

The Divine Roots of Human Love*

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Ibn al-'Arabi begins his long chapter on love (*mahabba*) in the *Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* – as he begins most of the book's 560 chapters – by citing relevant Qur'anic verses and prophetic sayings (II 322.16).¹ He points out first that love is a divine attribute, and he lists several of the Qur'anic verses in which God is the subject of the verb 'to love'. Fourteen of these verses mention those whom God loves and another twenty-three mention those whom God does *not* love. In every case, the objects of God's love or lack of love are human beings. Indeed, the Qur'an associates love only with human beings among all creatures. Hence love is a key term if we are to understand what differentiates human beings from other created things. Most other divine attributes – such as life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, mercy, and wrath – have no necessary connection with the human race.

When Ibn al-'Arabi turns to prophetic sayings concerning love, he cites first the famous hadith of the Hidden Treasure: 'I was a treasure that was not known, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures and I made Myself known to them, and thus they came to know Me.' Second, he cites a prophetic saying that he mentions innumerable times in his works, more often, I am sure, than any other hadith. Again, it is a *hadith qudsī*, which is to say that God is speaking:

Those who seek nearness to Me seek nearness through nothing I love more than the performance of what I have made incumbent upon them. My servant never ceases to seek nearness to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then,

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In short, when the Shaykh says that Qur'anic verses are the divine roots of things, he means to say that the verses manifest the very principles of *wujûd*, the very sources of the existence that we find in our own experience. The Qur'an gives expression to the realities of *wujûd* in the clearest possible manner, and hence, in our search to understand the realities, we need to look first at the Qur'an. One of the most significant realities for understanding the nature of human beings, and therefore the reality of God Himself, is love.

Love has many similarities with *wujûd*. For example, like *wujûd*, it cannot be defined. At the beginning of his chapter on love, the Shaykh reminds his readers of this fact:

You should know that known things can be divided into two sorts. One sort can be defined, and the other sort cannot be defined. Those who know and speak about love agree that it is one of the things that cannot be defined. A person recognizes it when it abides within himself and when it is his own attribute. He does not know what it is, but he does not deny its existence. (II 325.13)

The Shaykh calls love 'a knowledge of tasting' (IV 7.2), which is to say that people cannot know love until they have tasted it and experienced it in themselves. But, even then, they cannot explain it to others. As the Shaykh says, 'He who defines love has not known it, and he who has not tasted it by drinking it down has not known it' (II 111.12).

Although God or *wujûd* cannot be known in Himself, He can be known inasmuch as He chooses to show Himself. Once He shows Himself, we can summarize what we know about Him by mentioning His attributes, or, as He Himself does in the Qur'an, by mentioning His 'most beautiful names'. In the same way, love cannot be known in itself, but its attributes and names can be known and described.

THE NONEXISTENCE OF THE BELOVED

Perhaps the first and most important attribute of love in Ibn al-'Arabi's view is that love's object does not exist. This flies in the face of common sense, because we like to think that

Hence the love of the lover becomes attached only to that of the individual which is nonexistent at the moment. He imagines that his love is attached to the person, but this is not so. It is this that incites him to meet and see his beloved. He does not love the beloved's person or the beloved's existence in entity, because the beloved already possesses personhood or existence, so there would be no profit in love being attached to the beloved's personhood. (II 327.2)

The Shaykh continues this passage by answering certain objections. Some people may say that they loved companionship, or kissing, or intimacy with a person. Then, when they achieved their goal, they found that their love persisted. Hence, love can exist along with its object. The Shaykh replies that, in fact, the object still does not exist, because love's object has changed. Now the object is the continuity of what was achieved, not the achievement itself. Continuity is not an existing thing. On the contrary, it is the arrival, moment by moment, of the nonexistent object of love. He writes,

When you embrace the person, and when the object of your love had been embracing, or companionship, or intimacy, you have not achieved the object of your love through this situation. For your object is now the continuity and permanence of what you have achieved. Continuity and permanence are nonexistent. They have not entered into existence and their period has no end. Hence, in the time of union, love attaches itself only to a nonexistent thing, and that is the continuity of the union. (II 327.11)²

