

Rumi's Metaphysics of the Heart*

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The heart of the believer is the Throne of the All-Merciful
Prophet Muhammad

*I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart
I asked, 'Who are You?' He replied, 'You'*
Hallaj

In Rumi's (d. 672/1273) *Mathnawi-yi ma'nawi* (*The Couplets of Inner Meaning*), countless metaphysical concepts are woven into the fabric of the text in order to elucidate important Sufi teachings. One concept to which Rumi devotes a good deal of attention is the heart (*qalb* in Arabic; *dil* in Persian). But before attempting to discuss Rumi's understanding of the heart, it should first be noted that he also speaks of the spirit and the intellect.¹ Unfortunately, I will not be able to look at their intimate relationship to the heart here. It suffices to say that they are themselves unique faculties of perception which may also be synonymous with the heart, depending on the context in which they are used.² But in so far as the heart is distinct from both intellect and spirit, it can be said that it stands at the forefront of Rumi's Sufi teachings.

Many references to the heart are to be found in both the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet. Consequently, Sufi literature has devoted a good deal of attention to the systematic exposition of the nature and function of the heart, as is seen in the works of such figures as the famous Sufi and theologian, Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 505/

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¹ The words *ruh* in Arabic and *jan* in Persian denote the 'spirit', whereas the words *'aql* in Arabic and *khirad* in Persian denote the 'intellect'. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

² William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1983), p. 40.

1111).³ The twelfth-century saint, Ahmad Sam‘ani (d. 534/1140), explains the heart’s reality along the following lines:

From the spirit the heart took subtlety and from the earth gravity. It came to be praised by both sides and was well pleasing to both. It became the locus for the vision of the unseen. The heart is neither spirit nor bodily frame. It is both spirit and bodily frame. If it is spirit, where does this embodiment come from? And if it is a bodily frame, why does it have subtlety? It is neither that nor this. But it is both that and this.⁴

As Sam‘ani pointed out, the heart is connected to the physical world in some way, yet it also stands ‘outside’ of us. But, for the Sufis, the question of *where* the heart is located in relation to the human being is not as important as the question of *what* the heart is. The late French Iranologist and philosopher of religion Henry Corbin aptly referred to the heart as one of the organs of ‘mystic physiology’.⁵ The Sufis often refer to this ‘organ of mystic physiology’ as a mirror. In order to reflect the divine, the mirror of the heart must be polished from the rust which tarnishes it. Rumi, in keeping with the Sufi tradition which preceded him, also refers to the heart as a mirror:

Do you not know why your mirror does not reflect?
Because the rust has not been removed from its face.⁶

What is required is for this mirror to be so polished that it may reflect what Rumi calls the ‘non-delimited formless form of the unseen’,⁷ a point to which I will return in due course. Rumi’s standard way of speaking about the purified heart can be seen in the following verses from the *Mathnawi*:

³ For Ghazali’s treatment of the heart, see Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart*, trans. Walter Skellie (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, forthcoming).

⁴ Cited in Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1992), p. 296. Cf. Chittick, ‘Love as the Way to Truth’, *Sacred Web* 15 (2005), p. 24.

⁵ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1969), p. 221.

⁶ Rumi, *Mathnawi-yi ma‘nawi*, ed. and trans. R. A. Nicholson as *The Mathnawi of Jalāl’uddīn Rūmī*, 8 vols. (London: Luzac 1925–1940), 1:34.

⁷ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 1:3486.

