

OXFORD PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

Love

A HISTORY



Edited by Ryan Patrick Hanley



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CHAPTER 4

Love in Islamic Philosophy

William C. Chittick



By the third century of Islam—the ninth Christian century—Muslims were producing literature in many fields of learning. Scholars who occupied themselves with jurisprudence (*fiqh*) kept themselves busy codifying the Shariah, the body of law set down by the Qur'an and the Prophet; they had no reason to talk of love other than to formulate rules for its physical enactment. Early experts in Kalam (scholastic theology) investigated the right way to understand God as revealed in the Qur'an; they seemed to have considered love of little relevance to their abstruse discussions of divine attributes.¹ Many sorts of scholars composed poetry in which love played a prominent role, and some wrote anthologies of poetry with anecdotes about lovers, leading historians

¹ From about the sixth/twelfth century, some scholars of Kalam began to discuss it in detail. See Joseph Normant Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979).

to speak of a genre of “profane love” in Arabic literature.² Teachers of Sufism, a word I use to designate the living spirituality of the tradition, typically paid more attention to love than scholars in any other field, for they understood it both as God’s motive for creating the universe and as the means whereby human beings can actualize their true humanity.

As for experts in philosophy per se—Arabic *falsafa*—their earliest independent treatise on love was written by the anonymous ninth- to tenth-century philosophical fraternity, the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’). Avicenna (d. 1037), the most famous of the philosophers, wrote an influential treatise on the topic. Suhrawardī (d. 1191), the founder of the Illuminationist school of philosophy, paid special attention to love in his Persian visionary treatises. Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), typically classified as a Sufi in the secondary literature, integrated Avicenna’s metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology into the Qur’anic worldview and wrote extensively about the interplay of divine and human love. Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) revisited earlier theories of love and brought them together in his “transcendent wisdom” (*al-hikmat al-muta’aliya*), a school of philosophy that has flourished into modern times.³

Numerous words were used to designate love, especially by poets. Scholarly analyses focused on *ḥubb*, an important Qur’anic term, and *‘ishq*, which is not used in the revealed book. Early literary and Sufi writings took *ḥubb* as the generic word and held that *‘ishq* designates intense or erotic love. Philosophers generally preferred *‘ishq* as the



² See Lois Anita Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

³ A number of scholars made important contributions to love theory combining Sufi and philosophical perspectives, such as al-Daylamī (d. ca. 1000) and al-Dabbāgh (d. 1296); see Abu’l-Ḥasan al-Daylamī, *Kitāb ‘aṣf al-alif al-ma’lūf ‘alā’l-lām al-ma’rūf*, trans. Joseph Norment Bell and Hasan Mahmood; Abdul Latif Al Shafie, *A Treatise on Mystical Love* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of Al-Ghazālī and Al-Dabbāgh* (London: Routledge, 2003).

generic word, but from about the sixth/twelfth century onward, the two terms were often used interchangeably.

Discussions of love invariably connected it with beauty, *jamāl* and *ḥusn*. The most significant scriptural use of *jamāl* comes in a saying of Muhammad: “God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.” Philosophers and Sufis argued that all love is directed at beauty. According to Avicenna, “Every perceived beauty, agreeableness, and good is the object of love and affection.”⁴ As Ibn ‘Arabī put it, “The cause of love is beauty, for beauty is loved by its very essence.”⁵

The Qur’an uses *ḥusn* and its derivatives in almost two hundred verses. Four of these say that God possesses the names that are “the most beautiful” (*ḥusnā*). Echoing the Hebrew Bible, the Prophet said, “God created Adam in His own form (*ṣūra*).” The Qur’an calls God the “Form-Giver” (*al-muṣawwir*, 59:24) and tells us that God “formed you and made your forms beautiful” (40:64). All beauty, then, is divine or divinely rooted, so “Anything beautiful that comes to you is from God, and anything ugly that comes to you is from yourself” (4:79). When speaking of the afterlife the Qur’an turns the adjective “the most beautiful,” which it applies to the divine names, into a substantive: “Those who do what is beautiful will have the most beautiful and an increase” (10:26). Commentators suggest that this “increase” will be a vision of God Himself, beyond any delineation by names and attributes.

