s account is any reference to Avicenna’s apparent support of the immortality and substantiality of each individual soul *per se* (apart from its purely intellectual perfection and gradual acquisition of the secondary intelligibles)—a theory that again would tend to provide a foundation in demonstrative philosophical “knowledge” for central religious and Sufi conceptions that Ibn Khaldun clearly prefers to deal with only in their more visible function simply as ethically and politically important popular *beliefs*. Closely related to this is Ibn Khaldun’s emphatic insistence

in the *Muqaddima*, at each ontological discussion of the “angels” whose existence is revealed by physical science, that these are *only* the pure intellects moving the heavenly spheres. This is a pointed and intentional denial of the controversial Avicennan theory of the existence of a separate order of corporeal (or “imaginal”) angels that are associated with the bodies of each planet or sphere—a theory (again assumed by Ibn ‘Arabi and his interpreters) that became frequently used in later Islamic thought to explain separate, higher realms of imaginal being and of spiritual influence and revelation *distinct* from ordinary human acts of intellection and their expression in practical intelligence.

### The Constructive Aims of Ibn Khaldun’s Criticisms

The preceding discussion has tried to bring out some of the ways in which *both* the intellectual and the more practical facets of Ibn Khaldun’s criticisms of Sufism (as well as other Islamic religious sciences, such as *kalām*) have their deeper roots in his own understanding of Islamic philosophy. From that comprehensive perspective, the whole purpose of the *Muqaddima*, as of his new science of culture more generally, can be fully understood only in the larger context of the hierarchy of the philosophic sciences (both practical and theoretical) and the corresponding awareness of their practical and historical interaction with the new religious “crafts” and public beliefs in the Islamic context. We can envision that wider process more clearly by looking at (1) the aims and consequences that Ibn Khaldun could expect his critique to have on various classes of readers and (2) the ways that his far-reaching criticisms of contemporary Sufi claims, particularly to intellectual and religious authority, also seem to have been grounded and reflected in his own life and activity.

To begin with, for readers without the necessary rare intellectual qualifications and philosophic orientation described above, neither the *Muqaddima* nor the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il* would be likely to lead to any radical change in their beliefs, although it might point them toward a renewed devotion and attention to their own practice of their particular form of Islam and perhaps even to a renewed awareness of the this-worldly consequences of that practice. If such readers happened to be among the group of jurists who were already deeply suspicious of Sufi claims and writings, they would find in Ibn Khaldun’s works—including his unambiguous fatwa cited at the beginning of this exposition—ample further

justification for their hostile opinions.<sup>59</sup> However, such limited aims would scarcely justify or explain the complex intellectual and rhetorical effort and intention that are evident throughout his manifold criticisms of Sufism in this work. As such, they remind us of the seriousness with which Ibn Khaldun himself conceived of the intellectual dimensions of his work and of the irreducible differences between his distinctively philosophical outlook and the modern Islamic reformist movements with which it has often been rather misleadingly compared.

For more qualified readers, Ibn Khaldun's critique of Sufism could be expected to lead first of all to an intellectual clarification of the separate, legitimate, and harmonious aims and domains of philosophy and religion—and to a corresponding resituating of the various claims and activities associated with Sufism (along with other religious “pseudosciences” and dangerous hybrids of religion and philosophy), in both the theoretical and practical domains. Intellectually, that would certainly mean focusing their attention, in the most efficient possible manner, on those particular philosophic activities and sciences that Ibn Khaldun consistently describes as leading to human beings' ultimate perfection—and eventually on discovering and implementing the appropriate means for assuring the preservation and continuation of those essential philosophical sciences within the existing Islamic polities.

The further practical consequences of that philosophic awareness (as with Ibn Khaldun's own very practical fatwa cited above) would depend greatly on each reader's own degree of authority and ability to influence others.<sup>60</sup> Ibn Khaldun devotes considerable effort and intention in the *Muqaddima* to at least three such further philosophic aims:

- The first such intended consequence is evident in his repeated efforts to eliminate all competitors (including above all speculative or theoretical Sufism) for the philosophic sciences in relation to the rare elite who were properly qualified to pursue such scientific disciplines. This aim is evident both in his clarification of the true principles and relations of each of the various pseudosciences (both religious and philosophic) and in his repeated allusions to their potentially dangerous, delusive effects on the mass of “simpletons and idiots” among the wider population. Thus, in his autobiography as throughout the *Muqaddima* itself, he continually points to the supposed results of such deluded pursuits in helping to eliminate serious religious and scientific scholarship in Maghrebi society, while alluding more delicately to their pernicious social and intellectual

effects in Egypt and the Islamic East, where, as was pointed out at the beginning, these Sufi understandings of Islam and human perfection were more thoroughly established.

- A second further intended consequence was the appropriate rational ordering of education, time, manpower, and material resources not simply in the qualified reader's own life but also in the surrounding wider society—to encourage others to reach human beings' ultimate (purely intellectual) perfection and to enable others to follow the properly founded guidance of those true philosophers.<sup>61</sup> This process—at least on the level of the properly qualified and trained individual and that person's sphere of activity—need not be perceived as purely utopian. Indeed, the concluding sections of chapter 6 of the *Muqaddima* (immediately before Ibn Khaldun's final long treatment of Arabic poetry) contain essential discussions of the hierarchy and order of the sciences and of the best pedagogical methods and assumptions that were needed to begin to fulfill more successfully the highest human ends.
- Finally, to assure the necessary practical preconditions for pursuing what Ibn Khaldun understands to be the highest human ends, the removal of the widely accepted "illusions" that he sees as typifying contemporary Sufism (and its ontological claims and presuppositions) would clear the way for a more flexible and effective interpretation and application of the accepted religious norms in light of what he presents as their *true* sociopolitical ends and with a fuller practical appreciation of their actual limiting conditions and possibilities. Ibn Khaldun's own repeated emphasis on the practical political importance of effective, nonreflective internalized popular allegiance to "the law" is clearly viewed here not simply as some kind of religious or ethical end in itself but as one of a number of equally necessary sociopolitical conditions for intellectual reform and renewal, including eventually more appropriate and realistic public interpretations of the religious laws themselves.<sup>62</sup>

An essential test of this interpretation of the relations of religion and philosophy in Ibn Khaldun's written critique of Sufism—just as in the related cases of Avicenna or Tūsī—is its congruity with what we know of the rest of his life and activity. And in fact, not only is there no sign of Sufi practice, study, or support in Ibn Khaldun's known career as a politician, court official, teacher, and Maliki judge (exemplified most notably in the outspokenly anti-Sufi fatwa with which we began), but

the same sort of pointed, thinly veiled critique marks the beginning of his own autobiography, where the political failures and retreat of his own father and grandfather, after centuries of familial prestige and public renown, is suggestively traced to the influence of a leading Sufi preacher of Tunis.<sup>63</sup>

