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From Presence to Name:

Essential Knowledge and Divine Self-Disclosure in Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī*

Von der Präsenz zum Namen:

Wesentliches Wissen und göttliche Selbstoffenbarung bei Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī

Abstract
This paper examines whether, and in what sense, God can be known in the thought of the sixth/twelfth-century philosopher Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī. Through a close reading of Chapter 22 of the first maqāla of the Metaphysics of his Kitāb al-Muʿtabar fī al-Ḥikma, it argues that his account of knowing God is inseparable from his analysis of time, and in particular of the »now« (al-ān).
On this basis, the paper argues that knowledge of God in Himself is neither confined to inference from acts nor reducible to demonstration. It is instead realized in the now, where divine disclosure and human reception coincide. The same distinction governs divine naming: names derived from acts remain inferential, whereas a name signifying the divine essence corresponds to the moment in which that essence is present to the knower.
Keywords
→ Knowability of God
→ Essential and Accidental Knowledge
→ Divine Temporality
→ The Now
→ Divine Names

Zusammenfassung
Dieser Beitrag untersucht, ob und in welchem Sinne Gott im Denken des Philosophen Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī aus dem 6./12. Jahrhundert erkannt werden kann. Anhand einer genauen Lektüre von Kapitel 22 der ersten Maqāla der Metaphysik seines Kitāb al-Muʿtabar fī al-Ḥikma wird argumentiert, dass seine Darstellung der Erkenntnis Gottes untrennbar mit seiner Analyse der Zeit und insbesondere des »Jetzt« (al-ān) verbunden ist.
Auf dieser Grundlage argumentiert der Beitrag, dass die Erkenntnis Gottes in sich selbst weder auf Schlussfolgerungen aus Handlungen beschränkt noch auf eine Beweisführung reduzierbar ist. Sie verwirklicht sich vielmehr im Jetzt, wo göttliche Offenbarung und menschliche Rezeption zusammenfallen. Dieselbe Unterscheidung gilt für die göttliche Benennung: Aus Handlungen abgeleitete Namen bleiben schlussfolgernd, während ein Name, der das göttliche Wesen bezeichnet, jenem Moment entspricht, in dem dieses Wesen dem Erkennenden gegenwärtig ist.
Schlüsselbegriffe
→ Erkennbarkeit Gottes
→ Essentielles und akzidentelles Wissen
→ Göttliche Zeitlichkeit
→ Jetzt
→ Göttliche Namen

Sumario
Este artículo examina si, y en qué sentido, se puede conocer a Dios en el pensamiento del filósofo Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, del siglo VI/XII. A través de una lectura detallada del capítulo 22 de la primera maqāla de la Metafísica de su Kitāb al-Muʿtabar fī al-Ḥikma, se argumenta que su explicación del conocimiento de Dios es inseparable de su análisis del tiempo y, en particular, del «ahora» (al-ān).
Sobre esta base, el artículo sostiene que el conocimiento de Dios en sí mismo no se limita a la inferencia a partir de los actos ni es reducible a la demostración. Se realiza, en cambio, en el ahora, donde coinciden la revelación divina y la recepción humana. La misma distinción rige la denominación divina: los nombres derivados de los actos siguen siendo inferenciales, mientras que un nombre que signifique la esencia divina corresponde al momento en el que esa esencia se presenta al conocedor.
Palabras clave
→ Conocimiento de Dios
→ conocimiento esencial y accidental
→ temporalidad divina
→ el ahora
→ nombres divinos

1 Introduction

The question of whether God can be known was not, in medieval Islamic thought, a question that admitted of a simple affirmative or negative answer. It was usually unfolded into a series of prior distinctions: whether what is known of God is His existence,[1] His unity, His attributes, His acts, or His essence; whether such knowledge is attained by rational reflection, demonstrative proof, transmitted revelation, or spiritual disclosure; and whether the result is certainty in the strict sense, persuasive assent, or a form of realized awareness that exceeds discursive cognition. The problem, therefore, belonged at once to theology, metaphysics, semantics, and epistemology.

Within Islamic speculative theology *(kalām)*, the problem was closely tied to questions of proof and predication. To affirm that God is knowing, living, or powerful required clarification of how such predicates may be applied to a reality that does not belong to the order of created things. The issue was therefore not merely whether God can be known, but how discourse about God may retain intelligible content without collapsing either into anthropomorphism or into a negation that empties such discourse of meaning. Much of the classical debate turned on the relation between utterance *(lafẓ)*, meaning *(maʿnā)*, and reality *(ḥaqīqa)*, since the possibility of truthful predication about God depended on how these elements were understood to relate to one another.[2]

In Islamic philosophy *(falsafa)*, the same problem appeared in another form. Once God is conceived as the necessary ground of existence, the issue shifts from the obligation to recognize a creator to the manner in which the intellect relates to what stands first in the order of being. Avicennan metaphysics gave this problem its most systematic expression. Demonstrative reasoning could establish the existence of a necessary being and determine certain features that follow from that necessity. This, however, raises a further question: whether God is thereby known as a determinate object of thought, or whether the intellect reaches only the point at which explanation must come to an end. The reserve that Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 428/1037) maintains concerning quiddity and essential predication does not deny the possibility of divine knowledge but limits the sense in which such knowledge can be said to reach God in Himself.[3]

***** A digital version of the article can be found: https://www.ctsi.uni-bonn.de/zmr/aktuelle-ausgaben/zmr-110-2026-1-2.

1 A substantial and independent section is devoted to proofs for God's existence in both *kalām* and *falsafa* literature. In *kalām,* these proofs are treated as a central part of rational *naẓar* and are discussed after the establishment of its principles, while in falsafa they arise from the very subject matter of metaphysics as the science of being *qua* being, and in its theological part, of the Necessary Existent. Although cast in the form of demonstrations of existence, the arguments from *ḥudūth* and *imkān* are more illuminating when read as attempts to articulate a determinate conception of God and to clarify the structure of His relation to the world. For a sustained study of this dimension of the arguments, see Hannah C. Erlwein, Arguments for God's Existence in Classical Islamic Thought, Berlin 2019.