Once the mirror of your heart becomes pure and clear,
 you will see pictures from beyond the domain of water and clay,
 Not only pictures, but also the Painter, not only
 the carpet of good fortune, but also the Carpet-spreader.⁸

Elsewhere in the *Mathnawi*, Rumi says that a purified heart is higher than the heavens, because it has become cleansed of the impurities which taint it. A purified heart is no longer of this world since it has transcended the ephemeral, phenomenal order. It now has a direct relationship with the unseen:

That heart has become clean and pure from the mud [which taints it].
 It has become excellent and complete.
 It has cast the mud aside and come towards the Sea.
 Free from the prison of mud, it has become of the Sea.⁹

The purified heart may reflect the things in the phenomenal world in their true form, since the heart itself stands between the seen and the unseen. Because the heart is connected to both the spiritual and physical worlds, it portrays images from the phenomenal world's true origin, which is why images such as paintings, to use an example Rumi himself gives in the *Mathnawi*, when reflected in the mirror of the heart, are more perfect and beautiful than the actual paintings found in the phenomenal world.¹⁰ The mirror of the heart acts as a type of isthmus between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, for it can capture the materiality of the phenomenal world but also retain something of the unseen element by its very nature, hence producing

⁸ Cited in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 38.

⁹ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 2:2249–50.

¹⁰ Rumi makes this point in his rendition of the famous tale of the contest between the Chinese and Greek painters, which is to be found at *Mathnawi*, 1:3467–99. At *Mathnawi*, 4:1358–72, he makes a similar point in the story of the Sufi in the garden, which can be summarized as follows: a Sufi was in deep meditation in a garden when somebody reproached him for not paying attention to the beautiful signs of God's blessings in the garden. The Sufi then retorted that what this person was referring to as God's signs were in fact the 'traces of the traces' of God's signs. In other words, this Sufi was in a state of contemplation in which he was in direct contact with the traces of the divine self-disclosure, the locus of which was his heart. On the other hand, his heart acted as a receptacle, displaying the traces of the divine imprints upon his heart to the phenomenal world.

an imaginal¹¹ form of phenomenal images. The mirror of the heart, when purified, acts as a type of intermediary which reflects the beauty of the unseen onto phenomenal existence, and from this perspective is responsible for distributing God's blessings to the cosmos:

The heart encompasses this realm of existence
and spreads gold out of beneficence and kindness.
Upon the people of the world it bestows that peace [which comes]
from God's peace.¹²

THE HEART OF THE PERFECT MAN

It is with the above considerations in mind that the Sufis who devoted their attention to explaining the structure of the cosmos could say that it is the heart of one special individual that is solely responsible for sustaining the universe. This person's heart reflects the divine treasures to the cosmos, thus keeping it in order by distributing God's divine names. But the heart of such a person may not only reflect the beauty of the unseen to the seen world, or even be responsible for sustaining the cosmos; it can also reflect the unseen to itself. One should not, however, be mistaken into thinking that this heart is somehow accessible to just anyone. In fact, it is potentially accessible to everyone, since everyone has a heart. But very few people will

¹¹ The term 'imaginal' in the context of Sufism should by no means be understood as 'imaginary'. Terms such as 'imaginal' or 'imagination' derive from the Arabic term *khayal*, which denotes the intermediary nature of a thing's existence between the material and spiritual worlds. A good example of something imaginal but not imaginary is a dream: it conveys to us something of the reality with which we are familiar since the objects which appear to us in our dreams often correspond to the concrete forms with which we are familiar in our waking state; but our dreams are also somehow tied to the unseen or spiritual world since the objects we perceive in them are equally incorporeal and spiritualized. Because the objects in dreams are both materialized and spiritualized, their status is ambiguous: they do not belong entirely to the unseen, nor do they belong entirely to the seen. They lie somewhere in between. See Pierre Lory, *Le rêve et ses interprétations en Islam* (Paris: Albin Michel 2003), p. 302; Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1994), passim; Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, pp. 179–83 and 216–20; Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977), pp. vii–xvi and 86–90.