Whatever the relevance of the personal connection that he seems to make in that case, there can be little doubt that at least some of the recurrent passion in his denunciations of contemporary Sufism flows from his perception of an inner connection between its growing intellectual and sociopolitical influences in Islamic culture and the recent undeniable political and material decline of that culture (at least in the Maghrib and Andalusia), which is such a central theme in his new study of history. Many of his motivating concerns have their own immediate, poignant roots in his own experience and actively involved political situation. This certainly includes such recurrent items as his criticism of various mahdist and messianic rebellions as obstacles to real lasting political reforms; his critique of the squandering of scarce societal resources on the “simpletons” who populated the Sufi *zāwiyas* and *khānegahs* that were often lavishly patronized by the Mamluks and other Muslim rulers of his time; and his ironic account of the misdirection of indispensable human and intellectual capacities into futile activities and pointless speculations, which is elaborated with such telling detail throughout his survey of the state of the contemporary Muslim sciences and education. A significant sign that Ibn Khaldun proudly practiced what he preached, even in the later Egyptian phase of his career, is the incident that he recounts near the end of his autobiography in which he exposed the misalliance between those he considered fraudulent Maghrebi muftis and “those of their race retired in zawiyas” for “so-called reforms” and eventually succeeded in getting such people “to leave their zawiyas and dry up their source of profits.”<sup>64</sup>

### **Reading the *Muqaddima*: Related Applications of Ibn Khaldun’s Rhetoric**

The distinctive rhetorical methods and devices that have been illustrated in this study with regard to Ibn Khaldun’s criticisms of contemporary Sufism are by no means limited to that complex subject. Once the careful reader has learned to recognize the underlying motives and practical and intellectual concerns that guide his distinctive rhetoric, it soon be-

comes evident that those features apply equally to many other related areas of potential ethical, intellectual, and religious concern. And as in the case of Sufism, each reader's ability to discern this extraordinary literary craft almost always depends on having prior knowledge and awareness of the conventional wisdom and related competing conceptions of knowledge and proper practice that were once taken for granted by the learned Arabic readership of Ibn Khaldun's own time. In this regard, it may be helpful to conclude by mentioning some further telling illustrations of four of the most important rhetorical devices that are to be found throughout the *Muqaddima* and whose prominence has become evident over the years in my seminars devoted to this work:

- **Telling silence:** One of the most powerful (but also potentially most hidden) rhetorical methods in Ibn Khaldun's arsenal, which he uses constantly in regard to contemporary Sufi writers, is his ability to pass over in complete silence key historical events, issues, actors, writings, and the like that his educated readers would surely know and that they would normally *expect* to be mentioned in a particular context. Among the most striking illustrations of that revealing approach is his apparent silence<sup>65</sup> regarding the major historical role of the Kharijite 'Ibādīs (of the kingdom of Tahert and elsewhere) and their Berber followers in the earliest process of "Islamicization" of the indigenous, non-Arab populations of North Africa. It is doubtful that this particular omission can be explained either by theological prejudices (since one key feature of the *Muqaddima* is Ibn Khaldun's wide-ranging fascination with the historical success of the Fatimids, despite the sensitivity of Shi'ite theology and proclivities among his own primary audiences) or by the accidents of surviving historical documentation (since the existence of the North African 'Ibadis and their rule was well known and is at least mentioned by a considerable range of earlier Arabic historical sources). On the other hand, Ibn Khaldun's learned readers could be assumed to be well aware of the recurrently destructive political and historical consequences of what the Sunni (and also Shi'ite) learned scholars normally viewed as the relatively anarchic, sectarian, and troublingly democratic theological approaches and presuppositions of the full range of popular early Kharijite movements. These tendencies (as did those of some of the later Sufis discussed in this article) radically challenged those later scholars' most basic shared norms of religious knowledge, authority, and right order.

- Moral “shocks”:** As is pointed out in several cases above, one of Ibn Khaldun’s most obvious rhetorical methods—and probably the one that has led a few modern Muslim interpreters to note remarkable resemblances to Machiavelli—is his pointedly “realistic” (in the sense of *realpolitik*) stress, in many different historical contexts, on the powerful contrast between (1) the (popularly judged) ethically or religiously right and just attitudes and behavior and (2) the notorious cases of pragmatically amoral attitudes and behavior that proved to be politically effective and successful. That widespread popular religious attitude of unrealistic moral idealism—or at least a morally *critical* standpoint toward the questionable actions and public policies of many politically successful earlier Muslim rulers and their actions—which he explicitly and mordantly criticizes, is by no means limited to the ethical teachings that are associated with later Sufi writers. In fact, students of a great many classical Islamic historians—including central figures like al-Tabarī, who were certainly familiar to most of Ibn Khaldun’s learned audience—are familiar with the major, self-consciously ethical and religious role of the historical events that they were discussing, especially the constantly contested, religiously paradigmatic events and actors of the first two centuries of the Islamic era. The same ongoing tensions between political realism and idealism were also powerfully highlighted in the appropriate sections of the canonical hadith selections (for example, in the sections on the *fitan*, or civil wars) and—likewise often appealing to relevant hadith, among Sunni commentators—in the most influential works of Qur’an interpretation (*tafsīr*), for those verses where fundamental issues of political authority and responsibility are raised.<sup>66</sup> Thus, *only* readers familiar with the consistently moral and often openly moralizing perspective largely shared by those classical Islamic texts and traditions can really begin to recognize Ibn Khaldun’s thoroughgoing, consistently thought-provoking, often openly provocative undermining of what he clearly views as their misleading confusion of unrealistic ethical ideals and practical political insights and imperatives. This intentionally highlighted contrast is most obvious in his treatment of the political and military successes and actual methods of the Umayyads and their agents (al-Hajjāj, in particular), whose unconcealed attempts to subordinate religion as an overt tool of politics—very much in line with their Byzantine and Sassanid predecessors, as

with the philosopher-king ideal of Ibn Khaldun's own Islamic philosophic tradition—were rarely presented in a positive light by any of the later traditions of Islamic religious learning.

- **Ironic “mimicking” of traditionalist arguments:** This essay highlights the various ways that Ibn Khaldun often subtly hints at his thoughtful *disagreements* with popularly received opinions, norms, and conventions, which should not be taken to imply that even his most literal statements of ostensible, explicit agreement with popular beliefs and reasoning are meant to imply any deeper accord with the motives and assumptions that would ordinarily be taken as implicit in those particular commonplace formulas and expressions. A typical example of this problematic sort of “agreement” can be seen in his famous anti-Sufi fatwa that is quoted above, with its initial praises of the “path of the Sunna, of the *salaf*, according to the Book and the Sunna,” and so on and its contrasting condemnation of all heretical “innovations.” Naïve modern readers, without any of the necessary background for understanding Ibn Khaldun's language and guiding philosophic intentions and assumptions, could certainly be forgiven for reading such a passage as only another example of the familiar traditionalist (*salafī*) rhetoric of an Ibn Taymiyya and his generations of imitators. Neither tradition nor innovation have anything to do with the actual grounds of Ibn Khaldun's argument and its intended practical effects in this case.
- **Conscious misrepresentations:** Finally, the various examples given here of repeated massive misrepresentations of key Sufi writers and their doctrines and teachings (so that Ibn ‘Arabi, to take the most egregious example, comes across almost exclusively in the *Muqaddima* as a would-be magician and soothsayer) should certainly not appear surprising to scholarly students of the rhetorical techniques and assumptions of classical Islamic intellectual traditions.<sup>67</sup> After all, perhaps nothing about this work could be more extreme and intentionally problematic than the fact that this entire “new science” of culture—which is in many ways the most elaborate and far-reaching creative development of the Farabian tradition of Islamic political philosophy, in which virtually every single topic is meant to be understood properly *only* within that philosophical framework—nonetheless outwardly speaks directly of that foundational philosophical tradition within a section explicitly entitled “the refutation of the philosophers.”

