

# Vagueness: An Additional Nuance in the Interpretation of Ibn `Arabi's Mystical Language

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## **Abstract**

In the Sufi Ibn `Arabi's mystical discourse, a performative "language of unsaying" is generated from the tensions and paradoxes that arise from the attempt to articulate the ineffable nature of a transcendent divine. However, such forms of language also occur in his attempts to articulate the elusive nature of the *barzakh*, an intermediate property of all existent things and beings. His use of language invokes not only issues of ineffability arising from a transcendent object, but also the dynamic relation between the ineffable and the intermediate. The analytical concept of "vagueness" helps to clarify such concepts as the *barzakh* by showing how these symbols are, relatively speaking, "precise" representations. Such a linguistic, philosophical knot is built into the mystical, pedagogical tradition of Ibn `Arabi's Sufism, necessitating a distinction between how contemporary analytical philosophers and Sufi thinkers like him think about vagueness, while also emphasizing the sophisticated understanding of language at the heart of his Sufism.

## **Introduction**

When scholars focus their attention on a mystical writer such as Ibn `Arabi (1165-1240), the tendency might be to prioritize the popular caricature of mysticism as framed by an experience of absolute transcendence. As some scholars of religion suggest, if absolute transcendence is not a necessary

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component of religion in general, then it might be fruitful to see where there are wider nuances of mysticism in particular. One alternative is to concentrate on language, thereby directing one's attention toward the role of logic and language as a necessary component in the religious tradition. For example, ineffability, as a description of the relation between language and transcendence, is not emphasized simply to protect the objects of religious language from rational scrutiny, whether the referent is a religious experience or a religious reality. Rather, ineffability is a component of the very process of articulation itself. Logic and language are used not only to reflect back on themselves to show their shortcomings, but are also integral components of the pedagogical, psychological, and social processes operating in a religious tradition, such as Sufism within Islam.

Ibn `Arabi's thought is representative of the most sophisticated and wide-ranging work among Sufi literature. In his excellent example of a complex and rigorous project, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Michael Sells takes such language and embeds it firmly within a comparative model that allies Ibn `Arabi with mystical writers from other traditions. The result is a comparison of linguistic techniques, rather than comparisons that implicate presuppositions concerning the universal identity of the various notions of the absolute employed by mystics. Apophatic discourse, a negative "language of unsaying," is generated from the tensions and paradoxes that arise from the attempt to articulate the ineffable nature of the divine. As a transcendent, ineffable object of discourse, talking about God requires a spiralling sequence of affirmations and negations to ensure that God's ineffable quality is maintained, highlighting the paradoxical ability of mystical language to talk about that which evades articulation.

Such forms of language also occur in Ibn `Arabi's attempts to articulate the nature of the *barzakh*, an intermediate concept not divorced from an understanding of the divine, but likewise not a concept used to refer to the divine in particular. Whereas Sells focuses on the dynamic tension between affirmations and negations resulting from the ineffable nature of the divine, Ibn `Arabi makes concerted efforts to not merely express or suggest this tension between opposites, but also to precisely articulate the interstitial space between such polarities through concepts that simultaneously implicate a term's positive and negative extensions. I enlist the work of William C. Chittick to show that the *barzakh* is just such a succinct articulation. This interpretation of Ibn `Arabi's use of language shifts attention away from issues of ineffability arising from a transcendent object to the relation of the ineffable to the immanently interstitial.

An understanding of the *barzakh* is further augmented by a comparison with the contemporary, analytical notion of vagueness. I suggest that “vagueness” contributes to our theoretical tool shop in the study of religious language because it helps to clarify such concepts as the *barzakh* that emphasize the intermediate or interstitial, showing how these symbols are, ironically, “precise” delineations of the vagueness in language – a paradox of language distinct from the issue of transcendence. Furthermore, what is significant about this comparison is that thinkers like Ibn `Arabi are, remarkably, not only aware of the issue of vagueness in language, but also that such an aporia or philosophical “knot” is built into the very mystical, pedagogical tradition of Ibn `Arabi’s Sufism itself. This necessitates a distinction between how analytical philosophers think about “fuzzy logic” and how a mystic like Ibn `Arabi holds an insight into vagueness to be a necessary feature of the states and stations along the Sufi path of knowledge.

### **Apophatic Discourse as Unconventional Language**

Sells’ goal in *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* is to “establish the implicit logic and conventions of apophasis as a mode of discourse.”<sup>1</sup> He generates principles of mystical language in general by looking at mystical writers from various traditions: Plotinus (205-270), John the Scot Eriugena (810-77), Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-c. 1327/28), Ibn `Arabi, and Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) among them. Apophasis, which Sells translates as the “language of unsaying,” begins with the irresolvable dilemma of transcendence and ends with a continually growing semantic tension and fusion.<sup>2</sup> The aporia of transcendence begins with the fact that the

transcendent must be beyond names, ineffable. In order to claim that the transcendent is beyond names, however, I must give it a name, “the transcendent.” Any statement of ineffability, “X is beyond names,” generates the aporia that the subject of the statement must be named (as X) in order for us to affirm that it is beyond names.<sup>3</sup>

The paradox is that the act of naming the transcendent in order to declare its ineffability is counter to the nature of that to which the name refers. There are three typical responses to the dilemma: 1) silence as a solution (i.e., no words – no aporia), 2) an explanation that there is a difference between God the transcendent who cannot be named and “god” as designated by human language, and 3)

the refusal to solve the dilemma posed by the attempts to refer to the transcendent through a distinction between two kinds of name. The dilemma is accepted as a genuine aporia, that is, as unresolvable, but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse.<sup>4</sup>

If the transcendent must be named in order to declare it to be ineffable, then there is a further need to qualify statements of ineffability in order to ensure the transcendent nature of the divine. In apophatic language, any saying requires an unsaying, and such unsaying, in turn, becomes another form of saying, which must likewise be unsaid, *ad infinitum*.

When the full impact of the aporia of transcendence is taken into account, it generates an alternative mode of discourse. Sells wants to distinguish this “new kind of language” from apophatic theory, which “affirms ineffability without turning back upon the naming used in its own affirmation of ineffability.”<sup>5</sup> Apophasis as a mode of discourse differs from apophatic theory in the sense that apophatic discourse dynamically engages the problems raised by naming the ineffable, whereas the theoretical approach statically declares the ineffability of the transcendent and leaves it at that. The logic that is a part of apophatic discourse is conventional and the same as that utilized by apophatic theory, but the response to those conventions is uniquely unconventional. Apophatic discourse, therefore, has recourse to conventional logic, for without adherence to standard logic and semantics there would be no dilemma to recognize and no springboard for apophatic discourse to display its full effects.<sup>6</sup> While apophatic theory merely declares ineffability, apophatic discourse performs the tension, thereby sustaining the dilemma within the discourse.