2 For general discussions of the problem of knowing God in classical Islamic theology, see Luis Xavier López-Farjeat, Approaches to the Knowledge of God in Classical Islamic Thought, in: Nassim Bravo / Jon Stewart (ed.), *The Modern Experience of the Religious,* New Research in the History of Western Philosophy Vol. 0, Leiden-Boston 2,022, 160-197. On the metaphysical background of the debate, especially the Muʿtazilite analysis of the relation between the divine essence and attributes, see Richard M. Frank, *The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Muʿtazila in the Classical Period,* Albany 1,977. For discussions of the knowability of God in later kalām, see David B. Burrell, The Unknowability of God in Al-Ghazali, in: *Religious Studies* 22 (1,986) 170-183; and Binyamin Abrahamov, Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the Knowability of God's Essence and Attributes, in: *Arabica* 48 (2,001) 203-231.

3 See Jon McGinnis, Avicenna, Oxford 2,009, 150-211, for a discussion of Avicenna's metaphysics, especially his account of the Necessary Existent and the attributes that follow from divine necessity; and Peter Adamson, »From the Necessary Existent to God,« in: Peter Adamson / Robert Wisnovsky (ed.), Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam, Cambridge 2,012, 169-190, which examines how Avicenna moves from the notion of the Necessary Existent to the conception of God and the predicates ascribed to Him.

Sufi authors approached the issue from another direction. Rational reflection may lead to knowledge of God through His acts and signs, but it does not exhaust what it means to know Him. Knowledge reaches completion only when God discloses Himself to the knower *(ʿārif)*. Terms such as unveiling *(kashf)*, tasting *(dhawq)*, and witnessing *(mushāhada)* therefore designate not a departure from cognition but a transformation of its mode, in which certainty arises through a form of presence rather than through inference alone.

A different orientation appears in the traditionalist current associated with the Ḥanbalī school. Authors such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) grounded knowledge of God in the *fiṭra,* the natural disposition through which human beings are directed toward recognition of their creator. Revelation confirms and clarifies this primordial awareness, while rational reflection remains subordinate to these sources.[4] The problem is therefore not how the existence of God may be demonstrated through speculative reasoning, but how correct understanding of the divine names and attributes may be preserved without extending to God conceptual structures derived from created realities.

By the twelfth century these discussions had already passed through a prolonged engagement between *kalām* and *falsafa*. The critique advanced by al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* did not bring philosophical reflection on divine matters to an end, but altered the conditions under which such reflection could proceed. Questions concerning causality, divine agency, and the limits of demonstrative knowledge now unfolded in a setting where theological concerns about God's transcendence and His relation to the world could no longer be set aside.[5]

It is within this setting that the work of Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. ca. 547/1152) should be placed.[6] Writing in the generation following Ghazālī, he engages Avicennan metaphysics from within its conceptual framework while reopening several questions that Ibn Sīnā's system appeared to have settled. His criticisms of Ibn Sīnā do not amount to a rejection of the philosophical tradition. They take the form of revisions directed particularly at Ibn Sīnā's treatment of temporality, causality, and the structure of knowledge. As I have argued elsewhere, these revisions aim not at abandoning Avicennan metaphysics but at reworking certain of its assumptions so that the language of metaphysics becomes more responsive to questions concerning divine presence and God's relation to the temporal order.[7]

The present study examines one aspect of this project: Abū al-Barakāt's account of the knowledge of God and the conditions under which such knowledge becomes accessible within the limits of human cognition. The analysis focuses on Chapter 22 of the first *maqāla* of the Metaphysics *(Ilāhiyyāt)* of *al-Muʿtabar,* entitled »*On the Investigation into the Essence of the First Principle, Its Quiddity, and the Mode by which It Is Known to the Knowers*« *(fī baḥth ʿan dhāt al-mabdaʾ al-awwal wa-māhiyyatihi wa-ʿalā ayy wajh yaʿrifuhu al-ʿārifūn)*.[8] A close reading of this chapter reveals how Abū al-Barakāt understands the possibility of knowing God and how this account relates to his broader reconsideration of Avicennan metaphysics, particularly his analysis of temporality and the structure of the present moment *(al-ān)*.

4 Wael B. Hallaq, Ibn Taymiyya on the Existence of God, in: Acta Orientalia 52 (1991) 49-69. For epistemology and *fiṭra:* Jon Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya, Oxford 2019, chapters 3-4.

5 For further insight into the richness of intellectual debates during this period, see, for instance, Ayman Shihadeh, From al-Ghazālī to Al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology, in: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy (2005) 141-179; an Frank Griffel, Between al-Ghazālī and Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī: The Dialectical Turn in the Philosophy of Iraq and Iran During the Sixth/Twelfth Century, in: Peter Adamson (ed.), In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth Century, London 2011, 45-75.

6 Awḥad al-Zamān Abū al-Barakāt Hibatallāh ibn ʿEli ibn Malkā al-Baghdādī (d. ca. 547/1152) was a Jewish philosopher and physician from Baghdad who later embraced Islam. His major work, *al-Muʿtabar,* presents a critical rethinking of Avicennian philosophy, especially in physics, psychology, and metaphysics. He challenged key Peripatetic doctrines and developed a distinctive account of time, and self-awareness,

2 Divine Temporality

This section builds on my earlier study of Abū al-Barakāt's treatment of time, in which I examined his account of the relation between existence *(wujūd)*, time *(zamān)*, and awareness *(shuʿūr)*. Particular attention was given to his revolutionary claim that God is in time *(fī zamān)* – a statement that he introduces without further elaboration. By situating this remark within the structure of temporality that emerges from his discussion, my earlier study sought to clarify how it might be understood within his philosophical system and what it implies for the relation between God and the world.[9] The conclusions reached there form the background to the present paper. What follows briefly recalls the main elements of that analysis insofar as they are necessary for the argument developed here.