¹² Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 2:2272–3.

perfect their hearts. To whom does this heart belong?¹³ It is the one who has utterly died to the self. According to a well-known sacred tradition (*hadith qudsi*), God says, 'The heavens and the earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of my believing servant does contain Me'. In other words, it is the 'empty' heart which can 'contain' God, for only realization of God's utter oneness (and thus one's own nonexistence) can render one a true 'believing servant'. It is through this heart that God reveals Himself to Himself, so that He may contemplate Himself in His multiple manifestations. Thus, the heart acts as a type of receptacle in which God sees the manifest form of His Essence. This heart belongs to an individual known in Sufi metaphysics as 'the Perfect Man' (*al-insan al-kamil*); that is, one who reflects the divine names in their totality.¹⁴

The prototype of the Perfect Man is none other than the Prophet Muhammad. It is through the Prophet's grace, the Muhammadan *baraka*, that every other Perfect Man may come to exist. Along with the assistance which accompanies the Muhammadan grace, the Perfect Man's mirror of the heart also becomes polished because of his purifying his lower self from base human qualities, such as envy and pride, and through partaking in spiritual discipline, such as meditation and prayer. Once purified in its totality, the heart of the Perfect Man becomes a polished mirror which reflects the form of God, and hence the cosmos can be said to be nothing but the form of the form of God.

But if the heart of the Perfect Man can display God in His manifest aspect, it must display that aspect of His manifestness which is also formless. A heart which cannot reflect both God's form and his formless form is not a purified heart. Hence, for Rumi, the heart of the Perfect Man is boundless or non-delimited, and is capable of reflecting God's limitless form. From this perspective, there can be no distinction between the heart and God:

Here the intellect becomes silent, otherwise it will lead you astray,
because the heart is with Him, or, it *is* He.¹⁵

¹³ See Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 3:2270 for a similar question posed by the author.

¹⁴ The word *insan* in Arabic is not gendered. Therefore, the Perfect Man can either be a man or a woman. See Michel Chodkiewicz, 'Female Sainthood in Islam', *Sufi*, 21 (1994) pp. 12–19.

¹⁵ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 1:3489.

This, however, is not an essential identification. Rather, the heart of the Perfect Man can be said to 'be' God qua His self-disclosure, or the outward aspect of His Essence.¹⁶ To employ the dichotomy articulated by Rumi's older contemporary, the famous Sufi Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), the heart may reflect the divine name *Allah* (God), but not the name *al-Ahad* (the One). The latter denotes the divine Essence in Its absolute, undifferentiated aspect, whereas the former denotes the divine Essence in terms of Its manifestation of the divine names, that is, in terms of its multiplicity, or, as Ibn 'Arabi would also say, in terms of the cosmos being 'He' (*huwa*).¹⁷ The divine name 'One', on the other hand, denotes the Essence in terms of the cosmos being 'not He' (*la huwa*).¹⁸

With respect to the heart being God, the only way that it can reflect God's formless form is if it is Him, since if the heart is other than He, it would also be a form, which in turn would not be able to reflect God in His formlessness. A heart which is other than He, that is, an

¹⁶ Corbin notes that God reveals himself to the heart of the mystic in his manifest aspect, and . . . 'not as He inwardly knows Himself'. See Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 221.

¹⁷ I will occasionally explain Rumi's treatment of the heart with reference to the formulations of theoretical Sufism, particularly as found in the work of Ibn 'Arabi. It would indeed be quite difficult to explain Rumi's theosophical teachings without recourse to the expositions of theoretical Sufism (of which Ibn 'Arabi is the foremost medieval representative). It is for this reason that generations of commentators on Rumi's *Mathnawi* have also taken recourse to the teachings of Ibn 'Arabi in order to explain the metaphysical implications of Rumi's poetry. In so far as both Rumi and Ibn 'Arabi were writing from the standpoint of the Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*), their Sufi doctrines do indeed complement one another. The differences in the way they articulated their experience of the Oneness of Being has, more than anything else, to do with their own temperaments, spiritual dispositions, intellectual make-up, language, and medium of communication. However, Chittick rightly notes that reading Rumi through the lens of Ibn 'Arabi 'is not completely fair to his [Rumi's] perspective . . .' But, he says, 'it is certainly preferable to methodologies not rooted in the tradition.' See Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi* (Bloomington: World Wisdom 2005), p. xiii. On the question of Rumi's being 'influenced' by Ibn 'Arabi, see Chittick, 'Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi', *Sacred Web* 13 (2004), pp. 33–45; Chittick, 'Rumi and *Wahdat al-wujud*', in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, ed. Amin Banani et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994); Omid Safi, 'Did the Two Oceans Meet? Connections and Disconnections Between Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi', *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 26 (1999), pp. 57–88.