Another word that needs to be highlighted in discussion of love is *raḥma*, which is usually translated as mercy or compassion. Derived from the concrete noun *raḥim*, “womb,” it suggests the loving qualities of a mother.⁶ Almost every chapter of the Qur’an begins with a



4 Ibn Sinā, *al-Mabda’ wa’l-ma’ād*, ed. ‘Abdullāh Nūrānī (Tehran: McGill Institute of Islamic Studies, 1984), 17.

5 Ibn al-‘Arabī, Muḥyi al-Dīn, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo: 1911) vol. 2, p. 326, line 24.

6 Among Ibn ‘Arabī’s followers, this etymology gave rise to discussions of the cosmos as “the womb of the All-Merciful.” See Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), ch. 7.

formula using two derivatives from the root: “In the name of God, the All-Merciful (*rahmān*), the Ever-Merciful (*rahīm*).” Sufis generally understood mercy as God’s unqualified love for His creation. When God says in the Qur’an, “My mercy embraces everything” (7:156), scholars like Ibn ‘Arabī understood this to mean that mercy is the Qur’anic equivalent of the philosophical term *wujūd*, existence or being, which alone comprehends all of reality. Mercy was considered distinct from love because it is unidirectional, which is to say that God has mercy on creation, but creatures cannot have mercy on God. Love is bidirectional, for both God and man are lover and beloved of each other.

Early philosophers generally avoided the word *rahma*. Avicenna explains that the word implies affectivity (*infi‘āl*), but this “is not correct for God, for He acts [*fi’l*] upon all things with firm wisdom [*ḥikma*], and affectivity has no entrance into wisdom.”⁷ He and other philosophers did not ignore God’s concern for creation, but they preferred the non-Qur’anic word *‘ināya*, solicitude or providence. As Avicenna writes, “Everything that comes into existence enters under the First Solicitude. . . . Sufficient solicitude toward the things is that they have existence from [the Necessary Existence].”⁸ Ibn ‘Arabī makes the same point when he says, “The abode of mercy is the abode of existence.”⁹

ORIGIN AND RETURN

Kalam experts classified the articles of faith under three headings: the assertion of divine unity (*tawḥīd*), prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and eschatology (*ma‘ād*). The literal meaning of this last word is “return” or

7 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta‘līqāt*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badaw (Cairo: al-Hay‘at al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li’l-Kitāb, 1973), 117–118.

8 Ibn Sīnā, *Sharḥ kitāb Uḥūlūjīyya*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Aristū ‘ind al-‘Arab* (Kuwait: Wikālat al-Maṭbū‘āt, 1978), 73.

9 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* 4:4-32.

“place of return.” In discussing it, theologians analyzed the extensive Qur’anic descriptions of the Resurrection and its aftermath with a view toward human accountability. Philosophers were no less interested in the afterlife, but they came at it from a different angle. While acknowledging that God provides a prescriptive command (*amr taklīfī*) addressed at human free will, they preferred to focus on the existentiating command (*amr takwīnī*), mentioned in the verse “His only command to a thing, when He desires it, is to say to it ‘Be!’, and it comes to be” (36:82). This Qur’anic *fiat lux* is supplemented by numerous verses that speak about stages of creation and orders of being and becoming. Several of these mention that all things “return” to God just as they “originated” from God. Philosophers used the same two words when discussing the coming and going of all possible things. Both Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā wrote books called “Origin and Return” (*al-mabda’ wa’l-ma’ād*, Latin *exitus et reditus*).



In the introduction to his book by this title, Avicenna says that his goal is to explain the fruit reaped by the Peripatetics from two great sciences: metaphysics (*mā ba’d al-ṭabī’ā*) and physics (*ṭabī’iyyāt*, “the natural things”). The fruit of the first is knowledge of the Divinity and the manner in which all existent things are tied back to God. The fruit of the second is knowledge of the manner in which souls return to their origin.¹⁰ He summarizes the overall picture like this:

The beginning order in the arrangement of the origins goes from the First Origin down to the elements, and the returning order in their arrangement goes from the elements up to man. At man the return is complete, for he has the real return and gains similarity with the intellectual origins. So it is as if these [origins] circle back upon themselves, for he was an intellect [*‘aql*], then a soul [*naḥs*], then a

¹⁰ Ibn Sinā, *Mabda’* 1.

bodily thing, then a soul, then an intellect that returns to the level of the origins.¹¹

As a general rule, Kalam experts concerned themselves primarily with the prescriptive command, which is to say that they tried to understand and interpret the instructions for right activity found in Scripture. Philosophers in contrast devoted most of their attention to the existentiating command, so they looked for normative guidelines in the nature of things. The differing standpoints of the two approaches to knowledge are reflected in the respective stress they placed on the two most commonly cited verses on love in the Qur'an. Theologians emphasized the first verse, which makes divine love conditional on praxis: "Say [O Muhammad!]: 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you'" (3:31), so God's love can only be actualized by following revealed guidance. Philosophers were more likely to focus on the second verse: "He loves them, and they love Him" (5:54), which was understood to mean that God loves human beings eternally, and man loves God innately.