2.1 Time as a Magnitude of Existence

Muslim philosophical and theological accounts of time, despite their divergences, share a common assumption: temporality is inseparable from physical change. Influenced by Aristotelian physics, most of the *falāsifa* define time as the measure of the continuous motion of the outermost sphere *(falak al-aflāk)*, thereby grounding temporality in cosmic movement. The *mutakallimūn,* while rejecting the continuity of motion and time, nevertheless retain the connection between time and the physical world by conceiving it as a sequence of discrete instants created by God and inhering in bodies as accidents. In both cases, time does not stand on its own; it is subordinated to the dynamics of the world.

It is precisely this assumption that Abū al-Barakāt calls into question. Duration, he argues, neither arises from motion nor vanishes with its absence. To illustrate this point, he proposes a simple analogy. Imagine three balls moving in different directions and at different speeds: one rapidly, another more moderately, and a third slowly before eventually coming to rest, while the other two continue to move. Their motions differ, and one of them ceases altogether. Yet the duration that contains all three remains one and the same. Its beginning and end are not determined by the start or cessation of any particular motion. Differences in speed and direction – indeed even the absence of motion in one case – do not alter the span within which the event unfolds. Even if all three were to come to rest, that span would not thereby disappear; it would continue so long as the balls remain in existence.[10]

What the analogy shows is that the factor common to them is not motion but their persistence in existence within a single duration. Time is therefore neither generated by motion nor dependent upon it. Rather, it accompanies things insofar as they exist. For this reason, Abū al-Barakāt concludes that time is best understood as the magnitude of existence itself *(miqdār al-wujūd)*.[11]

grounded in direct reflection. There are a number of introductory chapters and encyclopedia entries on his thought, among them: Frank Griffel, The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam, New York 2021, 203-225; ʿĀmir al-Ṭayyib, *al-Jānib al-naqdī fī falsafat Abī al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī,* Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2004, 30-52; Wilferd Madelung, Encyclopaedia Iranica, vol. 1, Leiden 2008, 266-268.

7 See Mariam M. Shehata, God, Time, and the World: Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Theory of Divine Temporality, PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, 2023.

8 Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, al-Muʿtabar fī al-ḥikmah. Ḥaydarābād: Dāʾirat al-maʿārif al-ʿUthmānīyah, Ḥaydarābād 1938.

9 See Mariam M. Shehata, God, Time, and the World: Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Theory of Divine Temporality, PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, 2023, ch.1.

10 Abū l-Barakāt, al-Muʿtabar, III.1, 37-39.

11 Abū al-Barakāt, al-Muʿtabar, III.1, 39.

2.2 The Now *(al-ān)*

In his treatment of time, Abū al-Barakāt also addresses the status of the *now (al-ān)*. His discussion contains several remarks that, taken individually, appear dispersed, yet when read together they indicate a distinctive view of how temporal extension relates to existence. Two claims are especially significant. First, he rejects the Avicennian view that the *now* is merely an imagined division *(fāṣil mutawahham)* separating what has ceased from what has not yet come to be.[12] If the now were nothing more than such a mental boundary, continuity would have to be constructed out of what is not: the past would already have vanished, the future would not yet exist, and what is called »time« would lack any locus in which it is present. Second, he rejects the view that time consists of successive nows, insisting instead that the *now* is one.[13] Taken together, these remarks place the *now* in an unusual position. If it is neither an imagined division nor one element within a succession of moments, its unity cannot be explained by reference to temporal succession itself.

Abū al-Barakāt illustrates this point through the analogy of the sword and the thread. The sword represents existence, while the thread represents time as extension. As the thread runs along the edge of the sword, their contact occurs only at a single point.[14] The thread continues to extend along the blade, yet the meeting between extension and existence takes place only there.

Against this background Abū al-Barakāt remarks that what is realized in existence is the *now* rather than time as such. Time, insofar as it is conceived as extension, does not appear in the same manner in which existence appears. What appears is the encounter between temporal extension and existence, and this encounter occurs only in the *now*. Whoever attends carefully, he notes, finds that the realized element in existence is not time as an extended continuum but the now in which that extension meets existence.[15]

The unity of the *now* must therefore be understood in a specific sense. It does not denote one moment within a sequence of moments. Abū al-Barakāt explicitly rejects such a view. The *now* is one because it does not function as a divisible element within time. Rather, it designates the point at which temporal extension becomes actual by meeting existence.

Read in this way, the *now* is neither a boundary dividing past from future nor a discrete unit out of which time is composed. It is rather that in which temporal extension is realized. What appears in existence is not time as such, but the now in which it is present. The *now*

12 Ibn Sīnā, al-Shifāʾ, al-Samāʿ al-Ṭabīʿī, Maqāla 2:12, 160 (Ed. Saʿīd Zāyid. Iran: Manshūrāt Maktabat Āyat Allāh al-ʿUẓmā al-Marʿashī al-Najafī, 1405 HA.)
13 Abū l-Barakāt, Muʿtabar, II.1, 78.
14 Ibid., II. 1, 78f.
15 Ibid., II. 1, 79.
16 Abū al-Barakāt's claim that what is realized in existence is the now, together with his view that the past has ceased and the future has not yet come to be, may appear superficially close to what contemporary philosophy of time calls presentism, the thesis that only the present exists while the past no longer exists and the future does not yet exist. The comparison, however, should not be pressed too far. Abū al-Barakāt does not formulate an ontological theory of temporal reality in the modern sense. His concern is rather to clarify how time, conceived as extension, becomes actual only where it meets existence, namely in the now, which he also describes as one rather than a succession of instants.
17 In Abū al-Barakāt's philosophy, self-awareness *(shuʿūr al-dhāt)* is treated as a basic feature of cognition rather than as a secondary reflexive act. It provides the point of departure for his account of the soul's relation to itself, informs his understanding of human knowing, and extends to his conception of divine knowledge and agency. In this respect, Abū al-Barakāt departs from the Avicennian mashshāʾī framework, which explains intellection primarily through abstraction from forms rather than through intrinsic self-presence. See Jari Kaukua, Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond, Cambridge 2015, ch. 5; and idem, Self, Agent, Soul: Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Critical Reception of Avicennian Psychology, in: Jari Kaukua / Tomas Ekenberg (eds.), Subjectivity and Selfhood in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy, Dordrecht 2016, 77-90.
18 Abū l-Barakāt, Muʿtabar, III.1, 39.

is therefore one, not as an element within a succession, but as the locus of actuality itself. Temporal extension may continue, yet it is encountered only in this way, through the now in which it meets existence.