What this long catalogue of such recurrent intentional misrepresentations suggests, at the very least, is that we should never imagine that Ibn Khaldun—at least in his *Muqaddima*—is speaking simply as a disinterested, objective historian and mere describer (or “encyclopedist”)<sup>68</sup> of the Islamic intellectual, artistic, cultural, and religious traditions that he discusses. Machiavelli did not write his *Discourses* on Livy for scholars of Latin philology.

## Notes

1. The relevant bibliography is so vast that only a few representative English titles can be mentioned here. One of most striking and readily accessible illustrations of these phenomena, in the case of Islam in China, is S. Chittick’s *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000). Also see the proceedings of the Kyoto conference (2001) on the Influences of Ibn ‘Arabi in Asia, in *Journal of the History of Sufism* 5 (2006). The special issue brings together contributions from many of the international scholars who are actively publishing in this area. (Similar conferences on the “legacy of Ibn ‘Arabi” have been held in recent years in Spain, Morocco, Syria, and the United Kingdom; at the very least, these reflect the growing awareness of the ongoing contemporary significance of the issues and opportunities raised by this debate. One of the broadest and most detailed recent volumes on this subject, albeit written almost exclusively from the standpoint of other Muslim critics of these same historical developments, is F. de Jong and B. Radtke, eds., *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). Finally, a readily accessible recent study that addresses many of the dimensions of Mamluk Sufism (in both its popular and learned variations) attacked by Ibn Khaldun is E. Homerin’s *‘Umar Ibn al-Fārid: Sufi Verse, Sainly Life* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2001).

2. Reprinted at the end of M. al-Tanji’s edition of the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il fi Tahdhīb al-Masā’il*, (Istanbul, 1958), pp. 110–11, translated here in its entirety. Many students of Ibn Khaldun, including al-Tanji, have placed the composition of this otherwise undated text in the years immediately preceding the first stages of writing the *Muqaddima* and the *K. al-‘Ibar*.

3. Readers who may be struck by the verbal similarity of this passage to Ibn Taymiyya’s famous *salafī* outlook and criticism of popular Sufism in his time (and to the various permutations of his views in a wide range of modern radical “reformist” movements) should be cautioned that the resemblance here is at a purely verbal, rhetorical level. As is shown below, both the philosophical principles and the intentions that underlie Ibn Khaldun’s criticisms are fundamentally different.

4. In the sixth prefatory discussion to chapter 1, the prefatory sections of chapter 6 on human and prophetic knowledge, and the corresponding sections of the discussion specifically devoted to Sufism in chapter 6.

5. Q 1: 201–02, in the middle of the sixth “prefatory discussion” in the opening chapter. Ibn Khaldun stresses that “the course of our discussion caused us to insert the preceding section” (immediately after his discussion of purported claims to mystical knowledge). I don’t have space in this article to quote the passage in full or to point out the recurrent irony and ambiguities throughout all of his expressions. Textual references to the *Muqaddima*, throughout this essay, are to the old edition of E. M. Quatremère

(*Prolégomènes d'Ebn Khaldun* [Paris: Benjamin Duprat, 1858]), followed by volume (Q 1–3) and page numbers. This allows readers without Arabic to refer easily to the corresponding sections in the full Rosenthal (Bollingen) translation. The actual translations throughout this study are mine.

6. The forms of public and religious “folly” that are criticized in the *Muqaddima* are certainly not limited to Sufism (see, for example, Ibn Khaldun’s equally critical portrayal of *ilm al-kalām* or of various educational practices of his day), but contemporary Sufism is far more frequently the object of Ibn Khaldun’s criticisms than any other Islamic science, sect, or interpretive tendency.

7. Both the passion and the rhetorical centrality of Ibn Khaldun’s criticisms of Sufism (whether in the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il* or the *Muqaddima*) can be understood only against the background of the pervasiveness of Sufi themes in both religious literature and practice in his historical milieu. Therefore, as can be seen in many of the illustrations below, the distortions, inaccuracies, and omissions in his treatment of Sufism are normally not signs of ignorance of the authors and practices in question. Rather, they are signs of certain self-conscious rhetorical—often pointedly polemical—intentions whose critical dimension would be most evident precisely to his contemporary readers well acquainted with the intended targets of that persistent criticism.

8. The rhetorical structures of both Averroes’s *Decisive Treatise* (with its legalistic presuppositions that closely resemble the procedure of Ibn Khaldun’s *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*) and his *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* are especially interesting in this regard. The science of *kalām* in Averroes’s own intellectual and political situation, given the recent history of Ibn Tumart (whose ideology was putatively inspired by Ghazali) and the Almohad movement, had something of the wider public significance and impact of Sufi writings in Ibn Khaldun’s time. An even closer analogy can be seen in Ibn Tufayl’s *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, which revolves around the contrast between the ostensibly “mystical” and rational philosophic understandings of Avicenna’s “Oriental Wisdom” and the same intentionally ambiguous rhetorical treatments of prophetic and mystical epistemology in Avicenna’s works that have led to such recurrent misunderstandings of Ibn Khaldun’s intentions.

9. In fact, one could argue that the primary *practical* aim of the *Muqaddima* is not simply a reform of the science of history but rather a more fundamental rethinking of the presuppositions and aims of Islamic religious law.

10. Since Ibn Khaldun was apparently writing before the widespread institutionalization of popular “maraboutism” in the Maghrib, the relative openness of his criticisms of Sufism in the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il* and the fatwa that is cited above may not be unrelated to the relative lack in the Islamic West of a sociopolitical “establishment” of Sufi institutions and ideas that are comparable to the situation already prevailing in Mamluk Egypt. The widespread public support and institutionalization of Sufi thought and practice in Egypt, which are frequently alluded to in Ibn Khaldun’s autobiography and in the *Muqaddima*, were substantiated by a wide range of historical sources for several preceding centuries.

11. Ghazali’s Seljuk-sponsored anti-Fatimid polemic writings and Ibn Taymiyya’s anti-imami/Mongol polemics provide two other dramatic and accessible illustrations of this longstanding rhetorical pattern of using ostensibly anti-Shi’ite criticisms—in writings intended for an almost universally Sunni class of learned scholars—as a powerful indirect means of sharply criticizing more familiar and powerful developments in their own respective sociopolitical milieus. Modern interpreters of Ibn Khaldun have rarely even suggested the pervasiveness (or even the very existence) of this familiar and longstanding rhetorical procedure in his *Muqaddima*.

12. Again, this approach is by no means limited to Ibn Khaldun’s treatment of Sufism and is equally evident in his treatment of subjects relevant to our understanding and application of *fiqh* or *kalām*, for example.