¹⁸ On Ibn 'Arabi's 'He/not He' distinction, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1989), pp. 90–96 and 113–15.

unpolished heart, can reflect God only imaginarily, not as He is in Himself. But a polished heart, when all traces of the dross of duality disappear, reflects God as He is to Himself, since He looks at Himself through the polished mirror and only sees Himself.¹⁹ It is worth noting here that when looking into a mirror, the observer is unconscious of the surface of the mirror itself, and can only behold his own image, which is not actually 'real'. In a sense, the image reflected in the mirror is real because it accurately reflects the qualities of the object placed before the mirror. But the object is not 'real' because it is not actually 'there'. The reflected image in the mirror is the form or image of the object placed before the mirror. It is a form in so far as it accurately reflects the object placed before the mirror, but it is a formless form, and consequently unreal, insofar as it merely reproduces the image of the object.

It is with this same idea in mind that we are able to understand how God can look upon the purified mirror of the heart and only see Himself. The mirror of the heart therefore can reflect God's formless form to Himself. The phenomenal universe, on the other hand, may not contain God's formless form precisely because the things in phenomenal existence are themselves possessed of forms. The heart of the Perfect Man, however, does not have a form like the things in phenomenal existence, which is why it can reflect that which is formless, which is the image of God Himself. Of course, when we speak of God's image, a form is immediately implied. But for the Sufis, God's image, like the image of a reflected object in a mirror, is to be understood as a form without a form, or that which can be contained by the heart of the Perfect Man, which itself is formless. Hence Rumi says:

In the mirror of the heart, that Moses-like saint contains²⁰
 the non-delimited formless form of the unseen,
 even though that form is contained
 in neither the Throne or the Footstool,
 nor in the heavens or on earth.²¹

¹⁹ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 221.

²⁰ The words 'Moses' and 'heart' allude to the Qur'an 7:108, 27:12, and 28:32.

²¹ This line literally reads, 'nor in the heavens or on the fish.' The 'fish' referred to here is the creature which, according to medieval lore, upholds the cow which itself upholds the earth. See Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the*

This is because those are delimited and confined.
But know that the mirror of the heart is non-delimited.²²

Both the Perfect Man and his heart are, in a sense, uncreated, which is why Rumi refers to the heart of the Perfect Man as God. But from the perspective of the divine Essence's hiddenness, the heart of the Perfect Man is created. In a famous sacred tradition, God says, 'I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known. So I created creatures that they may know Me.'²³ It is precisely through this heart that God can know Himself, since in the heart of the Perfect Man He contemplates Himself objectively. In other words, God contemplates Himself in His manifest form in the heart of the Perfect Man by looking upon His names in their locus of manifestation. This is why it is a fitting metaphor to describe the Perfect Man's heart as a polished mirror, for it is that which at once reflects the divine treasures to the cosmos, but which also reflects the divine beauty to God Himself.

THE SEEKER AND THE SOUGHT

If the heart of the Perfect Man (1) reflects the unseen onto the phenomenal order, (2) is what sustains the cosmos, and (3) is the mirror in which God may contemplate Himself, Rumi also has a great deal to say about the role of the purified heart in one's envisioning the divine. After all, the heart is, in its most fundamental aspect, the seat of an individual's mystic consciousness. Thus, it has a direct role to play in one's vision and contemplation of the divine. As we shall see, Rumi cannot resist but to point out that, in this case too, it is really God who sees and contemplates Himself.