In sum, philosophers discussed love as an ontological reality, the divine force that brings possible things into existence with no external motivation. As Avicenna put it, "Since He is lover of His essence, and since the things emerge from an essence that has this attribute—that is, beloved—what emerges from Him must be the object of solicitude, for love is His essence and He desires the good for what emerges."¹² This same force then permeates creation and, as a human attribute, motivates people to return to their Origin. Discussion of these two



¹¹ Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda'* 91. Mullā Ṣadrā provides an expanded depiction of the circle of existence in his book by the same title: *al-Mabda' wa'l-mā'ād*, ed. Muḥammad Dhābiḥī and Ja'far Shāh-Nazārī (Tehran: Bunyād-i Ḥikmat-i Islāmī-yi Ṣadrā, 1381/2002), 336–338.

¹² Ibn Sīnā, *Ta'liqāt* 157.

interwoven loves—God’s creative love and man’s consummating love—are omnipresent in the literature, not least in the poetry of the various Islamic languages.

EARLY PHILOSOPHY

In their treatise on love, the Brethren of Purity begin by reviewing various definitions of love provided by Greek and Islamic sources, suggesting that the most adequate definition is “intense yearning for unification” (*shiddat al-shawq ila’l-ittiḥād*). They explain that this yearning increases at each ascending level of soul—vegetal, animal, and human. The vast differences in the objects of human love have to do with the sort of soul that dominates in the makeup of each individual. If the vegetal soul dominates, people will love gratification of the senses; if the animal soul, then power and control; if the human soul, rationality. The Brethren then turn to describing the various sorts of love, “whose number cannot be counted by anyone but God.” These include the love of animals for pairing, the love of parents for children, the love of leaders for leadership, the love of artisans for artifacts, the love of traders for trade, the love of scholars for knowledge, and the love of lovers for thoughts, cares, sorrows, and joys. “If people did not love,” they conclude, “all their virtues would stay hidden, and none of their vices would be recognized.”

As for the reason that God placed love in human souls, this was to provide a means of refining the soul and focusing all of its attention on that which is good and beautiful in essence, not just in appearance.

The final goal of love’s existence is to awaken souls from the sleep of heedlessness and the slumber of ignorance. It disciplines them, making them ascend and advance away from sensory, corporeal things toward soulish, intelligible things, and away from the bodily level toward spiritual beauties. It guides them to recognize their own substance, the eminence of their own element, the



beautiful qualities of their world, and the wholesomeness of their Return.¹³

In the last chapter of their treatise the Brethren explain that human souls reach perfection by loving beauty and yearning for union with it. The common people are attracted to outward beauty, but sages are attracted to the beauty of the wise Artisan who created all beautiful things. They strive to attain similarity with the Universal Soul in their activities, character traits, and knowledge, ascending at last to the true Beloved. Finally the Brethren remind their readers that all objects of love come from the same single origin:

All these beautiful qualities, virtues, and good things come from God's effusion and the shining of His light upon the Universal Intellect; from the Universal Intellect they fall on the Universal Soul, and from the Universal Soul on hyle. These are the forms seen by the particular souls in the world of bodies on the outsides of the individuals and bodily things. . . . Thus it is clear from what we mentioned that God is the first object of love, that existent things yearn for Him and aim for Him, "and to Him the affair is returned, all of it" [Qur'an 11:123], for in Him they have existence, abidance, subsistence, continuity, and perfection. This is because He is the Sheer Existent [*al-mawjūd al-mahd*], and He has everlasting subsistence and continuity and never-ending completion and perfection.¹⁴

Avicenna's *Treatise on Love*, like his *Origin and Return*, summarizes his metaphysics and psychology but in terms of love. In brief, the love of the Necessary Existence brings forth all things and steers them from potentiality to actuality, deficiency to perfection, and dispersion to

¹³ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), 3:282.