Due to the aporia involved in referring to the transcendent again, even if simply to state its ineffability, “apophasis is a discourse in which any single proposition is acknowledged as falsifying, reifying.”<sup>7</sup> Apophatic discourse is aporetic, maintaining a high level of self-criticism, “an acknowledgement of its own reifications, and a relentless turning-back to unsay them.”<sup>8</sup> If a single apophatic statement cannot avoid falsifying itself, then it requires another statement that undoes or “unsays” what it has posited, so that the meaning of the discourse “is generated through the tension between the saying and the unsaying.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, language becomes double-propositional with its meaning dependent upon a context that is wider than that of single propositions.

It is due to this ongoing tension that the meaning Sells speaks of is never static; rather, it is open-ended. In the minds of mystical writers, this open-

ness does not entail meaning that is ambiguous, imprecise, or unclear; the openness ironically expresses in a precise manner the relationship between the transcendent and words used to refer to it.<sup>10</sup> For mystical writers like Ibn `Arabi, using double-propositional language is a more authentic way of talking about the ineffable than the static method of straight declarations of ineffability. In the specific case of Ibn `Arabi, he “both uses and struggles against the dualistic structure of language.”<sup>11</sup>

A succinct technique of apophatic discourse that achieves meaning through a tension between affirmations and negations is known as reference fusion, which works to destabilize standard grammatical dichotomies simultaneously, but not in a linear, sequential, or propositional way.<sup>12</sup> In the context of Ibn `Arabi’s language, two key discussions that help to expose his use of apophatic techniques involve, on the one hand, the relation between God and the universe He creates as a mirrored reflection, and, on the other hand, his creation of Adam.

For the first example, I reproduce translations of one of Ibn `Arabi’s passages by both Sells and R. W. Austin to place Sells’ point in stronger relief. To summarize and partly paraphrase in the form of a question: “Why did the Real, or God, will into existence instantiations of its most beautiful names?” In Sells’ translation the response is “to reveal to it(self) through it(self) its mystery,”<sup>13</sup> while in Austin’s translation the answer is to “reveal to Him His own mystery.”<sup>14</sup> According to Sells, Austin’s translation, by inserting definite pronouns, gives the phrase only one nuance: God wished to reveal to Himself His own mystery. Sells’ understanding of the passage yields a referential fusion: “[T]he creative ambiguity between the reflexive and non-reflexive marks the perspective shift. It becomes impossible to determine whether the antecedent of the pronoun is the divine or the human.”<sup>15</sup> So, God created the universe to reveal to the universe the universe’s own mystery, to reveal to Himself His own mystery, to reveal to the universe His mystery, or to reveal to Himself the universe’s mystery.

If Ibn `Arabi’s intentions are correctly understood, then the indeterminacy over which option is the “right” interpretation is not a result of a lack of knowledge concerning the antecedent’s exact identity (i.e., whether it refers to the divine or the cosmos), but that the question “To whom does the antecedent belong?” has no definitive answer. The antecedent is deliberately indeterminate. Therefore, if Sells’ interpretation of this key passage is correct, then the pronouns in the phrase “To reveal to it(self) through it(self) its mystery” neither refer exclusively to the divine nor to the created universe.

Another instance of referential fusion revolves around the hadith “Allah created Adam in his *surah* [image, form].” If Allah is transcendent, then how is it possible that there is a divine image through which he creates Adam? According to Sells, Ibn `Arabi refused to provide a clear-cut solution to the debate as to the identity of the antecedent of the “his” in this phrase, namely, whether it refers to Allah or Adam.

Rather than trying to find a theological position that would avoid both anthropomorphizing and explaining away the distinctiveness of the expression, Ibn `Arabi, through the metaphor of the polished mirror, will imply that the antecedent to the “his” is neither the deity in itself nor Adam. ... The constitution of this image occurs within the heart of “the complete human” (*al-insan al-kamil*).<sup>16</sup>

The “complete human” sees both possibilities fused in a Sufi mode of seeing that, given Sells’ explanation, yields no definitive answer one way or the other as to the antecedent’s identity. Ibn `Arabi was reluctant to ultimately reduce the statement to either of the two possibilities, because the referential uncertainty creates a more authentic linguistic analogue of the cosmological situation as he understands and experiences it. Elsewhere, Sells explains that “[t]he statement ‘created in his image,’ which had been such a problem for the theologians, now reveals within a grammatical fusion of antecedents a double meaning incorporating both of the theological positions: the his refers both to the divine and the human.”<sup>17</sup> Sells is referring to theological positions that either wish to avoid anthropomorphizing God, maintaining His absolute transcendence (so that the “his” cannot refer to Allah), or to declare *tashbih* (similarity between God and His creatures), which entails that Adam’s attributes are similar to God’s.<sup>18</sup> Ibn `Arabi’s response does not offer a “solution” that conforms to the philosophical and theological debates of his time, because he “finds in mystical union a paradoxical logic in which the term refers to both the human and the divine party. Self and other, reflexive and non-reflexive, are semantically fused.”<sup>19</sup>

From the standpoint of the Sufi’s vision of mystical union, by fusing the reflexive and nonreflexive senses of “him,” Ibn `Arabi more “accurately” or authentically expresses the simultaneous similarity and difference between God and His reflection (the universe) in the one example, and between God and Adam (the human) in the other. He maintains the aspect of transcendence while at the same time expressing the immanent nature of God. Sells’ point is that according to a conventional English translation of Ibn `Arabi’s writings, it is possible to completely miss what Sells sees as a case

of the fusion of antecedents, a linguistic reflection of what we might typically understand as an experiential, mystical fusion or union that holds in dynamic tension the transcendent and immanent nature of the divine.

In speaking of this reference fusion, Sells introduces a nuance that explains the processional nature of apophatic discourse as moving toward a culminating tension.

His [Ibn `Arabi's] language realizes or enacts such fusions or slides of reference of reflexive and nonreflexive, self and other, human and divine. The fusions or slides occur often. ... Depending upon position and context, a pronoun's reference and antecedent may "slide" (a dominant reference yielding to an alternate possibility) or it may involve a complete fusion in which both possibilities are equally present.<sup>20</sup>

Complete fusion, what Sells calls a "meaning event,"<sup>21</sup> corresponds, then, to the contradictory ideal limit between the two options.

While Sells makes a point to begin his comparative treatment of mystical language with the aporia of transcendence, he is aware that the aporia also invokes a notion of immanence. Therefore, apophatic writing involves a dialectic of transcendence and immanence.