GOD'S LOVE

All things are rooted in *wujûd*, which is God, and love is no exception. Hence, if it is universally true that the object of love is nonexistent, the reason for this must be that God's love, which is the root of all love, takes a nonexistent thing as its object. In fact, the idea that God loves what is nonexistent is a corollary to one of the most basic themes of Ibn al-'Arabi's works: God is *wujûd* and everything other than

love. It follows that love, by definition, is directed toward the nonexistent, or, to use the Shaykh's terminology, 'attaches itself' (*ta'alluq*) to nonexistence, that is, takes nonexistence as its object.

If love is directed toward the nonexistent, and if love is the source of all God's creative activity, it follows that nonexistence exercises power throughout existence. In other words, the whole universe is rooted in nonexistence and depends upon nonexistence to exist. All activity of all things in the universe stems from God's love. And all the loves and desires of the creatures follow in the pattern of God's love, which is to say that they also are directed at nonexistence. Hence, nonexistence itself is the root of all creation. The Shaykh writes,

We maintain that every effect exercised upon an existent thing belongs to the nonexistent thing. The ultimate goal is nonexistent. That is why it is correct for the seeker to seek it. No one desires what is existent. Thus the nonexistent goal exercises effects in bringing things into existence. In other words, the nonexistent thing is the cause of God's bringing into existence whatever He brings into existence. (IV 431.8)

We can summarize the importance of nonexistence in the Shaykh's ontology by saying that *wujûd* and nonexistence, or the Real and everything other than the Real, are the two pillars upon which the whole universe stands. On one side, God alone is *wujûd*. On the other side, the creatures have no *wujûd*. *Wujûd* on its own simply is. Nonexistence on its own simply is not. But love is an inherent attribute of *wujûd*, and it is the nature of love to express that which is unexpressed, to bring into manifestation that which is hidden, to create that which has not yet been created. Thus love is the inherent tendency of *wujûd* to become manifest, to assert its own reality by showing itself to everything that is not. Love is the overflow of infinite *wujûd* into every possibility of existing, and the possibilities of existing are defined by entities that do not in themselves exist, though they are known to God. Each immutable entity is a specific mode of not existing, because each represents a possible mode in which *wujûd* can be

and upon their own possibility. It occasions for them a seeing that is Light's own seeing, because light alone allows anything to be seen. Then God discloses Himself to the entity through the name Beautiful, and it falls in love with Him. (II 112.33)

The Shaykh is saying that the Hidden Treasure is both beautiful and luminous, because it is *wujûd*. The nonexistent things have nothing of their own with which to perceive the divine beauty. In order for God to be able to say to the things 'Be!', they must be able to perceive His words, and all perception, as the Shaykh tells us, depends upon light, that is, manifestation.⁴ Light makes itself and others known by its very nature. God's light, shining upon the nonexistent entities, bestows upon them the ability to see, and they see that which is found, which is God. 'God is beautiful', and beauty occasions love by its very nature. Hence the entities fall in love with God, but they can only see God with God's own light. They have no light of their own. In other words, they come into existence only through God's *wujûd*, because there is no other *wujûd*. Thus God's love for the immutable entities gives rise to their love for Him, and His *wujûd* gives rise to their existence. This explains one of the meanings of the Qur'anic verse, 'He loves them and they love Him' (5:54).

God loves the nonexistent immutable entities, and the goal of His love is to give existence to the entities. But the entities themselves never change, since they are immutable. They do not in fact come to exist. To call them 'existent entities' is simply a convention, not an expression of the actual situation.