¹⁴ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il* 3:286.

unity. Avicenna sets down one of his theses in the first sentence of the introduction: “Each of the governing ipseities inclines by nature toward its own perfection.” By ipseity (*huwiyya*) he means the individual being, while governing (*tadbīr*) refers to the relationship between a being and what it controls, whether the being be God in relation to the universe or, as here, spirits and souls in relation to bodies. Avicenna is articulating a theme that runs throughout Islamic philosophy and Sufism: the divine mercy and solicitude bestow on each thing an inclination, desire, and love for its own perfection. All beings strive by nature to become what they have the potential (*quwwa*) to be. At each ascending level of their return to their Origin, they achieve a perfection vaster and more inclusive. On the highest level of the hierarchy of souls—the human state—there is no essential limit to what can be reached, for the rational soul has the potential to become a fully actualized intellect, unified with the Universal Intellect or, in Sufi texts, in union with the First Lover, who is also the Supreme Beloved.



Ibn ‘Arabī describes this ultimate state of human perfection as “the station of no station” (*maqām lā maqām*), for it is the actuality of all actualities, the total realization of every perfection prefigured by the creation of man in the divine form.¹⁵ The philosophers often referred to it as *ta‘alluh* (deiformity) or *al-tashabbuh bi’l-ilāh* (similarity to God). Theologians frequently called it *al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh* (becoming characterized by the character traits of God). In his books on metaphysics, Avicenna provides a capsule description. Though he does not mention love, he refers both to its object and to its goal—beauty and unification:

The perfection specific to the rational soul is for it to become an intellectual world within which is represented the form of the all, the arrangement intelligible in the all, and the good that is effused upon

¹⁵ See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), ch. 20.

the all, beginning from the Origin . . . until it fully achieves in itself the guise of all of existence. It turns into an intelligible world, parallel with all the existent world, and witnesses absolute comeliness, absolute good, and real, absolute beauty while being unified with it, imprinted with its likeness and guise, strung upon its thread, and coming to be of its substance.¹⁶

It should be kept in mind that Avicenna and other philosophers treated love as a relatively minor topic. When they did talk about human love, they understood it in terms of the soul's deformity, which can only be actualized if the soul becomes attuned to the normative hierarchy of the cosmos, in which the intellect (*'aql*) is a transcendent power located at the coincidence of the Origin and the Return. This originating and culminating intelligence appears in the outside world as prophetic revelation and in the inside world as the rational soul. In elaborating upon his just-quoted depiction of the soul's intellectual goal, Avicenna reminds us that love will not be actualized unless the soul becomes firmly grounded in moral and spiritual qualities, what he calls "the habitude of the mean" (*malakat al-tawassuṭ*). Not least among these qualities is dominance over the animal soul, which is attracted by nature to visible appearances. As Avicenna puts it, "What is meant by 'the habitude of the mean' is for the rational soul to transcend states of yielding [to the world of the senses] and to keep itself in its own innate disposition while gaining ascendancy and transcendence."¹⁷

The several chapters of Avicenna's *Treatise on Love* recapitulate the ascending stages of the soul as described in his major works. He explains the manner in which love appears successively, first in Prime Matter and inanimate things, then in plants, animals, young men, and

¹⁶ Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ilāhiyyāt min al-shifā'* / *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, ed. Michael E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 350; Ibn Sīnā, *al-Najāt*, ed. Mājid Fakhrī (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1982), 328.

¹⁷ Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt* 354; Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt* 332.



finally “divine souls,” by which he means those who have actualized the fullness of the intellect. In each case, all things are seeking the good and the beautiful, and their seeking is called “love.” In something like a definition, he writes, “In reality love is to deem the beautiful and the agreeable exceedingly beautiful. This love is the origin of inclination toward the beautiful when it is absent—if it be something that may be apart—and of unification with it when it is found. Every existent thing deems beautiful what it finds agreeable and inclines toward it when it does not have it.”¹⁸

In *al-Ishārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt* (“Allusions and Admonitions”), Avicenna offers a more precise analysis by distinguishing between love and yearning, perhaps with a view toward the Brethren of Purity’s definition of love as “intense yearning for unification.” He wants to explain how the Necessary Existence can be qualified by love even though It already possesses all objects of love, for all possible things are present within It. He says, “Real love is delight [*ibtihāj*] in being in-formed by the presence of some essence.” The word “being in-formed” (*taṣawwur*) is usually translated as “conceptualizing,” but this translation obscures the fact that the word is derived from form (*ṣūra*) and means to perceive or actualize a form within oneself. The “form” of a thing is its intelligible reality, disengaged (*mujarrad*) from the matter (*mādda*) that allows for its appearance. In philosophical terms the Necessary Existence is “the Bestower of Forms” (*wāhib al-ṣuwar*), though Sufi teachers preferred the Qur’anic divine name, “the Form-giver.” Avicenna is saying that when we assert that the Necessary Existence loves, we are acknowledging that It perceives the intelligible forms of all possible things within Itself and delights in their presence.