Simple transcendence, the affirmation that the deity is "beyond" the world is simply a more subtle and more dangerous mode of "binding." True affirmation of transcendence leads ironically to a transcendence of the normal notion of transcendence, to a dialectic of transcendence and immanence in which the "beyond" is simultaneously the "within."<sup>22</sup>

In this context, "binding" results from distinguishing God (and hence limiting Him) by declaring His nondelimitation. Thus, an understanding of the literal ramifications of meaning is vitally important to the apophatic enterprise. The tension generated in apophatic language through the combination of propositions – each proposition on its own seen as falsifying or reifying – is passed on to the discussions of transcendence and immanence. Rather than a simple affirmation of transcendence, it is in the tension between transcendence and immanence that the apophatic writer genuinely expresses or affirms the divine's simultaneously transcendent and immanent nature. For example, in one of Ibn `Arabi's chapters of the *Futuhat al-Makkiyah* on Prophet Muhammad's heavenly ascension, he begins with the Qur`anic quote(s) "There is nothing like His likeness [and He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing]."<sup>23</sup> By placing in unison two opposing statements concerning the nature of the divine, Ibn `Arabi creates the tension between

the statement affirming God's transcendence and one affirming his immanence. In another passage, he explains that

the truth is found in combining the statements of the two groups. He is not declared incomparable in any manner that will remove Him from similarity, nor is He declared similar in any manner that will remove Him from incomparability. So do not declare Him nondelimited and thus delimited by being distinguished from delimitation! For if He is distinguished, then He is delimited by His nondelimitation. And if He is delimited by His nondelimitation, then He is not He.<sup>24</sup>

This passage radically demonstrates the necessity of avoiding single, reifying propositions. Ibn `Arabi argues that declaring God to be only incomparable, without the qualification of similarity, only ends up delimiting Him. Pushing God's nondelimitation to its naïve extreme results in binding and delimiting Him. By combining two opposite viewpoints, Ibn `Arabi is indicating that neither alone suffices as a descriptive tool.

If you affirm transcendence you bind  
 If you affirm immanence you define  
 If you affirm both you hit the mark  
 You are an Imam in knowledge and a master. ...  
 You are not it  
 You are it  
 You see it in the essence of things  
 Boundless and limited.<sup>25</sup>

Both a statement that declares transcendence and one that declares immanence cannot stand on their own. The third line appears contradictory and false, and this is precisely Ibn `Arabi's point: Through the simultaneous affirmation of both transcendence and immanence, one "hits the mark," one best expresses the paradoxical nature of the dialectic of transcendence and immanence. Even a single phrase like describing the essence of things as "boundless and limited" is a dense and efficient instance of the double-propositional combination of opposing qualities.

Given this line of thought, things in the created world become implicated in the dialectic of transcendence and immanence. Therefore, there is an additional nuance that arises out of these kinds of passages, one that implicates the human or created realm as an additional progenitor of the dialectic of transcendence and immanence. The impetus to utilize double-propositions can be seen, as Sells outlines it, to arise from attempts to talk about the divine, but, equally so, Ibn `Arabi is revealing that the same move-



ment “begins” with the human perspective of the created world. So while “[r]eal contradictions occur when language engages the ineffable transcendent...”<sup>26</sup> in Ibn `Arabi’s writings, these contradictions also occur when language engages the nature of entities and individuals within the created world, insofar as they are simultaneously similar to and distinct from God.

Sells does potentially generate problems of interpretation by introducing further senses of transcendence into his explanation on top of the transcendence already subsumed by the dialectic.

Apophasis moves towards the transreferential. It cannot dispense with reference, but through the constant turning back upon its own referential delimitations, it seeks a momentary liberation from such delimitations. In terms of a spatial metaphor, to the linear referential motion apophasis adds a circular turning back (*epistrophé*). The combination yields a semi-otic spiral motion ever deeper into the prereferential ground (or groundlessness) of the discourse.<sup>27</sup>

The explication of apophasis as invoking the “transreferential” or seeking a “prereferential ground” is an interpretation that, I suggest, implicitly invokes the notion of the “inter-referential.” Inter-referential better suggests the penumbral region or the interstices between the discourse’s rigid referential structures, a region where there is a transition between the structures as well as an indefiniteness or uncertainty in pivotal moments where it deliberately should not be determined which specific referential delimitation applies. Such uncertainty is directly related to similar uncertainties associated with the antecedent involved in reference fusion.

As the next section suggests, such forms of language and the apophatic dialectic are related to Ibn `Arabi’s concept of the *barzakh* (“isthmus”), which is inherently double-propositional. The “aporia of the interstitial” presents additional, though similar, issues for articulation, just as the aporia of transcendence does. However, the object is not properly transcendent in this case, but rather interstitial or elusively located between categories of description. If all existent things are theophanies, that is, immanent manifestations of a transcendent divine, and hence involved in the dialectic of transcendence and immanence, and theophanies are described by Ibn `Arabi as *barzakhs*, then looking at how he describes the *barzakh* will shed more light on apophatic discourse in general, because in order to talk about the *barzakh* he has recourse to the same forms of discourse and the same techniques of language as seen in apophasis.

## Ineffability and the Interstitial: The *Barzakh*

The *barzakh*, Ibn `Arabi's quintessential symbol of the interstitial, is a highly efficient and intense instance of the dynamic tension seen in Sells' discussion of the spiralling sequences of propositions related to the aporia of transcendence. While I suggest that we broaden the idea of what prompts double-propositional language, Sells nevertheless makes a lasting contribution by clarifying the techniques of double-propositional language, regardless of the initial impetus for said language.

Double-propositional language is the semantic analogue of Ibn `Arabi's mystical vision, where the mystical vision involves an insight into the ontological situation, namely, that all creation is composed of *barzakhs*, combinations of God's being and the specific occasions of created entities, the interface between *tanzih* (incomparability) and *tashbih* (similarity), respectively. The *barzakh* is a precise articulation of the interstitial because it simultaneously implicates opposites, or a term's positive and negative extensions.

His concept of the *barzakh* builds upon an explicit Qur'anic reference:

He let forth the two seas that meet together,  
between them a barrier [*barzakh*] they do not overpass. (Qur'an 55:19)

Explicit in the passage is the notion of a location where things (the seas) meet while simultaneously remaining distinct. While the notion of the *barzakh* plays many different roles in Ibn `Arabi's writings, I focus on the ontological characteristics of it that emphasize its relation to apophatic language.<sup>28</sup>

Implicit in the concept of the *barzakh* is a theory of ontological intermediaries. Chittick helps to simplify the concept by distinguishing between two main perspectives in which the *barzakh* relates to the cosmos in general, and to the human realm in particular. His description revolves around two groupings of divine names: God conceived as both the First and the Last on the temporal, horizontal plane, and God as the Manifest and the Nonmanifest on the cosmological, vertical plane. "In both cases, a third world can also enter the picture, a world that is often called the *barzakh* or `isthmus."<sup>29</sup> On the temporal level,

[t]he cosmos is a *barzakh* between eternity without beginning and eternity without end.... This is like the [present] state between the past and the future. If not for the state, the past nonexistence would not become distinct from the future nonexistence. This is the property of the *barzakh*, and it never ceases in the cosmos in perpetuity.<sup>30</sup>

This passage reveals two characteristics of the *barzakh*: First, there is a necessity for the *barzakh* to distinguish past events from future events, for without the *barzakh* – as a transitional point that stands between them – they are indistinguishable; second, it is a linking principle that connects and provides continuity from the past through to the present and into the future. Therefore, the *barzakh* paradoxically connects and separates the past and the future. The borderline – the present moment – is that moment which is neither past nor future, but that which brings them together and distinguishes them.