13. In addition to the earlier Sunni precedents mentioned above, in a comparable way, later leading Iranian philosophers (such as Mulla Sadra) under the Shi'ite Safavid dynasty and its successors to the present day have typically used vehement attacks on the views of the notoriously Sunni *mutakallim* and pseudophilosopher Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī as a thinly veiled criticism of comparable outlooks and ideas among the increasingly powerful and intolerant Shi'ite clerics and jurists in their own milieu.

14. *Muqaddima*, Q 2: 142–201, summarized at 2: 171: Such beliefs and deluded actions are all based on “juggling of words, imagined things [*ashyā' takhyīliyya*] and astrological judgments,” so that “the lives of the first and the last of them are all wasted in this [nonsense].” Here, even before the separate chapter on Sufism, Ibn Khaldun already attempts to derive all the typical notions of “modern” (contemporary) Sufism from earlier “extremist” Shi'ism (Q 2: 164–72), focusing in each case on the common *ideological* function of each religious idea in terms of its popular political implications and effects. Thus, for example, the metaphysics of “union” (*wahda*) is treated here solely as a theological justification for the idea of divine “incarnation” (*hulūl*) that was ostensibly claimed by the imams (and presumably by later Sufi saints). The belief in the spiritual hierarchy of the saints (*qutb, abdāl, and other awliyā'*) is related back to earlier Alid political claims for the *nuqabā'*. Assumptions regarding Ali's spiritual superiority to the other Companions are reduced to simply another *political* claim, and the science of letters (*jafr*) and astrology are treated only in light of the practical usefulness of their purported “predictions”—whether sincere or simply as useful propaganda—for concrete political purposes.

15. See the representative cases cited at Q 2: 172–76, which so strikingly resemble a long series of more familiar recent “Mahdist” movements throughout the Islamic world.

16. See notes 11 and 13 above for his repeated references to the supposed “Shi'ite” and “extremist” (*ghulāt*) origins of widespread popular beliefs in the role of such spiritual intermediaries.

17. In his discussion of the role of the Sufi shaykh in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, Ibn Khaldun carefully sticks to the question of the practical need for such an individual guide in maintaining the disciple's psychic equilibrium and makes no mention at all of any wider social, political, or religious functions or authoritative claims of saints or spiritually perfected individuals (apart from the Prophet and Companions).

18. See Q 3: 65–79, where Ibn Khaldun briefly discusses the—in his view, both philosophically and religiously unsound—intellectual views on ontology and cosmology of “modern” Sufi thinkers and poets (including notably the famous Egyptian mystical poet Ibn al-Fārid), in light of both scientific knowledge and “sound” religious belief. His summary division here into contrasting later Sufi intellectual schools of divine “Self-manifestation” (*tajalli*) and “Union” (*wahda*) may also allude to Ibn Taymiyya's earlier critiques of many of the same “modern” Sufi writers. As in the hostile fatwa quoted at the beginning of this essay, he carefully distinguishes in this passage the irreparable *intellectual* and theological errors of these writers from the politically more useful, or at least potentially tolerable, *practical* and pietistic aspects of Sufi “folly.”

Ibn Khaldun's intellectual criticism of these “modern” Sufis and his presentation of their dangerous confounding of religious beliefs and true philosophy are paralleled by his equally vociferous, if perhaps slightly more subtle, attacks (following Averroes) on any intellectual pretensions of post-Ghazalian *kalām* in the immediately preceding section of chapter 6. The order of presentation and the historical analysis that is offered there strongly suggest that he—like Ibn Tufayl and Averroes before him—considered Ghazālī (through his monumental *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*) to be largely responsible for the subsequent spread and eventual respectability of these later reprehensible “Sufi” mixtures of philosophy and theology in Sunni Islam.

19. In fact, Ibn Khaldun, carefully following Avicenna's classical philosophic treat-

ment of such questions in the famous closing chapters of his *Ishārāt*, goes out of his way to eliminate both the necessity and even the possibility of any “supernatural” explanations of such activities, while stressing the great political importance of popular beliefs in them. Note the typical illustration of his biting ironic discussion of the “mystical unveiling” (*kashf*) of Ja‘far al-Sādiq in accurately foreseeing the failure of Alid uprisings against the Umayyads (at Q 2: 184) or his sarcastic remark at Q 2: 246 that astrologers “only give us the celestial cause for that, but they have yet to give us the *earthly* reason—which is what we’ve just mentioned.”

20. Q 1: 2, my emphasis.

21. As expressed in such widely circulated hadith (both in Sufi circles and in popular Islamic literature more generally) as “Were it not for you [Muhammad], I [God] would not have created the spheres [*lawlāka*]” and “I [Muhammad] was a prophet while Adam was between water and clay.” The most extensive intellectual development of this central Sufi theme is to be found throughout the works of Ibn ‘Arabi, whose writings—condemned to public burning in Ibn Khaldun’s fatwa, which is quoted at the beginning of this article—served as the basis for most subsequent elaborations of this theme.

22. Ibn Khaldun takes up the connection of *qurba* and *walāya* only once and very briefly in his section on Sufism—without any reference to the Prophet—and there carefully avoids mentioning any metaphysical or spiritual significance of such notions.

23. The same rare hadith is repeated three more times at 1: 168, 268, 364. The powerful and indeed often intentionally shocking effect of Ibn Khaldun’s use and personal selection of hadith throughout his *Muqaddima* can be appreciated only in light of what is the overwhelming denigration of attachment to this world and of the this-worldly pursuit of power and wealth throughout the Qur’an and the standard hadith collections as well as the central elaboration of those same spiritual themes throughout all forms of later Sufi tradition.

24. In fact, throughout the *Muqaddima*, the same criteria of political, worldly success are explicitly applied to saints and religious figures as to would-be political reformers in general—for example, at Q 1: 286–90 with regard to Ibn Qasī, other religious reformers, and “deluded” Berbers who were claiming to be the Mahdi or at Q 1: 390–91, where Ibn Khaldun stresses that the same politicoreligious “delusions” were shared by the Shi‘ite leader Husayn in his attitude toward the Umayyad Yazīd. In contrast, Ibn Khaldun never mentions the fundamental religious conception (which is shared by Sufis and many other Muslim groups) that the properly religious function of saints and other spiritual guides—quite distinct from their visible reforms and political aims—lies in their witnessing, often precisely through their “lost causes,” to the reality of the immortality of the soul and the afterlife, thereby pointing to the eternal importance of caring properly for the soul despite all worldly temptations and obstacles.

25. This hadith is quoted and commented repeatedly by Sufis such as Ibn ‘Arabi and was no doubt at least vaguely familiar (in that context) to most of Ibn Khaldun’s educated readers. The same sort of heavy irony is also constantly present in Ibn Khaldun’s characteristic exclusively this-worldly use, throughout the *Muqaddima*, of a large number Qur’anic verses that were normally understood in a spiritual and other-worldly manner, even without open reference to any explicitly Sufi framework of interpretation.

26. Likewise, three further references to “men mentioned by Qushayrī” in the much later chapter on Sufism (Q 3: 64, 67, and 79) all turn out to be thinly veiled criticisms of fundamental concerns and presuppositions of contemporary Sufism—as indeed of many of the renowned Sufi saints and ascetics mentioned by Qushayrī as well.