This also clarifies the broader structure of Abū al-Barakāt's account of time. Since time is defined as the magnitude of existence, the unity of the *now* prevents existence from being conceived as divided into separate temporal atoms. Temporal extension can thus be understood as the continuous unfolding of existence whose actuality is disclosed only in this single point of contact.[16]

2.3 Duration & Awareness *(shuʿūr)*

If time meets existence only in the now in which actuality is realized, the question arises as to how this presence becomes evident. Abū al-Barakāt addresses this question by turning to awareness *(shuʿūr)*.[17] Duration, on his account, is not first disclosed through the observation of external change. What makes temporal passage evident is the soul's awareness of itself; for in becoming aware of itself the soul apprehends its own existence and thereby recognizes the extension of that existence.[18]

To clarify this point, he revisits the well-known analogy of the People of the Cave *(Ahl al-Kahf)*. Earlier philosophers – most notably Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā – had appealed to this narrative to argue that the perception of time depends upon the recognition of motion, since the sleepers' failure to register the passage of time was taken to show that, where no change is perceived, time itself is not apprehended.[19] Abū al-Barakāt draws the opposite implication. The sleepers fail to register the passage of time not simply because no change is perceived, but because awareness itself is suspended – so neither time nor change is apprehended. What is absent, therefore, is not change but the soul's active presence to its own duration.[20]

Abū al-Barakāt presses the point further by asking us to imagine a different situation. Suppose a person remains fully awake yet is completely cut off from the external world – no light, no sound, and no perceptible alteration of any kind.[21] Even in such isolation, temporal passage would still be evident, he argues. The apprehension of duration does not depend upon external markers but accompanies the soul's continued presence to itself and its

19 Aristotle employs the example of dreamless sleepers in a cave in the *Physics* in order to support the claim that time is known only through the perception of change: where no difference between before and after is discerned, no temporal interval is registered. Ibn Sīnā briefly invokes the same example in the context of his discussion of time as the measure of motion, preserving its Peripatetic function of grounding temporal awareness in the recognition of change. Abū al-Barakāt's use of the Companions of the Cave departs from this framework: he shifts the explanatory focus from motion to awareness itself, arguing that the sleepers' failure to perceive time results from the suspension of consciousness as such, not from the absence of perceived motion. The example is thus reconfigured to support the priority of self-awareness over external change in accounting for temporal experience. See ARISTOTLE, *Physics: Books III and* IV, trans. Edward Hussey. Oxford 1983, chs. 10-14; an IBN SĪNĀ, al-Shifāʾ, al-Samāʿ al-ṭabīʿī, 152 (Ed. Saʿīd Zāyid. Iran: Manshūrāt Maktabat Āyat Allāh al-ʿUẓmā al-Marʿashī al-Najafī, 1405 HA.)

20 ABŪ AL-BARAKĀT, al-Muʿtabar, II.1, 73.

21 Abū al-Barakāt's appeal to a subject who remains awake while entirely cut off from sensory experience is clearly indebted to Ibn Sīnā's »flying man« thought experiment. Ibn Sīnā introduces this example to show that a human being is immediately aware of himself even in the absence of all sensation, and that self-awareness therefore cannot be reduced to bodily perception. The same intuition underlies Abū al-Barakāt's use of the cave scenario. See IBN SĪNĀ, *al-Nafs min Kitāb al-Shifāʾ*. Edited by Ḥasan Zādah Āmulī. Qom: Būstān-i Kitāb, 1996, 26-26. PETER ADAMSON / FEDOR BENEVICH, The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna's Flying Man Argument, in: Journal of the American Philosophical Association (2018) 147-164; MICHAEL MARMURA, Avicenna's »Flying Man«

awareness of that presence.[22] Time, therefore, is not first encountered through perceiving the physical motion (also, change). It belongs to existence itself and becomes evident when the soul is aware of its continued being. It is in this sense that Abū al-Barakāt describes the soul as *mutaḥarrika bi-dhātihā:* self-moving not through spatial locomotion but through its enduring presence to itself.[23]

2.4 Divine Temporality: the »Perpetual Now«

At this point the elements of Abū al-Barakāt's account of time can be seen as forming a single structure. Time is the magnitude of existence; the *now* is the point at which this magnitude becomes actual; and awareness apprehends this actuality. From within this framework the question of divine temporality follows directly.

If time belongs to existence as such, and if God, as Abū al-Barakāt repeatedly emphasizes, is the Necessary Existence by Himself *(wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi)*, whose being admits no possibility of non-existence, then duration pertains first to that very existence. Abū al-Barakāt's statement that »God is in time« *(fī zamān)*[24] should be read in this sense. It does not place God within the succession that characterizes contingent beings; rather, it denies that temporality is limited to generated existence.

From this perspective the *now* assumes a further significance. The *now* reflects two aspects that follow from the nature of necessary existence itself. On the one hand, it possesses a stable aspect grounded in the impossibility of non-being: what exists necessarily does not lapse into absence and therefore remains present without interruption. On the other hand, this permanence does not imply immobility. The continuity of existence is accompanied by the ongoing awareness and action that Abū al-Barakāt attributes to God. The now thus appears at once as stable in its ground and dynamic in its continuity.