The entire cosmos and its contents are the primary instances of the *barzakh* in both the horizontal and vertical senses. In the context of the vertical dimension, the *barzakh* is one of the most general terms referring to all things. Ibn `Arabi explains: “There is nothing in existence but *barzakhs*, since a *barzakh* is the arrangement of one thing between two other things ... and existence has no edges (*taraf*).”<sup>31</sup> The two poles that make up his cosmology are the Divine Essence and absolute nothingness: the cosmos stands as isthmus between them.<sup>32</sup> There is a hierarchy implied here, as Chittick explains:

... the existent things are ranged between the most intense created light and the most intense darkness (= the least intense light), and this tells us that there must be innumerable degrees of intermediate creatures between “pure” light and “pure” darkness. In this context, it needs to be remembered, “pure” does not signify absolute, since Absolute Light is God, while absolute darkness is sheer nothingness. These intermediate degrees are known as *barzakhs* (literally “isthmuses”).<sup>33</sup>

From these initial examples, it is clear that “isthmus” is the more common English translation of *barzakh*.<sup>34</sup> “Isthmus” stems from the Greek word for “neck,” and generally denotes a narrow structure joining two larger entities (e.g., as in the Qur’anic passage, a neck of land between bodies of water).<sup>35</sup> Recalling that a *barzakh* also separates two things, in this sense it could also be seen as a barrier or interstice: a “permeable membrane” of sorts that allows relative proportions of light or dark to penetrate according to the location of any respective entity within the hierarchy.<sup>36</sup> The two absolutes, for all intents and purposes, are not manifest as whole things or entities within the cosmos, because the Divine Essence is not a thing or an entity; rather, it is Being itself and the Being of all other things, and nothingness is sheer nothingness in Ibn `Arabi’s ontology.

Ibn `Arabi’s descriptions of the *barzakh* invoke the paradoxical language typically seen to be a result of the *aporia* of transcendence.

The *barzakh* is between-between, a station between this and that, not one of them, but the totality of the two....

Its it-ness is unknown save to those who solve the riddle, and equal concerning it may be the seeing and the blind. It is the shadow between the lights and the darkness, the separating limit between *wujud* and nonexistence....<sup>37</sup>

The *barzakh* is the intermediary *par excellence*, the quintessential isthmus that is evoked through the tautological repetition of “between-between.” We should bear in mind its description as the shadow between light and darkness. This is one of the main ways by which Ibn `Arabi attempts to describe the *barzakh* as that which stands between the light and the dark, namely, a penumbral region (penumbra means, literally, “almost shade”).<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere he writes: “A *barzakh* is something that separates (*fasl*) two things while never going to one side (*mutatarrif*), as, for example, the line that separates shadow from sunlight.”<sup>39</sup> Such a line is neither shadow nor sunlight, nor is its nature anything other than some combination of shadow and sunlight.

Ibn `Arabi also uses *barzakh* in his discussions of the different Sufi stations that lie along the spiritual path. The following passage discusses the waystation of the true *barzakh*, a station where the Sufi comes to clearly understand what the *barzakh* is and what its limits are.

It is, through its own essence, identical with everything it meets. Hence the separation between the things and the separating factor become manifest as one in entity. Once you come to know this, you have come to know what the *barzakh* is.<sup>40</sup>

The very essence of a “true” *barzakh* includes the properties of each item in the dichotomy between which it is juxtaposed. While identical with everything it meets, Ibn `Arabi also says elsewhere in the *Futuhat* that “it stands opposite the two things by its very essence,” where the “two things” in this context are Being and nothingness.<sup>41</sup> This “identical though opposite” description shows a clear violation of the law of the excluded middle.<sup>42</sup> More broadly speaking, the opposites would be a term and its negative extension, and therefore the *barzakh*, being both identical and opposite to both at the same time, paradoxically reinforces the impossibility of assigning it to either term. The standard logical laws do not apply to this case. There is, to refer back to Sells’ discussion, a conundrum or contradiction here: In order to explain the nature of the *barzakh* itself, Ibn `Arabi must

resort to language and metaphors that are reminiscent of Sells' category of "double-propositional language."

As alluded to above, an explicit instance of paradoxical talk about the *barzakh* is seen in Ibn `Arabi's descriptions of theophanies. A theophany is the *barzakh* between the two pivotal notions of God's dissimilarity (transcendence) and similarity (immanence), because it has its own instantiation within the created world as well as simultaneously being one of God's self-manifestations (*zuhur*) or self-disclosures (*tajalli*).<sup>43</sup> As a created entity it participates in Being, while its occasion within the created world is precisely what distinguishes it from God. "Although there is no existent but God, He has placed the manifestation of things at occasions. So the occasioned thing can have no *wujud* without the occasion. Hence everything that has come into existence at an occasion has a face toward its occasion and a face toward God, so it is a *barzakh* between the occasion and God."<sup>44</sup> A theophany is identified with neither aspect exclusively.

The strongest examples being the clearest, Michel Chodkiewicz describes Ibn `Arabi's recounting of the meeting with a young man who, according to Ibn `Arabi, was the inspiration for the writing of the *Futuhat al-Makkiyah*.

This is where Ibn `Arabi relates his encounter beside the Ka`ba, near the black stone, with a "young man" (*fatā*) described by a number of contradictory attributes. This *coincidentia oppositorum* clearly means that we are here dealing with a theophany: he is "living and dead," "simple and compound"; he "contains everything" and "everything contains him"; he is "the contemplator and the contemplated," "the knowledge, the knower, and the known." He is "the one who speaks" ... while at the same time he remains silent (*samit*). From him comes all that Ibn `Arabi will transcribe in the *Futuhat*.<sup>45</sup>

If a theophany is both *barzakh* and *coincidentia oppositorum*, this clearly suggests that there is a connection between the nature of the *barzakh* and contradictory, paradoxical language.

Ibn `Arabi believes that there are actual isthmuses existing within the cosmos (i.e., objects whose nature is inherently interstitial and not reducible to either terms in a polarity). Therefore, a *barzakh* is an object in its own right. It is "combinational," "interstitial," and so on, but it is, nevertheless, a phenomenon that commands Ibn `Arabi's full attention, rather than being merely an abstract or dialectical relation. Given this, although it is indefinite

relative to either of the polar terms when viewed exclusively, the *barzakh* is nevertheless something present; not an abstract intermediate, but an actual one.