By describing love as “delight in being in-formed,” Avicenna is able to show that love can be found at every level of “perception” (*idrāk*),

¹⁸ *Risāla fi’l-‘ishq*, ed. Ḥusayn al-Ṣiddīq and Rāwiyya Jāmūs (Damascus, Dār al-Fikr, 2005), 52–53.

a word that applies to God's awareness of things as well as to the activities of four basic levels of cognition: sensation, imagination, sense-intuition (or estimation), and intellection. Having explained that this delight appears in everything that perceives—every governing ipseity—he goes on to differentiate love from yearning. The latter, he says, is “the movement toward completing this delight once the form has assumed an image in some way,” that is, in some mode of perception, “but has not assumed an image in some other way.” He gives the example of imagining the form of someone while yearning to perceive that person with the senses. “Thus,” he says, “every yearner has attained something and lacks something.”

Avicenna continues this passage by employing the distinction between love and yearning to differentiate between divine and created love in the various levels of being. At the highest level, God loves because He delights in the presence of the forms, but He never yearns, for He lacks nothing. On the second level, the highest angels—who are intellects disengaged from any sort of matter—also lack nothing, for they contemplate God while loving Him. At lower levels of existence, everything that loves also yearns, because everything perceives beautiful forms while lacking them in some way, so they yearn to complete their perception. Avicenna also points out that the distinction between love and yearning helps differentiate between souls that are present in this life and those that have gone on to paradise. “When human souls attain the highest bliss in their life in this world, their greatest state is for them to be lovers who yearn. They will not be delivered from their connection to yearning except in the hereafter.”¹⁹



¹⁹ Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbihāt*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā. (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1947), 4:41–45; trans. Shams Inati, *Ibn Sīnā and Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions: Part Four* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 78–79.

GOD'S LOVE FOR HIMSELF

Given that love implies a duality of lover and beloved, and given that Islamic thought is built on asserting unity, philosophers and Sufis often set out to explain how the One God can be an eternal lover of created things without duality. Their basic answer is that by loving Himself, God loves everything that arises from Himself, which is all that exists. This answer is implicit in the Hadith “God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.” Since He is beautiful, He loves Himself. Since “He created all things beautifully” (Qur’an 32:7), He loves creation. As Avicenna explains, “All these existent things emerge from His essence and are required by His essence, so they do not contradict Him. He loves His essence, so all these things are desired for the sake of His essence.”²⁰ Or again, “He loves His essence, and His essence is the origin of the entire order of the good. So the order of the good is beloved to Him by the secondary aim.”²¹



That God loves His own essence was taken for granted by the philosophers. Al-Fārābī (d. 950), the greatest philosopher before Avicenna, explains why this should be so in *Mabādi’ ārā’ahl al-madinat al-fāḍila* (*Origins of the Views of the Folk of the Virtuous City*). In the passage he uses both words for love, *ḥubb* and *‘ishq*, translated here as love and affection:

In the First Cause, the lover is the same as the beloved, the admiring the same as the admired, and the one with affection the same as the object of affection. This is the opposite of what we find in ourselves, for in us the beloved is virtue and beauty, but the lover is not beauty and virtue. . . . So the First Cause is the first beloved and the first

²⁰ Ibn Sīnā, *Ta’līqāt* 16.

²¹ Ibn Sīnā, *Ta’līqāt* 72.

object of affection, whether or not anyone else loves It and whether or not anyone else has affection for It.²²

In the introductory chapter of *Treatise on Love*, Avicenna explains that God in His unity is love, lover, and beloved.