To express this structure, I introduce the term »*perpetual now*«. The expression is not found in Abū al-Barakāt's own terminology, yet it captures the temporal condition implied by his account of time as the magnitude of existence. What I call the *perpetual now* denotes the point at which the necessity of existence and the continuity of divine awareness coincide. This awareness, which Abū al-Barakāt describes as a volitional motion *(ḥaraka irādiyya)*,[25] entails no alteration in the divine essence but constitutes an abiding act of knowledge and will through which divine agency unfolds without division.

In this respect Abū al-Barakāt's position approaches, as I suggest elsewhere, Ibn Sīnā's notion of perpetuity *(dahr)*, which likewise serves to articulate the relation between

FN 21 in Context, in: The Monist (1986) 383-395; JUHANA TOIVANEN, The Fate of the Flying Man: Medieval Reception of Avicenna's Thought Experiment, in: ROBERT PASNAU (ed.), Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy, vol. 3, Oxford 2015, 64-98. For further details about Abū l-Barakāt's theory of the soul and his adaptation of Ibn Sīnā's Flying Man argument, see KAUKUA, Self, Agent, Soul, 75-89; and ABDULHAKEEM AL-KHELAIFI, The Psychology of Abu al-Barakât al-Baghdâdî, PhD thesis, University of Manchester 1995.

22 It should be noted that Abū al-Barakāt's appeal to awareness *(shuʿūr)* does not imply that temporality originates in consciousness. In his account, awareness functions only as the locus in which time becomes manifest. Temporality itself belongs to existence rather than to the structure of subjective experience. This is evident from his remark that »what exists externally is the existent in its duration« *(al-mawjūd fī al-khārij huwa al-mawjūd fī muddatihi),* which grounds time in the persistence of existence rather than in an act of consciousness. For this reason, his position should not be read through modern phenomenological accounts of time-consciousness (e.g., Husserl). See EDMUND HUSSERL, On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917), trans. JOHN B. BROUGH, Dordrecht 1991.

23 ABŪ AL-BARAKĀT, al-Muʿtabar, III.2, 172.

24 Ibid., III.1, 40f.

25 Ibid., III.2, 172.

permanence and change.[26] Yet the difference is decisive. Whereas Ibn Sīnā situates dahr as an intermediate order between God and the cosmos, the analysis developed here suggests that the origin of temporality lies in the now that belongs first to the Necessary Existence in Himself. From this point temporality becomes differentiated across the scale of being. The further a being stands from necessary existence, the more its duration appears articulated as succession. At the level of sublunary bodies, whose existence is bounded by coming-to-be and passing-away, time appears as linear passage. At its source, however, temporality proceeds from the uninterrupted presence that belongs to Necessary Existence Himself.

2.5 Divine Attributes

Abū al-Barakāt's position on the divine attributes reflects, as I argued elsewhere,[27] the same dual structure that becomes visible in light of the preceding discussion of temporality. Just as the structure of the *now* reveals a conjunction of permanence and dynamism, a comparable relation appears in the way he conceives the divine attributes.

On the one hand, there is a static dimension grounded in the essence's intrinsic entitlement *(istiḥqāq al-dhāt)* to attributes such as knowledge, will, and power. These attributes are not additions to the essence nor relations externally imposed upon it. They belong to what the essence is as the Necessary Existent through Himself. Their permanence expresses the perfection of the divine essence and safeguards its simplicity. At this level, the attributes are neither acquired nor renewed; they belong to the essence by virtue of what it is.

On the other hand, Abū al-Barakāt also affirms a dynamic dimension. From God's awareness of Himself and of the world there arise newly originating cognitions *(ʿulūm ḥāditha)*, newly originating acts of will *(irādāt ḥāditha)*, and newly originating acts *(afʿāl ḥāditha)*. These do not constitute the divine essence nor alter what it is. Rather, they arise from it while remaining grounded in it and subsisting in it *(qāʾima bi-dhātihi)*.[28]

The relation between these two dimensions mirrors the structure discussed above. The permanence grounded in necessary existence corresponds to the stable aspect of the *now*, whereas the newly originating acts of knowledge and will express the ongoing renewal through which divine agency unfolds. The divine essence therefore remains what it is, while the acts that proceed from it occur without compromising its constancy. In this way Abū al-Barakāt affirms both divine immutability and genuine dynamism.

26 Ibn Sīnā distinguishes three levels of duration: *zamān, dahr,* and *sarmad*. *Zamān* (time) is the measure of motion, an accident of material change; *dahr* (perpetuity) is the atemporal duration of the heavenly/intelligible realm that encompasses all time; and *sarmad* (eternity) is God's own changeless duration beyond time. In this ontological hierarchy only the Necessary Existent (God) is absolutely eternal *(sarmad),* while the celestial realm exists perpetually *(dahr)* and the sublunary world temporally *(zamān)*. See, for instance, Ibn Sīnā, al-Shifāʾ, al-Samāʿ al-Ṭabīʿī, Maqāla 2:13, 171f (Ed. Saʿīd Zāyid. Iran: Manshūrāt Maktabat Āyat Allāh al-ʿUẓmā al-Marʿashī al-Najafī, 1405 HA.), and Tisʿ Rasāʾil fī al-Ḥikma, Cairo: Dār al-ʿArab lil-Bustānī, 1989, 92. cf. for instance, Dimitri Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition, Leiden, 1988, 141-143; Robert Wisnovsky, Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context, Ithaca, 2003.

27 See Mariam M. Shehata, God, Time, and the World: Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's Theory of Divine Temporality, PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, 2023, ch.2.