It is important to clarify that God in Himself is not qualified by the notion of the *barzakh* as all other existents are, because this reinforces my point that Ibn `Arabi's use of a metaphor like the *barzakh* is not an attempt to describe an ineffable divinity.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Ibn `Arabi's language of the *barzakh* has stylistic affinities with language working through the aporia of transcendence, whereas the "object" of this specific type of language is not the absolutely transcendent but rather the "interstitially transcendent," which speaks to a need for a revised understanding of both ineffability and transcendence.<sup>47</sup>

For Ibn `Arabi, the complete descriptions of theophanies are necessarily self-contradictory, from the standpoint of conventional logic, due to the aporia of the interstitial. As I show in the next section, vagueness relates to descriptions of the *barzakh* because both vague objects and *barzakhs* violate the basic law of the excluded middle, an outcome of the paradoxical nature of both. Like a vague object, a *barzakh* cannot be definitively assigned to either of the two polar terms it stands between, because its very nature is to remain an isthmus. Entities located within his hierarchy of being – ranging between divine light and absolute nothingness – bear a family resemblance to examples of the borderline cases used to convey the contemporary, philosophical problem of vagueness. The *barzakh* is the quintessential borderline case as the instantiation of a real, existent limit between opposites, and in this sense it is Ibn `Arabi's radical example of philosophical vagueness.

### **Vagueness and Ibn `Arabi's Interstitial Language**

Ibn `Arabi's *barzakh* is a "precise" representation of the penumbral or borderline region pointing to vagueness in language. In both apophatic discourse and Ibn `Arabi's *barzakhi* descriptions, vagueness is flaunted and deliberately utilized to hint at or suggest the Sufi's mystical vision. The concept of a penumbra, frequently used in current analytical discussions of vagueness, stands as a succinct analogue of the *barzakh*, especially when it is described as the line separating shadow from light.

In the context of analytical philosophy, vagueness in language has to do with referential uncertainty.<sup>48</sup> While a "non-vague term is one which is sharply defined in the sense that it neatly divides objects into those contained in the term's extension and those contained in the extension of its negation," Linda Claire Burns defines a vague term as "one whose correct definition

permits the possibility of borderline cases. These are cases where it is not determined whether or not the term applies or fails to apply. Where there is vagueness there is genuine uncertainty concerning the application of expressions to certain objects.”<sup>49</sup> In addition to objects that are included in the extension of a term and the extension of its negation, there are cases for vague terms that do not allow a definitive answer as to whether or not the term applies.

One of the best illustrations that visually connects Ibn `Arabi’s notion of the *barzakh* to the analytical discussion of vagueness is the color spectrum.

Suppose you are looking at a spectrum of colours painted on a wall though a device with a split window which divides the section of the spectrum you can see into two equal adjacent areas. Suppose the spectrum is so broad and the windows so narrow that the colours in the two visible windows are indistinguishable, no matter where in the spectrum the device is positioned. The device is first placed at the red end of the wall, and then moved gradually rightward to the blue end. It is moved in such a way that the area that was visible in the right-hand window in the previous position is now visible in the left. At the beginning you will unhesitatingly judge that both areas are red. At each point, the newly visible area will appear indistinguishable from an area that you have already judged to be red and that is still visible. One feels bound by the principle that if two coloured patches are indistinguishable in colour, then both or neither are red; yet clearly there must come a time when neither of the visible areas are red. This looks like a contradiction: on the one hand, no two adjacent areas differ in colour and the first is certainly red; on the other hand, the first area differs in colour from some subsequent colour.<sup>50</sup>

What the illustration suggests is that in the process of moving the “device” between adjacent, indistinguishable shades, there is genuine uncertainty as to when the transition takes place between any “red” and “blue” areas. “Red” and “blue” are vague terms precisely because they allow borderline cases or do not possess sharp boundaries, so that in some cases there does not appear to be any conclusive way of deciding whether or not either term fits.<sup>51</sup> Between the clear cases, there is a region of indefiniteness that does not prompt a decision either one way (red) or the other (blue). An example of this sort points to what is known as a Sorites paradox.<sup>52</sup>

A borderline case involves an uncertainty as to whether a term applies or fails to apply.<sup>53</sup> In his foundational paper “Vagueness,” Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) discusses vagueness as a general feature of language: “The fact is that all words are attributable without doubt over a certain area, but

become questionable within a penumbra, outside of which they are again certainly not attributable.”<sup>54</sup> So it is the penumbral region that raises doubts over the ability or inability to attribute a term to a specific state of affairs.

Bringing the discussion back to Ibn `Arabi’s writings, there are two typical responses to vagueness: the epistemic and the semantic views.<sup>55</sup> The semantic view involves two sub-options, namely, whether vagueness is considered a result of the limitations of our descriptions of the world or, “one might alternatively think that the world could, or even must, contribute to the explanation.”<sup>56</sup> Ibn `Arabi subscribes to the latter option, that of ontic or ontological vagueness.<sup>57</sup> While the debate continues within philosophy concerning ontic vagueness, vagueness itself cannot be wished away. “The paradox may be dissolved and language made to appear in working order but only at the expense of treating vagueness as if it did not exist.”<sup>58</sup>

I am not merely trying to suggest that we can analyze Ibn `Arabi’s cosmology as involving vague terms; rather, it is my concern to emphasize that the notion of the *barzakh* is a cognate of the analytical concept of vagueness, albeit a cognate within the context of a specific religious tradition, namely, Sufism. Ibn `Arabi was fully aware of the issue and the existence of vagueness not only as a result of a philosophical scrutiny of language, but rather as a pivotal cornerstone of his religious view. His descriptions of theophanies – and ultimately this means descriptions of all things – as *barzakh* means that he views all created things as borderline cases lying between God and nothingness, a created world imbued with both divine being and the contingent quality arising from absolute nothingness.

If vagueness engenders a genuine paradox, then it is important to understand its relation to standard logic. Simply put, conventional logic cannot accommodate it. The pragmatic point for the present purpose is that vague expressions serve a useful purpose in the context of Ibn `Arabi’s Sufism. If vagueness is useful in language, for example, if it conveys or communicates “something,” then it is not the case that a vague term is incoherent or unclear.<sup>59</sup> Given his context, Ibn `Arabi resorts to using vagueness because for him, this is an accurate way of expressing the nature of the cosmos and the place of human beings within that cosmos.

A supplementary motivation for attempting to show the relevance of analytical discussions of vagueness for interpreting Ibn `Arabi’s language revolves around the distinction between ambiguity and vagueness. Vagueness differs from ambiguity, but in studies of Ibn `Arabi the use of the term *ambiguity* substitutes for vagueness even though, technically speaking, it is more properly vagueness that is being discussed.<sup>60</sup> Thus, it is my concern that a



more sophisticated understanding of Ibn `Arabi's language would speak more of the phenomenon of vagueness rather than instances of ambiguity.