God's love attaches to the created thing because the created thing is nonexistent. Thus the created thing is the object of God's love constantly and forever. As long as there is love, the existence of the created thing cannot be supposed along with it. Hence the created thing never comes to exist. (II 113.29)

If the created thing never gains true existence, then the existence that we perceive can belong only to God, the Manifest, who is *wujûd*. God makes Himself manifest in a form that is named the 'existent entity'. This entity is what

Treasure. They do not exist in themselves, but they do exist as objects of *wujûd*'s self-knowledge. God loves these objects when they are nonexistent, and the goal of His love is to give them existence. At the moment He gives them existence, He ceases loving them, because love is directed only at non-existence. Hence He loves the next moment of the thing's existence, which is to say that He loves the continuity of the thing's existence. This is one of several ways in which the Shaykh explains his famous doctrine of the 'renewal of creation at each instant'. God continues to renew the existence of things ad infinitum. God never ceases to love the existence of the immutable entities for all eternity, because they remain forever nonexistent. Thus, at each moment His love for the existence of the nonexistent things produces a new creation. The Shaykh writes,

No lover loves anything but himself. This is why God described Himself by saying that He loves the loci of manifestation. These loci are a nonexistence in an entity. Love attaches itself to what becomes manifest, and He is the Manifest within it. The relationship between the Manifest and the loci of manifestation is love. But love attaches itself only to nonexistence. Thus, in this case, the object to which it attaches itself is continuity, and continuity has not been made present, for it extends to infinity, so it can never be made present. (II 113.7)

By loving the nonexistent things, or by loving the manifestation of the nonmanifest, God loves the Hidden Treasure and gives it existence. For the Shaykh, this explains the meaning of the divine name Loving (*al-wadûd*), which the Qur'an attributes to God in two verses. In one of these verses, the Qur'an says that God is 'the Forgiving, the Loving, the Lord of the Throne' (85:14-15). In his chapter on the divine names, the Shaykh writes that the meaning of the name Loving is that God constantly and without cease brings the universe into existence for our sake. We are immutable entities. But through the tongue of our own situation, which is nonexistence, we constantly beg God to bestow existence upon us.

which is the universe and everything it contains. Everything He loves is nonexistent and remains nonexistent forever. From another point of view, the universe itself is nothing but the manifestation of *wujûd*. Hence God loves Himself, and through loving Himself He gives manifest existence to that which was nonmanifest.

Human beings, as images of *wujûd*, also possess the attribute of love. The object of their love is always nonexistent in relation to themselves. When we consider God and the universe as two different realities, the object of human love may be God or something in the universe. But when we understand that the universe is nothing but the self-disclosure of God, the object of human love can only be God. And since God in His Essence is forever nonmanifest, unknowable, and unattainable, the true object of love is always nonexistent in relation to human beings.

In one passage, the Shaykh makes this point while discussing the proper attributes of the disciple on the path to God. Literally, the 'disciple' is the 'desirer' (*murîd*), and he should desire God alone. Nevertheless, the Shaykh insists, the object of his desire is in fact nonexistent, both in the sense that is absent from him because he has not reached it and in the sense that it will always remain nonexistent for him because he can never reach God's Essence.

In our view, the object to which desire attaches is nonexistence. You already know that knowledge of God is desired by the servant, and you know that no created thing can gain knowledge of God as He knows Himself, even though creatures have the desire to achieve that. As long as the servant stands in this station, he is inseparable from desire's property, that is, attachment to the nonexistent thing.

Knowledge of God, as we have said, cannot exist, so the property of desire is more complete in the servant of God than in someone who perceives the object of his desire. Hence desire is true desire only when it is attached to an object that cannot be perceived. Desire itself remains qualified by existence only so long as its object is qualified by nonexistence. If the desired object were to be found or established, then the property of desire would disappear. If the property disap-

knowing, seeing, and witnessing God in His self-disclosure.

In respect of His Essence and His *wujūd*, nothing stands up to the Real. He cannot be desired or sought in His Essence. What the seeker seeks and the desirer desires is only knowledge of Him, witnessing of Him, or vision of Him. All of these are *from* Him. They are not He Himself. (II 663.9)

Since God in Himself cannot be sought, those who truly know things as they are – those whom the Shaykh calls the ‘gnostics’ or the ‘Folk of God’ – make no attempt to seek Him, since He is unattainable. Rather, they seek their own benefit, and their own benefit is ‘felicity’ (*sa’āda*), that is, the everlasting vision of God in this world and the next. As the Shaykh puts it, ‘God cannot be attained through seeking. The gnostics seek their own felicity, not God’ (IV 443.1). In other words, what they seek is the joy of participating with full awareness in the never-ending creation of the universe, the never-ceasing process whereby God loves the nonexistent things and brings them into existence.