28 Abū al-Barakāt, al-Muʿtabar, III.1, 33f and III.2, 160-162.

3 Knowledge of God

3.1 Essential & accidental Knowledge

Having laid out Abū al-Barakāt's account of God's relation to time, we may now turn to the central concern of this chapter: the question of how God is known. In Chapter 22 of the first *Maqāla* of the *Ilāhiyyāt* of al-*Muʿtabar,* Abū al-Barakāt returns to the question of how God is known. He begins by distinguishing between two forms of knowledge: essential *(dhātī)* and accidental *(ʿaraḍī)*.[29] A thing may be known in itself, or through something that merely accompanies it. In the first case, the object is grasped directly, without mediation. One perceives heat by touch, colour by sight, sound by hearing – not through something else, but through the very reality of what is sensed. It is this kind of presence, immediate and unmediated, that grounds what Abū al-Barakāt calls essential knowledge. In such cases, the name we assign is not arbitrary or derived from secondary features. It arises from the very act of apprehension. The word *ḥarāra,* for example, is not imposed from outside; it is what the knower utters in response to the question »*mā huwa?*«, because what is present is heat itself. The name coincides with the quiddity *(māhiyya)* as it is given in experience.[30] It is not a symbol pointing beyond itself, but an expression of what is already manifest. Here, naming and knowing converge: the name is not a tool to reach the object, but a trace of its presence. This is why, for Abū al-Barakāt, such names belong properly to realities known *bi-dhātihā* and mark the rare cases in which language keeps pace with immediate awareness.

By contrast, accidental knowledge *(al-maʿrifa al-ʿaraḍiyya)* does not reach the object in its own right. One apprehends not the thing itself, but something bound to it contingently – its sound, its shape, its effects. Recognition, in such cases, proceeds by way of correlation: a person is known by voice, by manner, or by trace, just as motion reveals a mover without grasping the mover as such. The act of knowing thus remains sideways, tied to what accompanies rather than to what is. And with this shift in the mode of apprehension, the function of the name is likewise transformed. The name here does not arise from the presence of the essence, but from an indication that points beyond itself. It does not answer the question »what is it?« *(mā huwa?)* but rather »by what is it known?«[31] In this mode, naming no longer coincides with unveiling; it mediates. The name functions as a referential sign, not as a direct disclosure of quiddity. One says »Zayd« not because Zayd is present, but because something – his voice, his shadow – has signalled his likely presence. The name thus reflects not certainty but conjecture, not essential presence but inferred relation. For this reason, accidental knowledge is necessarily inferential *(istidlālī)*: it proceeds from what is other than the thing and points toward it without grasping it as it is.

The forms of evidence concerning the existence of God that Abū al-Barakāt has presented earlier in *al-Muʿtabar* fall precisely under what he calls accidental knowledge. The proof from contingency *(dalīl al-imkān)* shows that possible beings require a Necessary Existent; the proof from origination *(dalīl al-ḥudūth)* affirms a Creator that creates every originated

29 Ibid., III.1, 121-123.
30 Ibid., III.1, 122.
31 Ibid., III.1, 121f.
32 On the proof of the go existence see Herbert A. Davidson, Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy, New York 1987.
33 Abū al-Barakāt, al-Muʿtabar, III.1, 122.
34 Ibid., III.1, 123.
35 Ibid., III.1, 123.
36 The possibility of seeing God *(ruʾyat Allāh biʾl-abṣār)* became one of the central points of dispute in classical kalām. Sunnī theologians (Ḥanbalīs, Kullābīs, Ashʿarīs, and Māturīdīs) affirmed that God will be seen by the believers in the hereafter, while denying any vision of Him in this world. The Jahmiyya and the Muʿtazila categorically rejected the notion, arguing that vision presupposes corporeality or accidentality, both of which are impossible for God. Ashʿarī and Māturīdī theologians replied that visibility is not restricted to bodies and accidents,

thing; the Aristotelian proof from motion *(dalīl al-ḥaraka)* leads to a first unmoved mover; and the proof from causality *(sabab wa-musabbib)*, by which every effect must lead to a cause; and the analogy from the unseen to the seen *(qiyās al-ghāʾib ʿala al-shāhid)* is employed to affirm divine attributes – such as knowledge, will, and power – by drawing parallels with human faculties.[32] Each of these proofs establishes the necessity of a First Principle (also Creator and Cause) yet none of them yield direct knowledge of God Himself. What is known are effects, contingencies, and relations from which His existence is inferred. Thus, Abū al-Barakāt calls this *maʿrifa bi-ghayr wa-ʿan ghayr:* knowledge »through other than Him and by other than Him.«[33] The question that emerges now is whether there is any path to knowing God not by inference, but in Himself.

3.2 The possibility of Knowing God in Himself

Abū al-Barakāt does not state that essential knowledge of God is impossible. He states, rather, that such knowledge »has not occurred for us up to now, neither through God's essence nor through what belongs to Him essentially.«[34] The statement deliberate. Essential knowledge of God is describe an not as unattainable, but as an event that has not happened yet. It does not close the question; it situates it within the limits of our present epistemic condition. He explains this limit by first clarifying what is meant by divine oneness. God is one without composition: He does not fall under a genus, is not specified by a differentia, and has no likeness or counterpart.[35] For this reason, the procedures through which essential knowledge is ordinarily achieved in other cases – definition, classification, or recognition through similarity and contrast – have no application here. These procedures presuppose internal structure, whereas the divine reality admits none.

This does not entail a denial of essential knowledge as such; what is excluded is the assumption that it must follow the same routes by which we know composite things. The difficulty, therefore, does not lie in the object. It concerns the conditions under which knowing takes place – that is, the conditions under which such knowledge might occur as an event. A particular case of this difficulty appears in discussions of seeing God.[36] If vision is taken to belong exclusively to the bodily eye, then such seeing is indeed excluded. But Abū al-Barakāt recalls that the soul is already known to perceive, in certain states, without the mediation of bodily organs. In sleep, the soul perceives without bodily instruments, »seeing« without an eye and »hearing« without an ear.[37] The point he seeks to establish here is that apprehension is not exhausted by the operations of the senses, and that the absence of a bodily organ does not, in itself, entail the impossibility of perception. On this basis, he introduces the possibility that the soul, when detached from her bodily reliance, may be capable of a mode of apprehension other than the one currently operative.[38] The issue, then, is not whether God is in principle knowable in Himself, but whether the soul's present condition allows for the occurrence of such an encounter.

but is a property of existence as such, and since God exists, He can be seen, without implying likeness or corporeality. For more details, see DANIEL GIMARET, Ruʾyat Allāh, in: Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., online edition, Leiden.