Ambiguity involves two or more meanings, while vagueness suggests a vague or indeterminate meaning. An ambiguous word, such as "nail," remains ambiguous only as long as no further information is available as to whether the word is referring to finger nails or toe nails or a nail that one hammers. Ambiguity in this sense is related to equivocation. Roy Sorensen has articulated the differences quite succinctly: "Typically, a word is ambiguous between some readings, vague between other readings, and general between yet other readings. For example, 'child' is ambiguous between 'immature offspring' and 'offspring,' vague over when a child becomes an adult, and general in that it covers both males and females."<sup>61</sup> Therefore

[i]f someone asks of a borderline case "Is he a child?", it is not that our problem in answering is the problem of knowing which question has been asked, there is only one possible question involved here. The problem is quite different: if the person of whom the question is asked is a borderline case, neither "Yes" nor "No" is a clearly correct answer. This question has a single vague meaning, and that is quite different from having two or more meanings.<sup>62</sup>

Ambiguity and obscurity only convey a precise meaning when the referent of an ambiguous word has been clarified. However, while ordinary use of vague or vagueness denote both imprecision and indefiniteness, we are clearly not dealing with any imprecision of thought with these instances of vagueness in the thought of Ibn `Arabi; rather, these are very precise delineations of ontological entities that must necessarily invoke vagueness as indefiniteness or uncertainty.<sup>63</sup>

As we have already seen, when Sells says that the pronoun's antecedent is ambiguous with reference fusion, perhaps now we could qualify this statement, given the understanding of the difference between ambiguity and vagueness, and say that the antecedent uncertainty is a result of the creative vagueness that Ibn `Arabi introduces in the passage. The whole point for Ibn `Arabi is not that we could choose one antecedent over another if we had further information, but rather that one must maintain both possible nuances as part and parcel of the Sufi's perception of the relation between God and His creation. Likewise, when Chittick speaks of ontological ambiguity and its relation to the *barzakh*, the point is not that further information will resolve the ambiguity, but rather that the vagueness is to be sustained in the *barzakh*, imaginative faculty of the Sufi saint.<sup>64</sup>

My primary motivation for positing a connection between Ibn `Arabi's *barzakh* and analytical vagueness is terminological: Both have recourse to penumbral images and metaphors. For example, "[e]verything other than the Essence of the Real is intervening imagination and vanishing shadow...."<sup>65</sup> All of existence is always in some process of transmutation, and so, in a very real sense for Ibn `Arabi, all existents are ontically vague. The cosmos, entities located within the cosmos, and lastly, human beings, are all vague. Therefore, vagueness as a component of the human being has religious, and not merely philosophical, significance.

The human alone has two complete relations; one whereby he enters into the divine realm and the other whereby he enters into the created. ... He is like an isthmus between the world and God, combining in himself creatureliness and divinity; he is the dividing line between the divine and the created realm, like the line between the shade and the sunlight. This is his reality.<sup>66</sup>

The human being is the most complete creation because he or she encompasses both the divine and the created realms, or is the *barzakh* between them. Like the line between shadow and sunlight, the human partakes of both worlds. The very reality of the human is the very "line" between shade and light. If the line or boundary between shade and light is understood as a vague or penumbral region where it is neither true nor false that the line belongs to either the shade or the light, then Ibn `Arabi understands the consummated reality of the human to be quintessentially vague. The issue of vagueness and referential uncertainty concerns the nature of humanity itself: Human beings can only be adequately understood, according to Ibn `Arabi's cosmology, through recourse to vagueness.

## Conclusion

Vagueness in the context of Ibn `Arabi's Sufism is intertwined with the Sufi's mystical imagination. Rather than being only an intellectual acknowledgement of referential uncertainty, vagueness is an element within a particular spiritual faculty through which the world of the Sufi is seen.

The ontological ambiguity of all things, standing as they do in a *barzakh* or isthmus between *wujud* and nonexistence and between this moment and the next, brings us back to imagination, one of whose characteristics is constant fluctuation and change. As a faculty of the soul, imagination is able to perceive the self-disclosures of God, recognizing the presence

of God in each thing. Imagination, in other words, can perceive the words of the All-Merciful as God's self-articulation. It sees the things are He even as reason recognizes that they are not He.<sup>67</sup>

That this is a result of the Sufi's imagination is important for two reasons. First, the vagueness of the Sufi's imagination is not a result of philosophical analysis but rather of spiritual discipline. Second, as a corollary to the first point, I am certainly in no way suggesting any intuitive link between the Sufi's imagination and the philosophical acumen of analytic philosophers. However, I do hope it suggests that through his own religious worldview, Ibn `Arabi gained insight into some of the problems endemic to language in general, and not simply to language directly addressing the ineffable divine. He sees all created entities as *barzakhs*, as vague. In a sense, analytic philosophers also realize that vagueness is endemic to a general description of the world. But the similarities end there. The true nature of the *barzakh* "is unknown save to those who solve the riddle, and equal concerning it may be the seeing and the blind."<sup>68</sup>

Ibn `Arabi describes the task for the Sufi saint, therefore, as an approximation of the ideal combination of the two "modes of contemplation," which corresponds to the notion of the "true" *barzakh*. Approximating this ideal mode of "seeing-as" entails holding both modes equally, without definitively swaying in either direction. While it is true, given his cosmology that all things are theophanies, bearing two faces, a conglomeration of contradictory attributes, and so on, for the most part this view is available only to the Sufi virtuosi: "If you affirm both, you hit the mark. You are an Imam in knowledge and a master..."<sup>69</sup> For Ibn `Arabi, then, the majority of us see only one side of things at any given time, but "that which is missing from the visible face of a thing is captured in the face which is invisible."<sup>70</sup> After translating a passage by Ibn `Arabi, Chodkiewicz discusses the term faces (*wujuh*) by referring to one of Ibn `Arabi's commentators, `Abd al-Karim Jili (d. 1423):

Our translation takes account of only one of the possible meanings of the word "faces" (*wujuh*), which Ibn `Arabi almost always uses in a deliberately ambivalent way. The *wujuh* are simultaneously the "Faces of God," the visible or invisible forms of the phenomenal world, and the modes of contemplation: all these different meanings, moreover, are obviously related. Similarly, the "perfect that it is not given to all to know" is the perfection of God; but it is also the perfection of each thing inasmuch as what is manifest in it is the "Apparent One" (*al-Zahir*), that is to say the

Divine Reality itself.... At this point Jili employs two expressive images: when, he says, the visible face of the moon is waning, its hidden face is waxing in the same proportion, and vice versa; when the day (*nahar*) becomes shorter, the night (*layl*) becomes longer, but the duration of the nychthemeron (*yawm*) never changes.<sup>71</sup>

Yet again we have a metaphor of the *barzakh* – the nychthemeron – that highlights how viewing through a disjunctive lens results in missing half of the equation. With nychthemeron, we have a perfect image of a borderline case, a blending of two contraries. As a twenty-four hour period, it combines day and night.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps we could add another cognate metaphor and say that all theophanies are Janus-faced in the sense that, for most people, when one face is visible the other is invisible. The Greek god Janus was typically represented “with a face on the front and another on the back of his head.”<sup>73</sup> Therefore, you cannot see the face on the back of the god Janus’ head if you are looking at the face on the front. Hence, again built into Ibn `Arabi’s Sufi, *barzakhi* vision is the attempt to view the two faces simultaneously, despite the conventional impossibility of such an attempt. There is an ironical double-entendre in this choice of expression, as theophanies are Janus-faced in the sense of being a *barzakhi* combination of divine and phenomenal faces. But they are also “deceitful” in the sense that they fool those who are ignorant into believing that they are seeing the whole picture when, in fact, they are only getting half the story, seeing many different, distinct things that veil the divinity within them.<sup>74</sup>

Language used to describe the faculty of imagination combines aspects of the two faculties – perception and conception – into one:

Imagination is neither existent nor non-existent, neither known nor unknown, neither negated nor affirmed. For example, a person perceives his form in a mirror. He knows for certain that he has perceived his form in one respect and he knows for certain that he has not perceived his form in another respect.... He cannot deny that he has seen his form, and he knows that his form is not in the mirror, nor is it between himself and the mirror.... Hence he is neither a truth-teller nor a liar in his words, “I saw my form, I did not see my form.”<sup>75</sup>

In a simple sense, imagination perceives the borderline cases between affirmation and negation. Appropriately, Ibn `Arabi describes this in some places as a state of perplexity. The climactic moments, those within which referential openness occurs, are those moments where standard logic breaks

down. But up until that point, logic's provisional role is a necessary part of the performance.