The Folk of God know that they can never attain to their Beloved and hence that they can never know their Beloved. Their Beloved is nonexistent in relation to them and will remain forever nonexistent, and this for them is the source of the greatest joy and felicity, for it requires that they leave nonexistence and enter into existence continually and forever. All creatures love by their very nature. The difference between the Folk of God and ordinary people is that the latter think they know what they love. In fact, their true beloved remains forever nonexistent and inaccessible, and hence it can never be known. They are ignorant of their own ignorance.

Although there are many lovers – or rather, everyone in existence is a lover – no one knows the object to which his love attaches. People are veiled by the existent thing within which their beloved is found. They imagine that the existent thing is their beloved, but, in reality, it is their beloved only indirectly.

In reality, no one loves a beloved for the sake of the beloved’s self. Rather, he only loves the beloved for the sake of

is always nonexistent in relation to themselves. Ultimately, everything in the universe is poor, so everything in the universe is a seeker and a lover.

He who is independent through God is poor toward Him. But the relationship to God through the word *poverty* is more appropriate than the relationship through *independence*. This is because independence is a description of the Essence that abolishes the interrelationship between the Essence of the Real and creation, but every seeking announces an interrelationship, since no one aspires for what is already present. Hence people seek only something that is not with them in the state of seeking. This is why seeking attaches itself only to non-existence, which is the same as the nonexistent thing. The sought object may be within an existent entity, or not within an existent entity.

There is nothing in the engendered universe save a seeker, so there is nothing in the engendered universe save the poor toward what he seeks. (II 263.34)

People are poor toward God. They also love God, and nothing else. However, just as people become confused by the forms to which they are attracted, so also their poverty and need become specified and focused on specific things, rather than on God. The goal of the Sufis – those who know their own poverty for what it is – is to have no object toward which they are poor save God. But, as we have seen, the object of seeking can only be nonexistence. So here again, the Sufis love God by loving that which cannot be delimited, defined, constricted, or understood.

Poverty is an affair that is inherent in everything other than God. There is no way to escape from it . . . However, poverty's goals are diverse in terms of the specification of that toward which the poor person is poor and the meaning for which he has need.

Know that, since it is known that poverty and need are an attribute of the very essence of things, the object to which things attach themselves and toward which they are poor is the seeking of the continuation of their engendered existence

these were the names of God, that is, the names that designate *wujûd*, the Real. This special knowledge that God taught to Adam explains his superiority over all other creatures. The goal of human life is to actualize the knowledge of the names that were taught to Adam when God created him in His own image.

The fundamental focus of Ibn al-'Arabi's writings is not, as many would say, upon *wahdat al-wujûd*, the Oneness of Being. Rather, his basic concern is to explicate the nature of human perfection. Although he never mentions the term *wahdat al-wujûd*, he refers repeatedly to *al-insân al-kâmil*, Perfect Man. His most famous work, the *Fusûs al-Hikam*, begins with a discussion of Adam, the original Perfect Man, and the rest of the work deals with the various modalities of human perfection. Hence it is natural that Ibn al-'Arabi's discussion of love should lead to an explication of how Perfect Man is the object of God's love. For example, he devotes a significant portion of his relatively short subchapter on the divine name Loving to the explanation of how Perfect Man is the goal of God's love and actualizing perfection is the goal of human love.

Given that Perfect Man is Ibn al-'Arabi's most prevalent theme, the idea is extremely difficult to summarize in a few words. By explaining the nature of Perfect Man, the Shaykh clarifies the reality of God, the nature of the cosmos, and the diverse modalities of human existence, since all of these are brought to their full actualization through Perfect Man. Hence Perfect Man has divine, cosmic, and human dimensions. In the section on the divine name Loving, the Shaykh focuses on the cosmic dimensions. I will quote part of the passage shortly. Before doing so, however, let me summarize how human perfection is bound up with the infinity and inaccessibility of *wujûd* and, at the same time, with love for nonexistence.