37 ABŪ AL-BARAKĀT, al-Muʿtabar, III.1, 124.

38 Here Abū al-Barakāt suggests that human beings do not possess, in their present constitution, a faculty capable of perceiving God, but that God may create for them a new perceptive faculty by which such vision becomes possible. This position closely parallels Al-Ghazālī's treatment of the problem, especially in *al-Iqtiṣād fī al-Iʿtiqād,* where he denies that God can be seen through the corporeal senses as they presently exist, while affirming the possibility that God creates, in the eschatological state, a specific faculty enabling the vision of Him without implying corporeality or spatial localization.

To give further support to the claim that the soul may, under conditions of detachment, be capable of a direct form of apprehension, Abū al-Barakāt turns to the analogy of light *(nūr)*, an analogy well known from al-Ghazālī's writings.[39] In ordinary speech, Abū al-Barakāt notes, »*nūr* is said of what is seen first and by itself, and it is also said of that by which other things are seen.«[40] We speak of the light that appears upon bodies, and we speak of the light that belongs to the sun, and of the light of the moon, and of the light in fire. The same name is applied in all these cases. These uses, however, are not equivalent. The illumination that spreads over surfaces is not the principle of light; it is what occurs when light becomes manifest upon what is dense. What deserves the name more properly is that from which illumination proceeds. For this reason, Abū al-Barakāt distinguishes between what is called light because it is visible, and what is called light because it is that from which visibility arises. He reinforces this point by appealing to the nature of fire. The light that appears as flame does not come from dense earthy matter, but from the subtle, transparent element within fire. Light becomes visible only when it falls upon something in which vision does not pass through. Where there is only transparency, light may be present without being seen. The presence of light, therefore, is not exhausted by its appearing to sight. It may be fully real while remaining un-apprehended.

It is precisely this feature that allows the analogy of light to speak to the earlier discussion of the soul. Just as light may be present without being an object of sight, so too a reality may be present to the soul without being grasped through bodily instruments. The analogy thus clarifies the possibility of a mode of apprehension in which what is known is not reached by way of an intervening sign or effect but is encountered as present in itself to the knower. The emphasis, then, falls not on mediation but on manifestation.

From here Abū al-Barakāt extends the analogy beyond the soul herself. If the soul may be called light insofar as it apprehends intelligibles and renders them present, then the cause from which the soul derives its existence and its power of apprehension must, by the same logic, be more entitled to the name light than the soul. The relation is explicitly articulated through a graduated comparison: the soul stands to her cause as the light of the moon stands to the light of the sun. The moon is luminous, yet luminous through another; its light is not self-subsisting. And just as the light of the sun is not the ultimate origin of luminosity, but proceeds from a further source, so too the chain does not terminate with any created light. Abū al-Barakāt therefore states that reflection leads step by step to that principle:

> »from which the existence of all lights proceeds – hidden and manifest, their causes and their effects – and which is the light of lights *(nūr al-anwār)*, just as it is the principle of principles *(mabda' al-mabādi')*.«[41]

Within the internal logic of the analogy, the name *nūr al-anwār* is not a metaphor borrowed from sensory appearance. It marks ontological priority. What is light by another is

39 The use of the light analogy in this context is not without precedent in the Islamic intellectual tradition. A closely related deployment is found in al-Ghazālī's Mishkāt al-Anwār, where light is analysed as that which is manifest in itself and that by which other things become manifest, and where God alone is identified as the true and absolute light, while all other lights are derivative and borrowed. Al-Ghazālī develops the analogy in a graded manner, moving from sensible light to the light of intellect, and finally to the divine light as the source of all manifestation. Although Abū al-Barakāt does not cite al-Ghazālī, the structural similarity between the two treatments – especially the move from physical light to a model of immediate, non-inferential apprehension – makes it plausible that Abū al-Barakāt was familiar with this line of reflection and found it conceptually useful for articulating his own account of how God may be known. See AL-GHAZĀLĪ, The Niche of Lights (Mishkāt al-anwār) (Islamic Translation Series), Provo 1998.

less entitled to the name than what is light through itself; and what is light through itself by derivation is less entitled than that which is the source of light as such. The First Principle is therefore called light because all manifestation depends upon Him – not because He belongs to a class of luminous entities, but because He is the ground if all appearing.

Abū al-Barakāt reinforces this ordering by returning to the conditions of perception. He observes that what is stronger in existence and more intense in reality may be inaccessible to a weak faculty, just as the bat's eye is overpowered by daylight. He therefore remarks that the First is »too remote to be seen by the eye, yet more deserving of being seen, since He is more evident in existence, prior in being, and more entitled to existence.«[42] The difficulty, then, does not arise from lack of reality or deficiency in manifestation. It arises from lack of correspondence between the object and the knower. What is most evident in itself may be most concealed until the condition of receptivity make encounter possible.

3.3 Divine Names as Disclosure

At this point, Abū al-Barakāt turns to the question of divine names. He treats naming in connection with the various manners in which God is known. Names arise, in his account, in accordance with the meanings through which their object is apprehended. Since most human knowledge of God proceeds from acts, effects, and relations, the names commonly applied to God correspond to these modes of access. He states:

> »God has names by which He is named according to the meanings through which He is known: He is called the creator of creation, the giver of provision, the bringer into existence after non-existence, the one who brings about the existence of possibles, the powerful, the overpowering, the merciful, the generous, and the like – names that correspond to the different meanings by which the knowers *(al-ʿārifūn)* define Him and know Him, and to what they know Him through, and how they know Him.«[43]

These names follow the same epistemic pattern that governs accidental knowledge. They presuppose access to God through what appears from Him, not access to His essence as such. Abū al-Barakāt formulates this limitation explicitly: »There is among these names no name that indicates Him by Himself in the way that heat indicates heat with respect to meaning.«[44] Heat functions, earlier in the chapter, as the paradigm of what is known through itself: it is directly apprehended, and its name arises from that apprehension. By contrast, the divine names just listed do not arise from a direct grasp of the divine essence. They arise from what is known of God through acts, effects, and relations