For the Sufis, seeing God is the greatest of felicities, both in this life and in the next. This concept has many well-known scriptural antecedents in the Qur'an and in the sayings of the Prophet. The Prophet is reported to have defined spiritual excellence (*ihsan*) as worshipping

Works of Jalaluddin Rumi (Albany: State University of New York Press 1993), p. 71. For the cosmological significance of the symbol of the fish in various traditional civilizations, see René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, ed. Michel Vâlsan and Martin Lings, trans. Alvin Moore Jr (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia 1995), pp. 105–9.

²² Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 1:3486–8.

²³ For Rumi's use of this tradition in his works, see Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, p. 225 and Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 48–49, 56, 71, 99, 137, and 149.

God as though we see Him, with the caveat that even if we do not see Him, He nonetheless sees us. Throughout his corpus, Rumi emphasizes the fact that the greatest vision of God can take place in prayer. As we have seen above, Rumi, like the other Sufis before him, says that the heart must be polished, for a rusted heart, like a rusted mirror, will not accurately reflect the object which stands before it. The pure heart in a state of contemplation in prayer is thus more receptive to God's self-disclosure than an impure heart partaking in the same activity. As for the heart which has some rust on it, it is also capable of envisioning, although the representations are delimited forms, whereas the heart of the Perfect Man sees only a non-delimited form since it is non-delimited itself, as has been explained above.

Rumi tells us that one of the reasons why the Perfect Man can envision God is because he is able to see the end in the beginning.²⁴ After all, those who can see what is to come can anticipate it. Rumi relates this important point to the postures of the daily prayers as a prefiguration of what will take place on the day of resurrection, where people will be brought before God to account for how they spent their time on earth.²⁵ By imagining oneself as facing God now, by seeing the inner significance behind the physical gestures of the daily prayers – this being possible only by means of a purified heart – the true goal of prayer will be achieved. People will then be able to envision God from the very beginning of their prayers and will therefore be able to attach their hearts to their object of worship, that is, the formless form of God.

Just as one must first die in order to be resurrected, so too must one die to the self in order to be resurrected before God. In the ritual prayer, people stand before God as they will on the Last Day, and so long as they have died to themselves, they will achieve the goal of the prayer, which is a direct encounter with the divine. But this encounter with the divine is nothing other than the divine's encounter with Himself.

Only if the self is negated can vision of God come about, for then the Sufi becomes an empty vessel through which God may disclose Himself to Himself. When the servant beseeches God from the depths of his soul, what he does not realize is that it is not he who is calling out to God. Rather, it is God who is calling out to Himself. In other

²⁴ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 3:2196–2201. ²⁵ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 3:2147–75.

words, God supplicates to Himself through the servant's heart. Rumi reminds us that our supplications are only lent to us by God.²⁶ In every prayer, God is at once the seeker and the sought:

That supplication is self-less. The 'self' is another.

The supplication is not from him [i.e., the character in the tale];
It is the Judge's speech.

The Real is performing the supplication;
The servant has passed away from self.

Both supplication and answer are from God.²⁷

This statement made by Rumi is a general remark which applies to all prayers and to all types of individuals. Regardless of who is suppling God, in the very act of prayer, be it a saint or a sinner, it is God who turns to Himself in the act of prayer. It is God who prays to Himself in every prayer, since every servant who prays to Him becomes negated. But it is to the degree that the servant becomes absent to himself, to the degree that his heart becomes purified from the rust of otherness, that God will be able to see Himself. And it is to the degree that God sees Himself and thus prays to Himself that the servant will have vision of Him and pray to Him in His sacred centre, which is the heart.

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²⁶ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 3:2125.

²⁷ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, 3:2219–21. Similar passages in the *Mathnawi* are to be found in Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun*, pp. 352, 354, and 363–5. On p. 353, Schimmel briefly documents the interesting way in which Rumi's verses about God's self-veneration were received by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orientalists. For Rumi's exposition of how it is that our prayers actually 'belong' to God, see Rumi, *Signs of the Unseen*, trans. Wheeler Thackston (Boston: Shambhala 1993), pp. 71–2.

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