27. That is, as actual realities. This is radically different from Ibn Khaldun’s consistent focus on eschatology—for example, at Q 2: 126–28 and wherever he discusses related matters—solely in terms of popular *beliefs*, purely on the level of imagination (not of genuine knowledge), insofar as such shared beliefs practically reinforce the deterrent

functions of this-worldly rewards and punishments and thereby encourage the popular practice of and obedience to established religious precepts.

28. Although Ibn Khaldun has failed to include a separate chapter on music in his discussion of the quadrivium (among the philosophic sciences), there is no indication that his omission in this case flows from any particular religiolegal position against music as such. As illustrated by Ibn Taymiyya's attacks on the Sufi practice of *samā'*, among others, there were plenty of deeply rooted traditional legal precedents for such criticisms of music (as for similar religioethical criticisms of Arabic poetry, which he also carefully avoids mentioning), if he had wished to emphasize that particular point.

29. The only mention of particular Arabic mystical poets at all is the brief, disdainful allusion to Ibn al-Fārid and two other more minor figures (including Ibn 'Arabi's student al-Tilimsānī) at Q 3: 69 and 72, in the context of Ibn Khaldun's general dismissal—closely echoing Ibn Taymiyya's influential earlier judgments—of the heretical, “crypto-Shi'ite” notions of pantheistic “union” and “incarnation” that supposedly permeate their works. It is likely that this relative silence is a concession to—or at least an indirect acknowledgment of—the widespread popularity in Cairo of a poet like Ibn al-Fārid (or al-Busīrī).

Apart from this one exception, it is remarkable that Ibn Khaldun, in his long separate discussion of genres of Arabic poetry, seems largely to abandon the characteristic combination of religious and philosophic categories that were applied to all the other preceding Islamic and Arabic arts and sciences in favor of more autonomous (and phenomenologically adequate) aesthetic and descriptive criteria. This peculiarity is also worth noting because the philosophic commentaries of Averroes, for example, offered him a model of a more rigorously ethical, political, and rhetorical approach to Arabic poetry, which Ibn Khaldun had applied to other (especially religious) forms of Arabic literature in a number of earlier passages.

30. Alexander Knysh, in chapter 7 (“Ibn 'Arabī in the Muslim West”) of his *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), deals in greater detail with the case of Ibn Khaldun's famous friend and mentor, the Grenadan vizier Ibn al-Khatīb. Knysh stresses the concrete political dangers that were associated with contemporary Sufi movements and writing in the Maghrib. Although that earlier political context vividly illustrates Ibn Khaldun's criticisms of the popular effects of Sufi ideas (already discussed above), there is little evidence that those particular events somehow led Ibn Khaldun to adopt an attitude of prudential concealing of his real positive interest in Sufi thought, as Professor Knysh sometimes seems to suggest.

31. Miya Syrier, “Ibn Khaldun and Islamic Mysticism,” *Islamic Culture* 21 (1947): 264–302. This essay does not deal directly with the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*.

32. See the detailed epistemological discussions in the following two sections below.

33. Summarized in Eric Chaumont, “La voie du soufisme selon Ibn Khaldūn: présentation et traduction du prologue et du premier chapitre du *Shifā' al-Sā'il*,” *Révue philosophique du Louvain* 87 (1989): 264–96. Some of the author's main ideas were more briefly developed in an earlier note on “Ibn Khaldūn et al-Ghazālī: *Fiqh* et *Tasawwuf*” published in *Studia Islamica* 64 (1986): 151–57. This work is cited here as an extreme illustration of what remains probably the most common description of Ibn Khaldun's approach to both Sufism and Islamic philosophy in the *Muqaddima*, including the accounts in most historical surveys of Islamic philosophy and in the vast popularizing Arabic literature devoted to Ibn Khaldun.

34. Most elaborately developed in Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), still the most thorough and profound study of Ibn Khaldun's thought and intentions in the *Muqaddima*.

35. The best summary account of these fundamental issues is to be found in the two related articles on Ibn Khaldun by Muhsin Mahdi, in M. M. Sharif, ed., *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1963), 888–904 and 961–84. The detailed documentation of those perspectives in the *Muqaddima* itself is to be found throughout the same author's book-length study cited in the preceding note.

36. Q 3: 242–48 (ch. 6, sec. 32). This key section opens with a critically important reiteration of the Aristotelian epistemology that underlies Ibn Khaldun's understanding of the universality and uniformity of the philosophic sciences and of the reasons for the contrasting diversity of the religious and historical sciences. (The clearest earlier exposition of these principles is at Q 2: 385–86.) Ibn Khaldun's illustrations of these sound reasons for writing a scientific work are taken from nonphilosophic, religious literatures, but all of his first six reasons are directly applicable to his own justifications and motivations for composing the *Muqaddima* and, even more revealingly, to his understanding of this "new science" in its relation to the preexisting philosophic sciences and Arabic historiography.

However, the most important point in this section, with regard to Ibn Khaldun's critique of Sufism (and more particularly of Sufi literature, both doctrinal and poetic) is his concluding forceful insistence (Q 3: 247–48, repeated three times in a few lines and attributed to the ultimate scientific authority of Aristotle) that "everything else . . . is ignorance and impudence" involving either "exchanging what is untrue for what is true, or bringing in what is useless"—clearly "going astray from the path set out by the inquiry [*nazar*] of the truly intelligent [*al-'uqalā'*]."

37. Q 2: 367 (ch. 6, secs. 1–2). This short discussion of the distinctively "human power to think"—even more concisely summarized at the beginning of the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*—is the key to Ibn Khaldun's treatment of all the different "sciences" (including speculative, dogmatic Sufism) and ultimately to the structure and intentions of the entire *Muqaddima*.

38. The critical link for Ibn Khaldun's knowledge of Avicenna and the rationalistic (and often political) conceptions of Tūsī was almost certainly his own master in philosophy, al-Ābilī. See the brief discussion by N. Nassar, "Le maître d'Ibn Khaldūn: al-Ābilī," *Studia Islamica* 20 (1964): 103–14. That article contains some suggestive ideas on Ābilī's possible influence on Ibn Khaldun's radical pedagogical reforms and criticisms developed in chapter 6 of the *Muqaddima* and points to the importance of Ibn Khaldun's youthful work, *Lubāb al-Muhassal* (since Rāzī's *K. al-Muhassal* was a central target of Tūsī's philosophical polemics) but without analyzing the latter work. What is most decisive here (apart from the other references to Ābilī's mastery of the philosophic sciences) is Ibn Khaldun's own indication (in his description of that teacher in his autobiography) that Ābilī spent years in the company of masters of the Avicenna-Tūsī philosophical tradition in *Kerbala*, a notorious center of Shi'ite and intimately related philosophical studies. This key role of al-Ābilī can be contrasted further with Ibn Khaldun's account in the *Muqaddima* (Q 2: 378) of the way that Rāzī's dogmatic works reached the Maghrib through the Tunisian religious scholar Ibn Zaytūn (d. 691/1292) and his students.