Abū al-Barakāt nevertheless introduces an important qualification. Although none of the commonly used names indicate God by Himself in the manner of directly

40 Abū al-Barakāt, al-Muʿtabar, III.1, 125.
41 Ibid., III.1, 128.
42 Ibid., III.1, 126.128.
43 Ibid., III.1, 128.
44 Ibid.

apprehended sensible, this does not exhaust the question of naming. He adds that God may be named by a name that indicates His essence for the one who has known His essence through essential knowledge. He writes:

> »Rather, we call Him by a name signifying His essence by the one who has known His essence by means of essential knowledge, and he calls Him from the aspect from which he has known Him, by way of imposition, just as heat is called heat and light is called light.«[45]

Here Abū al-Barakāt returns to the earlier model of essential knowledge. When a thing is apprehended through itself, the name arises from the very act of apprehension. The name does not follow from a property, an effect, or a relation, but from the presence of the reality itself to the knower *(al-ʿārif)*. He immediately restricts the intelligibility of such a name:

> »At that point, the meaning of that name is not understood from him except by one who has known Him as he has known Him, and who agrees with him upon the naming from the aspect from which he has known Him.«[46]

The name that arises from essential knowledge is therefore not publicly available in the way inferential names are. Its intelligibility depends upon sharing the same mode of knowing. From this point Abū al-Barakāt shifts the focus from the knower to God Himself.

If a name that signifies the divine essence is understood only by one who has known God in the same manner, then such naming does not belong to ordinary linguistic practice. It presupposes an occurrence of knowing that cannot be produced by instruction, transmission, or conceptual determination. Abū al-Barakāt grounds this restriction in a fundamental premise: God knows His own essence through Himself, and He is more knowing of Himself than any other knower.[47] Essential knowledge of God, therefore, does not arise from the human side. What occurs in the servant *(ʿābid)* (also the knower) is not the origination of such knowledge, but its reception. For this reason, Abū al-Barakāt does not describe the servant as naming God. He speaks instead of God »making Himself known to a servant« *(an yataʿarrafa ilā ʿabd)*.[48] The statement is precise. It locates the initiative entirely in God. Knowledge of God in His essence, here, is not the result of a human act. It occurs as a disclosure whose source is God Himself. Within this structure, the *ʿārif* is not the author of a designation. He does not impose a name, nor does he derive one from effects or relations. He is the site in which disclosure takes place. What distinguishes him is not obtaining a special faculty, but a condition of the soul: its being present to itself and no longer dispersed among its instruments.

It is within this condition that naming becomes possible. The name does not follow upon an already completed act of knowing. It arises in the very moment in which God becomes known to the servant. Naming, here, is not subsequent to presence; it coincides with it. This is why Abū al-Barakāt states that the meaning of such a name is not understood except by one who has known God as the first knower has known Him and who concurs with him upon the naming from that same aspect. What is shared is not a word, but participation in the same moment of disclosure.

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.

In this sense, the divine name that signifies the essence is inseparable from the temporality of essential knowledge. It does not exist as something that endures in the soul independently of knowing, nor as a concept preserved for later use. It occurs only insofar as knowing occurs. And knowing, in Abū al-Barakāt's account, takes place only in the now in which the soul is present to itself.

What is disclosed in such a moment is not something that comes into being, nor something that undergoes change. God's essence remains what it is. Yet the disclosure of that essence to a knower is an event. The stability belongs to what God is; the dynamism belongs to the relation by which He makes Himself known. For this reason, Abū al-Barakāt speaks not of the servant reaching God, but of God making Himself known to the servant *(an yataʿarrafa ilā ʿabd)*. The initiative lies with God. Essential knowledge does not arise as the result of a human act. It occurs when God discloses Himself, and when the soul is in a condition capable of receiving that disclosure. The name arises within this same event. It is not prior to the act of knowing, and it does not remain after it as a detachable possession.

The fact that being known occurs in moments requires further clarification. These moments are not fragments of a temporal sequence in God, nor are they merely psychological states in the servant. They designate the point at which divine presence becomes actual in relation without introducing alteration into the essence. If the now, as established earlier, is the locus in which endurance and manifestation coincide, then the disclosure described here must be situated within that same locus. What takes place is not succession in the divine being, but the realization of presence in a determinate now.

The meeting *(liqāʾ)* between God and the servant must be understood accordingly. It is neither spatial proximity nor a transition from absence to presence in God. Rather, it is the actualization of a relation in which the divine awareness becomes operative toward a particular servant. This actualization belongs to the order of time insofar as time is inseparable from existence itself. The essence remains what it is; yet its self-awareness and its awareness of the servant are realized in a now that marks the point of encounter. In this sense, the encounter is temporal – not because God undergoes change, but because His enduring presence becomes manifest within the structure of the now.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Abū al-Barakāt's treatment of divine temporality, essential knowledge, and naming forms a single coherent structure rather than a set of independent discussions. His account of God's relation to time establishes a mode of presence that is not reducible to succession or change. On this basis, he distinguishes between inferential knowledge that proceeds through effects and essential knowledge that occurs through presence. The possibility of such knowledge is grounded not in human conceptual capacity, but in the soul's preparedness for disclosure.

Within this framework, the divine name that signifies the essence does not function as a descriptive predicate or a conceptual representation. It arises only where God makes Himself known through Himself. Naming, in this sense, is inseparable from the event of knowing. It belongs neither to ordinary linguistic practice nor to stable doctrinal possession, but to a temporally situated act of presence in which divine self-disclosure and human receptivity coincide. Abū al-Barakāt thus articulates a model in which knowledge of God, in its strongest sense, is neither purely demonstrative nor merely symbolic, but grounded in a moment of presence structured by divine temporality itself. ◆