The refusal by apophatic writers to define the subject of discourse is neither a mystification nor the result of inability to use language clearly ... it is only upon a foundation of conventional logic and semantics that the apophatic text, at the critical moment, can perform (rather than assert) a referential openness – by fusing the various antecedents of the pronoun, or the perfect and imperfect tenses, or by transforming the spatial and temporal structures of language at the level of article, pronoun, and preposition.<sup>76</sup>

In a sense, the rules are used in order to be broken, or conventional logic is utilized to generate a novel “logical” position.<sup>77</sup> Ibn `Arabi is neither an apophatic theorist nor merely a protective strategist working to establish restrictions on language; He is, in fact, developing forms of language that he believes succinctly reflect the ontological situation.

Although evocative language has been criticized as a protective strategy (and can be used as such in certain cases) the goal here is to understand the apophatic displacement of the grammatical object as a key moment in a distinctive literary mode with its own rules, conventions, and fields of meaning, and to develop a critical vocabulary for better understanding that literary mode.<sup>78</sup>

I believe that the concept of vagueness contributes to the development of such a “critical vocabulary” that helps to shed light on his distinctive literary style.

Ibn `Arabi's understanding of the *barzakh*, and hence a basic idea of vagueness, is part and parcel of an account of the linguistic techniques that express the ineffability of the transcendent. It is “when language encounters the notion of the unlimited that conventional logic, not illogically, is transformed.”<sup>79</sup> However, logic is likewise transformed or re-evaluated by attempts to articulate the vagueness of particular terms. Articulating the vague boundaries or borderlines between polar terms is a major component of Ibn `Arabi's mystical language and should be considered a part of what it means to describe such language as “mystical.”

The approach of Sufi writers like Ibn `Arabi demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of language that should earn respect from our contemporary vantage point. Through the attempt to talk accurately about God and the *barzakh*, we witness conclusions similar to the ones arrived at in analytical philosophy, conclusions achieved by radically different means with

absolutely different goals in mind. Such an interaction urges the study of religion, in general, and the study of Islam, in particular, to broaden the view of the role of religious language in the religious life. It is hoped that the above investigation demonstrates the fruitful possibilities available when we show how religious forms of language are related to examples of contemporary philosophical approaches to language. Likewise, contemporary philosophical discussions encourage a terminological rigorousness that saves the complex and potentially confusing study of religious language from possible obscurity.<sup>80</sup>

### Endnotes

1. Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.
2. *Ibid.*, 2.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. Sells' point is, I believe, that logic is used and not simply abused in apophatic discourse. It is, therefore, not merely a protective strategy that says logic cannot accommodate the ineffable, it expresses ineffability through logic, even if that logic needs to be violated in order to successfully articulate the nature of ineffability. I return to this briefly in my concluding remarks.
7. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 12.
8. *Ibid.*, 225, n. 31.
9. *Ibid.*, 12.
10. Performative apophasis is, in certain respects, a reaction to conventional logic utilized by traditional theologians and philosophers. But such mystical writers do not believe they are being obscure; they believe such discourse is a necessary feature of their religious view.
11. *Ibid.*, 63.
12. *Ibid.*, 208-9.
13. Ibn `Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, 1:50-51, trans. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 72.
14. Ibn `Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, trans. Austin, R. W. *Ibn al-`Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 50.
15. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 73.
16. *Ibid.*, 66.
17. Michael Sells in Idel, Moshe, and Bernard McGinn, eds., *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 120.
18. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 65.

19. Sells, in Idel and McGinn, eds., *Mystical Union*, 100. Sells explains his recourse to experimental ways of translating reference fusion.  
English demands that a choice be made between the reflexive and nonreflexive pronouns. If we say, “He saw him reflected in the mirror,” it is assumed that the him refers to someone other than the subject of the sentence. Arabic does not so insistently require such a distinction. At the moment of mystical union, of reflection in the mirror, the reflexive and nonreflexive possibilities are fused. (Ibid., 119)
20. Ibid., 123.
21. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 9.
22. Ibid., 105.
23. James W. Morris, “The Spiritual Ascension,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107, no. 4 (October 1987): 634, n. 27. Commenting on this Morris points out that such a phrase is a “classic reference to that mystery of the simultaneous immanence (*tashbih*) and transcendence (*tanzih*) of the Divine Reality reflected in the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) which is the central intuition of all his work.” Ibid.
24. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuhat al-Makkiyah*, 1:289.20, trans. William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 112.
25. Ibn `Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, 1:70, trans. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 100-101.
26. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 3.
27. Ibid., n. 98, 36. Ultimately Sells creates a structural affinity between mystical experience and the linguistic analogue – the “meaning event.”
28. For purposes of brevity I am omitting a discussion of the *barzakh* in relation to the afterlife, where the *barzakh* stands for a purgatorial state prior to judgment. See Chittick’s chapter “‘Your Sight Today is Piercing’: The Muslim Understanding of Death and Afterlife,” in Hiroshi Obayashi, ed., *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 125-39.
29. William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-`Arabi’s Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 242.
30. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuhat al-Makkiyah*, 3:108.10, trans. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 334. In this context, he also emphasizes the necessity of the *barzakh* for the process of reasoning: “It is the tie between the two premises. If not for it, no sound knowledge would become manifest.” Ibid.
31. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuhat al-Makkiyah*, 3:156.27, trans. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 14.
32. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 13.
33. Ibid., 14.
34. Here I am indebted to, specifically, Michael Sells, Michel Chodkiewicz, and William C. Chittick.