With regard to the subject of this study, Ibn Khaldun's most important indication of the decisive importance of Tūsī and Avicenna—and of the probingly critical, political focus of Avicenna's *Ishārāt* as read and understood within this Eastern philosophic tradition—is in an aside in his description of one of his childhood teachers in his autobiography. M. al-Tanjī, ed., *Al-Ta'rīf bi-Ibn Khaldūn wa Rihlatih Gharb<sup>am</sup> wa Sharq<sup>am</sup>* (Cairo, 1370/1951), pp. 62–63. This autobiographical passage—which also stresses the important role of both Avicenna's *Shifā'* and the Aristotelian commentaries of Averroes in the general philosophic teaching of al-Ābilī—mentions how one of that teacher's most accomplished students, who already "had a perfect knowledge of the *Ishārāt*" and the other works of Avicenna and Averroes, once studied "the section on Sufism [the key final

chapters of the *Ishārāt*]” from that work with the famous chief Qadi of Tunis but only “*alone with him in his house.*” Ibn Khaldun’s stress on the extraordinary secrecy surrounding this private study—which would have been entirely pointless if those two famous concluding chapters were understood as simply another apologetic for by then widespread Sufi claims and practices—becomes much more understandable when one is aware of the actual focus of Tūsi’s commentary on these sections of the *Ishārāt*. Tūsi there takes up extremely delicate questions of the *political* nature, aims, and methods of “prophecy” (understood in an explicitly universal manner) and the “imaginary” nature (and political functions) of religious beliefs in the afterlife in a way that (as throughout Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima*) clearly situates the apparently “Sufi” language of those concluding chapters within the strictly rationalistic, ethico-political context that is provided by the earlier chapters and the rest of Avicenna’s technical works.

39. Tūsi’s philosophical writings are almost certainly the major immediate philosophic “source” or predecessor for Ibn Khaldun’s understanding of Islamic philosophy and its relation with the religious sciences (including the claims and methods of later Sufism). The key work in this domain (as explained in the preceding note) was Tūsi’s highly influential, lengthy lifelong commentary on Avicenna’s *Ishārāt*, which is constructed as a careful, point-by-point refutation of what he considers the repeated theological abuses of Avicennan thought by the *mutakallim* Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. (Tūsi himself, writing at the end of his tumultuous, politically active, and influential life, refers to this as his major life’s work, which he had continued to perfect for more than 40 years.) There one finds clearly and explicitly stated virtually all the major themes in Ibn Khaldun’s rationalistic, distinctively *political* understanding of prophecy (and of the supposedly “mystical” passages in Avicenna’s *Ishārāt*), usually developed through Tūsi’s polemic against Rāzī. Although there was also a vast ongoing subsequent Eastern Islamic literature of learned “adjudications” (*muhākamāt*) of this fundamental quarrel between philosophy and kalam theology, Ibn Khaldun’s own personal opinion is no doubt summarized in his pointed remark (Q 3: 274) that Tūsi was *better than any other* later Iranian scholar.

Ibn Khaldun’s great philosophic esteem for Tūsi (despite his lifelong Shi‘ite affiliations and key political role under the Mongol invaders, which is sufficient to explain the lack of other openly positive references in the *Muqaddima*) and his fierce disdain for Rāzī’s attempted replacement of Islamic philosophy by a revised version of Ash‘arite *kalām* (which comes out most openly in the section of chapter 6 on theology)—are most clearly stated (with a typically “Khalidunian” ironic use of the Qur’an) at Q 3: 117: “Tūsi . . . disputed many topics with the imam [Rāzī], and he more perfectly resolved his inquiries and disputes, for ‘*above everyone with knowledge there is a true knower*’ (12: 76).”

This same passage of the *Muqaddima* (3: 117, in the brief section on the Aristotelian sciences of physical nature) also has a crucially revealing statement of Ibn Khaldun’s understanding of the relations of Avicenna, Averroes, and Aristotle: “It was as though [Avicenna] differed with Aristotle in many of his topics and stated his own opinions [*arā*] concerning them, whereas Averroes summarized the books of Aristotle in his commentaries, following him [exactly] without differing with him. And although the [philosophically unqualified] common people [*al-nās*] composed much about that since him [Averroes or Avicenna?], nevertheless these [Aristotle’s and/or Averroes’s books] are renowned to this day and are the ones truly esteemed in this craft (of philosophy).”

This important passage reveals Ibn Khaldun’s own suspicion, discussed below (and following earlier famous Maghribi examples in key writings of Ibn Tufayl, Averroes, and Tūsi), that many of Avicenna’s apparent neoplatonic “departures” from Aristotelian (and Farabian) principles should be properly understood in terms of prudential public rhetorical adaptations to his Islamic religiopolitical context and intentions—especially in rela-

tion to the competing intellectual and practical claims of *'ilm al-kalām* and speculative Sufism.

40. Although there are many more explicit and detailed allusions to the premises, aims, and divisions of Aristotelian philosophy throughout the *Muqaddima* (amply discussed in the classical study by Muhsin Mahdi already cited) than in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, those allusions are almost certainly not enough to give an idea of the pervasive influence and indispensable presuppositions of Islamic philosophy for readers who encounter Ibn Khaldun's work without some serious prior knowledge of the philosophic sciences. However, those allusions are certainly more than sufficient to suggest necessary further directions of thought and inquiry for any curious, attentive, and properly prepared reader.

41. This fundamental distinction is brought out most openly—in its application to the religious and philosophic sciences of Ibn Khaldun's time—at Q 2: 385–86 (ch. 6, sec. 9). It is again summarized in a more inconspicuous manner after his survey of these two radically different groups of sciences (and their spurious imitators) at Q 3: 274 (ch. 6, sec. 43), where he straightforwardly insists that the philosophic, rational sciences are all “matters of the intellect” while the Islamic so-called sciences (*'ulūm*) and laws that are “derived from the Qur'an and Sunna” are “all matters of the imagination.”

42. See Ibn Khaldun's explanation (Q 2: 126–28) of the greater effectiveness of religiously supported laws compared to local governmental, outwardly restraining laws due to the additional factor of popular Muslim beliefs in posthumous rewards and punishments. The opening chapters of the *Muqaddima* are replete with references to the “anarchy” and natural “evil tendencies” (for example, Q 1: 233) of people whenever they are not restrained by their belief in religious or governmental laws. Ibn Khaldun consistently presents Muhammad's “transformation” of the “savage” Arabs (see, especially, Q 1: 270–75) as an archetypal illustration of the political effectiveness of that decisive religiopolitical influence on the popular imagination.

43. To take only a few examples, see Q 1: 235–36 on the importance of the “imaginary” (in the uses of tribal and genealogical pedigrees) in moving the passions and imagination to create group feeling, discussing the ways that Muhammad and 'Umar both encouraged this, or see Ibn Khaldun's strong insistence at Q 1: 244–45 (in an explicit criticism of Averroes's commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*) that the importance of rhetoric consists in swaying the beliefs and passions of only “those whose opinions count.” This last point may help explain why Ibn Khaldun is explicit and openly hostile in his criticisms of Sufi “theorists” who write for the politically influential *ulema* while remaining more reticent in his critique of Sufi metaphysical poetry directed toward the masses, which does at least reinforce their politically useful naïve religious faith and devotional sentiments.