God in Himself is no thing, which is to say that He is no existing thing, because He is *wujûd* itself, which is the source of all existing and nonexisting things. If human beings are to attain to the perfection of the divine image, they cannot be any specific thing. They must be, at one time, all things and no thing, just as God is all things and no thing.

passion, a longing, an agitated yearning, a passion, a wasting away, and an inability to sleep or to take pleasure in food all the while that you do not know who it is or how it is that you love, and your beloved does not become specified for you. . .

This is similar to the covenant made with the children of Adam that He is our Lord, so that no one can deny it afterwards. Hence you find in the original nature [*fitra*] of every human being a poverty and need toward an existent thing that can support him, and that is God, but he is not aware of Him. That is why God says, 'O people, you are the poor toward God' [35:15]. He is saying to them that the poverty and need which you find in yourself is attached to God, no one else, but you do not recognize Him. So we come to know God through Him. (II 323.35, 324.7)

The Shaykh sometimes calls the nonspecific and nondelimited love that is actualized by the Folk of God and Perfect Man 'divine love', since, like God's love for the universe, it does not distinguish among the entities.⁸

The mark of divine love is love for all engendered things in every presence, whether suprasensory, sensory, imaginal, or imaginalized.⁹ Every presence has an eye from His name Light through which it looks upon His name Beautiful, for that light clothes it in the robe of existence. (II 113.6)

On the cosmic level, Perfect Man plays the role of the intermediary between God and created things. Perfect Man is the actualized image of God, and hence he embraces everything in the divine reality. The cosmos in all its diversity also discloses the divine reality, but in a dispersed, differentiated, and specified manner. Hence Perfect Man is one through God's Oneness and many through the infinite things that he encompasses, which are the objects of God's knowledge, the immutable entities. The universe is infinitely dispersed, God is One, and Perfect Man is both one and many. Only he has a complete knowledge of God's manifestation through creation. Only he knows the Hidden Treasure in its fullness. Hence Perfect Man alone is the true beloved of God. From this point of view, Perfect Man is the reality of the whole cosmos.

the Real. That is why God brought the name Forgiving along with the name Loving [in the verse *He is the Forgiving, the Loving, Lord of the Throne, the Glorious* (85:14–15)]. After all, Forgiving means literally 'curtaining'. Thus it is said that [the famous Arab lover] Qays loved Layla, since Layla derives from the locus of disclosure. In the same way, Bishr loved Hind, Kuthayr loved 'Azza, Ibn al-Durayj loved Lubna, Tawba loved al-Akhyaliyya, and Jamil loved Buthayna. But all these women were pedestals through which the Real disclosed Himself to them.

The beloved is a pedestal even if the lover is ignorant of the names of what he loves. A man can see a woman and love her, without knowing who she is, what her name is, who her relatives are, and where she lives. Love, by its very essence, requires that he seek out her name and her home so that he may attend to her and know her in the state of her absence through the name and the relationship. Thus he will ask about her if he lacks the witnessing of her.

So also is our love for God. We love Him in His loci of self-disclosure and within the specific name, which is Layla, Lubna, or whatever, but we do not recognize that the object is identical with the Real. So here we love the name but we do not recognize that it is identical with the Real. Thus we love the name and do not recognize the entity.

In the case of the created thing, you know the entity and you love. It may be that the name is not known. However, love refuses anything but making the beloved known. Among us are those who know God in this world, and among us are those who do not know Him until they die while loving some specific thing. Then they will come to understand, when the covering is lifted, that they had loved only God, but they had been veiled by the name of the created thing. (IV 260.12)

Notes

1. References throughout are to *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, Cairo, 1911. For a French translation of the chapter on love, see *Traité de l'Amour* by M. Gloton (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986).