35. Online OED, s.v. “isthmus.” The neck of land referred to specifically in the Greek context is the Isthmus of Corinth connecting the Peloponnesus with northern Greece.
36. The online OED describes an interstice as an “intervening space” or a “narrow space” between things. Online OED, s.v. “interstice.”
37. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuh al-Makkiyah*, 3:337.29, trans. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 334.
38. Penumbra comes from the Latin *pæne* meaning “almost” and *umbra* meaning shadow. Online OED, s.v. “penumbra.”
39. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuh al-Makkiyah*, 1:304.16, trans. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 118.
40. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuh al-Makkiyah*, 3:518.1, trans. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 335.
41. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuh al-Makkiyah*, 3:47.25, trans. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 205.
42. Either the *barzakh* is identical or opposite, but if both it violates the law of excluded middle (for any statement P, either P or not-P is true).
43. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 16.
44. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuh al-Makkiyah*, 2:568.3, trans. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 271.
45. Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 28.
46. “As for the Real with regard to Himself, He is not qualified by anything by which the *wujud* of the cosmos is qualified.” Ibn `Arabi, *Futuh al-Makkiyah*, 3:537:16, trans. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 259.
47. I believe this is related to the general idea that transcendence is not a necessary and exclusive feature of a provisional definition of religion. See, for example, Hans H. Penner, “You Don’t Read a Myth for Information,” in Nancy Frankenberry, ed., *Radical Interpretation in Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 169.
48. For an excellent introduction to the history of the study of vagueness in analytical philosophy, see the first chapter of Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith, eds., *Vagueness: A Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
49. Linda Claire Burns, *Vagueness: An Investigation into Natural Languages and the Sorites Paradox* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 3.
50. R. M. Sainsbury, *Paradoxes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24. It should be noted that such an apparent contradiction prompts various attempts at its resolution. However, this is not the issue in the present context, as I am suggesting that like-minded conundrums are deliberately sustained in the context of Ibn `Arabi’s notion of the *barzakh*.
51. Sainsbury explains that a “vague word admits of borderline cases, cases in which we don’t know whether to apply the word or not, even though we have



all kinds of information which we would normally regard as sufficient to settle the matter.” Sainsbury, *Paradoxes*, 24.

52. The classic example of the Sorites paradox, which stems from discussions by Cicero (106-43 BCE), Galen (second century CE), and Diogenes Laertius (third century CE), is the heap of grains. A concise explanation is the following: a pile of ten thousand grains is a heap. If one grain is taken away from the heap, the heap remains a heap. The difference of one grain does not appear to be enough to make a heap no longer a heap. But, given this reasoning, if we continually remove one grain at a time we will eventually arrive at a heap comprised of one grain. But it is absurd that one grain should constitute a heap. Somehow our reasoning has led us to the contradictory statement that one grain is a heap. Therefore the concept of the heap is vague because it is uncertain precisely when a pile of grains is no longer a heap and becomes merely a pile of grains. See chapter 2 in Keefe and Smith, eds, *Vagueness: A Reader* for a more extensive discussion.
53. This is a popular term in Anglo-American philosophy related to vagueness.
54. Bertrand Russell, “Vagueness,” originally a lecture delivered in 1922, reproduced in Keefe and Smith, eds, *Vagueness: A Reader*, 63.
55. Simply put, the epistemic view sees vagueness to be a result of epistemological limitations.
56. Sainsbury, *Paradoxes*, 47. As Burns explains, it is usually brought up only to be rejected. Burns, *Vagueness*, 14. For examples of “higher order” logical arguments concerning vagueness see *The Monist* 81, no. 2 (April 1998) for a special issue dedicated to the problem of vagueness.
57. Properly speaking, he subscribes to both: There is ontic vagueness insofar as every thing is a *barzakh*, and ontological vagueness insofar as all Being is vague or *barzakhi*, save that of God’s Being in himself.
58. Burns, *Vagueness*, 6.
59. I agree with Burns on this point. See Burns, *Vagueness*, 5. The decision as to whether something is clear or imprecise is certainly a value judgment.
60. Some typical definitions of “vague”: “Not clearly expressed; inexplicit; not thinking or expressing oneself clearly; lacking definite shape, form, or character; indistinct; not clear in meaning or application; indistinctly felt, perceived, understood, or recalled; hazy.” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “vague.” Some of these are clearly applicable, but the point is that the meaning is precisely indeterminate, rather than unclear.
61. Roy Sorensen, “Ambiguity, Discretion, and the Sorites,” *The Monist* 81, no. 2 (April 1998): 231.
62. Sainsbury, *Paradoxes*, 26.
63. The Online American Heritage Dictionary is very helpful at this juncture: Ambiguous indicates the presence of two or more possible meanings.... Something equivocal is unclear or misleading.... Obscure implies lack of clarity of expression.... Recondite and abstruse connote the erudite obscurity of the

scholar.... What is vague is expressed in indefinite form or reflects imprecision of thought.... Cryptic suggests a sometimes deliberately puzzling terseness.... Something enigmatic is mysterious and puzzling....

See *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. "ambiguous."

64. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, xxvi.
65. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuhat al-Makkiyah*, 2:313.12, trans. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 118.
66. Ibn `Arabi, *Insha' al-Dawa'ir*, 22, trans. Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 80.
67. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, xxvi.
68. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuhat al-Makkiyah*, 3:337.29, trans. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 334.
69. Ibn `Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, 1:70, trans. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 101.
70. Ibn `Arabi, *Risalah al-Anwar*, trans. Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*. Trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 158.
71. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 159. The English translation nychthemeron is based on Chodkiewicz's original French term *nycthemère*.
72. Online OED, s.v. "nychthemeron."
73. Online OED, s.v. "Janus." This also reminds me of Wittgenstein's "duck-rabbit," although the Sufi's imaginative faculty sees it as both simultaneously, while in his or her mind most others see either a duck or a rabbit, but never both at the same time.
74. The concept of the *barzakh* reminds the Sufi to never get caught seeing things disjunctively as either God or not God. If someone is adamant in claiming that a particular thing in the phenomenal world is not to be related to the divine then what transpires is an obscuring of the aspect of that thing which is divine, which in turn means to conceal or put a veil over God himself. Chittick explains this well: "A veil (hijab) is something that prevents seeing the face. Inasmuch as everything in the cosmos prevents seeing God's face, everything is a veil, but inasmuch as everything discloses *wujud*, everything is identical with His face." Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 104. Theophanies are good candidates, I believe, for possessing a "vague identity."
75. Ibn `Arabi, *Futuhat al-Makkiyah*, 1:304.16, trans. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 118.
76. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, 8.
77. In this sense, Ibn `Arabi and other prolific writers can be seen as articulate mystics who do not avoid utilizing language to express their "mysticism," in contrast with inarticulate mystics whose best mode of expression is silence. While space does not allow for a more detailed supplementary discussion,

the need for interpreting writers like Ibn `Arabi literally also prompts a distinction between such discourse and what is implied in Nancy Frankenberry's critique of *The Theology of Symbolic Forms*, which seeks to protect the objects of religious language by arguing for multiple levels of meaning, where transcendent principles can only be spoken of through symbolic or metaphorical meaning. See Nancy Frankenberry, "Religion as a "mobile army of metaphors"," in Nancy Frankenberry ed., *Radical Interpretation in Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 173; 179; 180.

78. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 10.

79. *Ibid.*, 212.

80. I would like to acknowledge both Daniel Merkur and Atif Khalil for their encouragement and feedback on earlier versions of this paper.