This particular question of the “natural” grounds and political conditions of (religious) “prophecy,” following Avicenna, was already developed in considerable detail in the above-mentioned philosophical polemics of Tūsi against the theologian Rāzi (see notes 38–39 above on their influential commentaries on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*), as well as in the long series of later philosophical “adjudications” (*muhākamāt*) of their disputes.

44. Note Ibn Khaldun's problematic depiction of his own situation in the long earlier quotation (Q 1: 201–02 at note 5 above) concerning the many “simpletons and idiots” who devote themselves to Sufism, with its crucial emphasis on their widespread “activity and influence” for both good and bad.

45. The recurrent ambiguities in Ibn Khaldun's discussions throughout chapter 6 of the *Muqaddima* often turn on the convenient popular Arabic designation of all the Islamic religious crafts (and other hybrid imitations or pseudosciences, including, in Ibn Khaldun's judgment, later Sufi speculative writings) as “sciences” (*'ulūm*).

46. His intention and procedure here, although much more complex, often closely

resembles that followed in Averroes's famous *Fasl al-Maqāl*—with the obvious change that the major object of criticism in this case is no longer the theology of *kalām* (although Ibn Khaldun is even more devastating in his analysis of its intellectual pretensions) but the works of contemporary Sufism.

47. Ibn Khaldun's refusal in chapter 6 to give any more than the vaguest second- or third-hand account of the metaphysical teachings of Sufi writers like Ibn 'Arabi or Ibn Sab'in and his corresponding disingenuous attempts to associate those authors with such things as magic, astrological predictions, antinomian practices, and the like clearly flow directly and intentionally from his own philosophical judgment concerning the scientific invalidity and practical dangers of those texts. Neither position can be adequately explained either by simple ignorance of the authentic writings of the authors in question or by the supposition that they were considered "suspect" or "heretical," given what we know of their preceding widespread diffusion (both directly and in more popular forms) for more than a century in North Africa and Mamluk Egypt. See also the recent broad historical study of that wider influence in the Arab world in this period—and the reactions against it—in the recent work of Alexander Knysh cited at note 30 above. Indeed, as is noted at the beginning of this article, the wide-ranging popular influence of such Sufi writings undoubtedly helps to explain the depth of Ibn Khaldun's opposition and concern throughout his *Muqaddima*.

48. For a detailed study of the Avicennan ideas discussed here (and their philosophic roots in Avicenna's creative adaptation of Farabi's political philosophy), see my foundational article on "The Philosopher-Prophet in Avicenna's Political Philosophy," chapter 4 in C. Butterworth, ed., *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 142–88. Although the rhetorical adaptation of Avicenna's theories to the Islamic context of Sufism is most fully developed in the final two chapters of the *Ishārāt* (as well as in his less well-known rationalizing commentary on famously "mystical" sections of the Plotinian *Theology of "Aristotle"*), the wider philosophic explanation and understanding of those phenomena (and their relation to prophecy), as summarized here, are largely consistent throughout Avicenna's various systematic works composed at different periods of his life.

49. See notes 38–39 above.

50. Apart from the discussions of these prophetic attributes in the psychological sections (the *Kitāb al-Nafs*) of his longer works, Avicenna's supplementary treatment of prophetic questions and qualities in his sections on metaphysics has to do either with (a) establishing the existence and nature of the separate immaterial intellects (as the ultimate source of the intellectual inspiration assumed in his epistemology) or (b) discussing the activity of the prophets (appearing at the very end of the metaphysical section in each of his longer systematic works) that presupposes the practical workings and effects of all three of the distinctive "prophetic" aspects of the human soul, just as is true in the two concluding (ostensibly "Sufi") chapters of the *Ishārāt*.

51. As Avicenna boldly claims in his description of this theory in the *Dānīsh-Nāmīh*, a claim that is explicitly corroborated by his disciple Bahmanyār in the corresponding section of his influential *K. al-Tahsīl* (see details in my study of Avicenna's political philosophy cited above in note 48).

52. This subject is an excellent illustration of Ibn Khaldun's insistence, already noted above (from chapter 6 of the *Muqaddima*), on the very different aspect that his book is intended to present for readers who are able to think several steps ahead. Although readers of the sections on mystical epistemology might initially understand his remarks on *kashf* and *wijdān*—if taken in isolation—as a positive, almost apologetic support of Sufi epistemic claims, those same passages take on a radically different tone when viewed in light of the philosophic and ontological explanations that are provided elsewhere in his book. One scathingly ironical (although still outwardly ambiguous) illustra-

tion of this rhetorical approach is his pointed comparison (Q 1: 192) of the claims of “Sufi” perceptions with the problematic visions of diviners, the sick, the dying, and the insane.

53. All of Ibn Khaldun’s illustrations of successful or meaningful “unveiled” perception of the “unseen” (*ghayb*) turn out to refer to future this-worldly events and not to the symbolic and spiritual realities, on higher spiritual planes of being, that are the actual object of almost all Sufi writing and practice—and the target of Ibn Khaldun’s own epistemological criticisms. The significant illustration of Ja‘far al-Sādiq’s mystical “unveiling” concerning the eventual failure of so many anti-Umayyad Alid rebellions has already been mentioned. The full irony of that illustration in the *Muqaddima* depends on its coming after a detailed historical analysis of the relative political and material strengths and weaknesses of the opposing parties.

54. Two typical (and equally ironic) illustrations of this not too subtle debunking of mystical claims are Ibn Khaldun’s ridicule (Q 1: 18) of the “crazy talk” of those who claim to have had a mystical unveiling of the city of ‘Ād “beyond sensual perception” or of “historical reports” (Q 1: 57–60) concerning the existence of jinn, monsters, and the like. As usual, Ibn Khaldun’s failure to extend these ironic and critical remarks explicitly to such fundamental religious and Qur’anic topics as the existence and descriptions of heaven and hell (and to the mystics’ claims of perceptions relevant to their proper understanding) would inevitably be interpreted in ways that mirror each reader’s own level (or lack) of intellectual understanding.

55. Readers of traditional Sufi poetry, in Arabic or other Islamic languages, could also not help but be struck by Ibn Khaldun’s pointedly ironic reversal here of the central symbolic, metaphorical or spiritual role of wine imagery (based on obvious Qur’an and hadith antecedents) throughout those traditions of mystical poetry.

56. The key passage here is at the beginning of the *Muqaddima* (Q 1: 165–73), where he passes in review the various theories (including the philosophic ones at 1: 170–72) about the “signs” effectively distinguishing true from false prophets—one of the major topics in the influential philosophical disputes between Tūsī and Rāzī (above all in Tūsī’s seminal commentary on Avicenna’s *Ishārāt*). Not surprisingly, the treatment of Muhammad and the early caliphs throughout the rest of the *Muqaddima* elaborates only the essentially *political* criteria of the Avicennan philosophers.

Once again, Ibn Khaldun’s single-minded focus on these practical political and social criteria is certainly not unrelated to his silence concerning (and vehemently attempted suppression of) some of the most influential Islamic religious books that claimed to provide some insight into a more comprehensive spiritual hierarchy of values and intentions or to his repeated criticisms of the contending prototypical representatives within his own community—key spiritual figures such as al-Hallāj, ‘Alī, or al-Husayn—of values that call into question the primacy of those strictly political criteria. As with Avicenna, it is no accident that the one potential criterion of value that is explicitly mentioned and left intact is provided by the pursuit of those rational philosophical sciences that Ibn Khaldun repeatedly mentions as providing human beings’ ultimate perfection.

57. As discussed above, Ibn Khaldun’s repeated attempts to portray contemporary Sufism in this pejorative light cannot be explained by any ignorance (or popular suspicion) of the more intellectual and spiritual aspects of Sufism that were discussed in precisely the sort of works that he wished to burn. Nor can they be explained by a pious religious desire for “reform” and “purification” of popular religious practices such as those that motivated Ibn Taymiyya, even when (as in the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*) Ibn Khaldun uses a superficially similar rhetoric.

The corresponding gross misrepresentation throughout the *Muqaddima* of the works of Ibn ‘Arabi, which had come to provide the leading ideological justification (in Islamic terms) of virtually all forms of Sufism by Ibn Khaldun’s time, is one of the more striking

illustrations of the latter's rhetorical techniques. See, for example, the attribution to Ibn 'Arabi at Q 2: 196 of two obviously apocryphal prediction works (*malāhim*) and Ibn 'Arabi's implicit association, in the same context (2: 197–201) with clearly fraudulent predictions by a later scandalously “fallen,” swindling, and antinomian Qalandar dervish (among the suspect hippies of Ibn Khaldun's day). Even more important, given the political centrality and notoriety of the claims that flowed from Ibn 'Arabi's assertion of his own status as “seal of the Muhammadan saints”—and his corresponding theories and claims concerning the socioreligious roles of Sufi saints and masters more generally—is Ibn Khaldun's facetious presentation of that doctrine of the spiritual hierarchy and his citation of a supposed “forecast” of the Mahdi's advent, at Q 2: 165–67.

58. These were undoubtedly the central points of difference involving Aristotelian “physics” (the *tabī'iyāt*) between Avicenna, on the one hand, and Aristotle and Averroes on the other, alluded to in the key passage (partially translated in note 39 above) in which Ibn Khaldun questions Avicenna's (political and rhetorical?) motivations for his apparent departures from Aristotle's positions and insists on the greater philosophic reliability of Averroes and Aristotle. All three of these fundamental metaphysical differences are taken up in the “physical” books of Avicenna, and all three are pointedly left out in Ibn Khaldun's own accounts of that discipline and its results.

For the ways in which these three innovative aspects of Avicenna's philosophy were elaborated by later Islamic thinkers to provide a much more neoplatonic and spiritualist account of being and a metaphysical foundation for wider religious and Sufi beliefs, see the discussions and detailed illustrations in J. Michot, *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: le retour à dieu (ma'ād) et l'imagination* (Louvain: Peeters, 1987). Although this sort of thoroughly mystical interpretation of Avicenna's ideas cannot be easily reconciled with what is known of Avicenna's own life, works, disciples, and philosophic antecedents (as argued in detail in my detailed study of his political philosophy cited above in note 48), it does represent a highly influential current of later Eastern Islamic thought and indeed corresponds precisely to the sort of neoplatonic Avicennism (subsequently dominant in the Latin West and historically connected with the influential works of Ghazālī) that was already being vigorously criticized by Ibn Tufayl and Averroes long before the time of Ibn Khaldun.

59. One could add to these more immediate effects the eventual longer-term, indirect consequences of the creative actions of the rarer individuals in the second group (of qualified potential philosophers) that are discussed in the next paragraph.

60. This can be seen, for example, in Ibn Khaldun's own legal and other activities mentioned below or in the contrasting public writings and practical political activities of such philosophers as Tūsī, Averroes, or Avicenna (or the teaching efforts of Ibn Khaldun's own philosophic master al-Ābilī, cited above).

61. It is important to note the full significance of Ibn Khaldun's brief reference (Q 2: 126–28) to the central philosophic theme (for both Averroes and Farabi) of the ideal “virtuous city” (*al-madīnat al-fādila*) and the timeless scale of real and potential human finalities that it suggests. This far-reaching significance (for readers acquainted with Farabi's works and their profound impact on Islamic philosophy) is not adequately reflected by the use of the term *utopian* in the existing English translation. See the related discussion of Farabi's political insights in the first chapter of my *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (London: Archetype, 2004), 14–40.

62. Hence, as already noted, his criticisms of Sufism turn out to have an entirely different underlying motivation than in the case, for example, of a more public religious “reformer” like Ibn Taymiyya, who was clearly motivated by the ostensible religious “purity” and correctness of his ideal rather than by its likely worldly consequences. Ibn Khaldun's depiction of religious laws, Islamic or otherwise (and both in the *Muqaddima* and the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*), is not at all literalist and frozen but instead focuses on properly

understanding the process of their historical evolution and development in light of changing public political and social “benefits” (*masālih*). There is no sign with Ibn Khaldun (except in the occasional rhetorical appeal to certain popular beliefs) of any illusion of a “purification” or “return” to an ideal source as a magical formula for all circumstances, and everything in his hundreds of pages of historical and sociological analysis argues against the dangers and pitfalls of such an illusion—at least when held by those with real political authority and responsibility.

63. *Al-Taʿrīf*, 14. The full weight of this turning “from the path of the military prowess and service (of the rulers) to the path of (religious) learning and spiritual retreat” comes from its following many pages (most of pp. 1–14) that detail centuries of martial and political exploits by Ibn Khaldun’s earlier Arab ancestors—a forceful recapitulation, through his own family history, of the key themes of historical “decline” pervading the *Muqaddima* and his wider *History*. See also the excellent discussion of Ibn Khaldun’s autobiography, focusing on its relation to the themes of this study, in the authoritative work of Muhsin Mahdi cited above at note 34. One might add that the implicit challenge of Ibn Khaldun’s pointed contrasts here (as throughout the *Muqaddima* itself) between difficult contemporary conditions and past Arab glories and achievements suggests interesting rhetorical parallels with the role of recollections of earlier Roman glory in Machiavelli’s writings.

64. *Al-Taʿrīf*. The same later sections of his autobiography also allude to some of the hostility, whether popular or learned, that such reforming actions and intentions seem to have aroused and that may help account for the relative brevity of Ibn Khaldun’s appointments as a Maliki judge, despite his friendship with powerful Mamluk figures.

65. Always subject to new manuscript discoveries, of course. For this illustration, I am grateful to my student Taliesin Davies, who carefully investigated the historical sources on the Ibadis of Tahert in preparing his recent M.A. thesis on that subject.

66. Again, particular thanks are due here to the participants in my graduate seminars exploring Islamic political thought in the classical traditions of *taʾrīkh*, hadith, and *tafsīr*.

67. One need only recall the equally extreme, problematic, and often intentionally self-contradictory rhetoric of many of al-Ghazālī’s classical polemics—under Seljuk, anti-Fatimid patronage—against the philosophers and Shiʿite esotericists, for example.

68. Unless those modern writers who have spoken of the *Muqaddima* as an “encyclopedia” are disingenuously thinking of the entirely polemic and highly political project of Diderot and his pro-Enlightenment associates. That specific analogy is indeed relevant and illuminating.