The Good loves the Good because of Its access to attaining and perceiving It. The First Good perceives Its essence in actuality endlessly throughout the ages, so It loves Itself with the most perfect and fullest love. Given that the divine attributes in the Good's essence have no distinction by essence among themselves, it follows that love is the same as the Essence and the Existence—I mean the Sheer Good.²³

In his *Metaphysics*, Avicenna explains in more detail why the Necessary Existence loves Itself:



The Necessary Existence has sheer beauty and splendor, and It is the origin of the beauty and splendor of all things. . . . Every perceived beauty, agreeableness, and good is the object of affection and love. The origin of all of this is perceiving it—whether by sensation, imagination, sense-intuition, supposition, or intellect. The more intensely perception penetrates and the more intensely it realizes, the more perfect and more eminent will be the essence of the perceived thing, so the perceiving faculty's love for it and joy in it will be more. Hence the Necessary Existence has the utmost perfection, beauty, and splendor. It intellects Its essence in the utmost limit of splendor and beauty with a complete intellection, an intellection in which the intellecter and the intellected are one in reality. So by essence

²² Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Mabādi' āra' abl al-madīnat al-fāḍila/On the Perfect State*, ed. Richard Walzer (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1998), 86–88.

²³ Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla* 54.

Its essence is the greatest lover and beloved and the greatest enjoyer and thing enjoyed.²⁴

The famous theologian al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) was critical of many conclusions of the Peripatetic philosophers, but he had great respect for rational thought and the goal of the philosophical quest. He devoted one of the forty volumes of his magnum opus, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (“Giving Life to the Sciences of the Religion”), to love and yearning. Among the many issues he mentions is that God’s love for creation derives from His love for Himself. He largely agrees with Avicenna, but he brings the terminology more into line with the current theological discourse. To help make his point, he cites a saying of a famous Sufi teacher, Abū Sa’īd ibn Abī’l-Khayr (d. 1049), whom Avicenna is reported to have met:



All perfection, beauty, splendor, and majesty that are possible on the part of the Divinity are present, attained, and possessed necessarily without end and without beginning; renewal and disappearance are inconceivable. Hence He does not gaze on other than Himself inasmuch as it is “other.” Rather, He gazes only on His own essence and acts, and there is nothing in existence other than His own essence and acts. This is why, when God’s words “He loves them and they love Him” [Qur’an 5:54] were recited before Shaykh Abū Sa’īd, he said, “He loves them truly, for He loves only Himself.” He meant to say that He is the all, and there is nothing other than He in existence. When someone loves only himself, his own acts, and his own compositions, his love does not transgress his essence and the concomitants of his essence inasmuch as they are connected to his essence, so he loves only himself.²⁵

²⁴ Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt* 297; Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt* 281–282.

²⁵ Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 1993) 4:328; see *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment*, trans. Eric Ormsby (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2011), 101–102.

In *Origin and Return*, Mullā Ṣadrā quotes this passage from al-Ghazālī approvingly after pointing out that God does not love all things equally, for He created the universe in a wise arrangement on the two arcs of origin and return and distributes His love according to the capacity of the possible things to receive it. This means that those whom He loves most are those who are nearest to Him:

Once it has been established that God loves His essence and that this love is identical with the fact that He knows that His essence comprehends the attributes of perfection and the descriptions of beauty, it is also established that He loves His requisites and traces, which are the existent things of the cosmos in their totality. . . . But the layers of the existence of the creatures in relation to the Highest Origin are disparate in terms of proximity and distance, eminence and meanness, and perfection and deficiency. Hence the most worthy of creatures for the love of the Real is the most eminent of the possible things and the nearest of them to Him in the two chains of originating and returning, hereafter and here-below.²⁶

Also in *Origin and Return*, Mullā Ṣadrā describes God's self-love while explaining the seven essential attributes of the Necessary Existence. He asserts, in keeping with the view of many theologians and philosophers, that these attributes are knowledge, power, desire, life, hearing, seeing, and speech. In explaining desire (*irāda*)—which the Qur'an mentions as the source of the existentiating command—Mullā Ṣadrā insists that God's desire for creation does not imply duality, for it is nothing but His love for Himself.

Even though the Necessary loves and desires Its act because the act is one of the traces of Its essence and one of the overflows of Its

²⁶ Mullā Ṣadrā, *Mabda'* 251.

effusion, this does not require that the act be a delight and a good for It. Rather the delight of the Necessary lies only in that which is Its beloved by essence, and that is Its own transcendent essence, for every perfection and every beauty is an overflow and effusion from Its beauty and perfection. Hence Its love and desire for the act do not require that It be seeking perfection outside of Itself, for in reality that which is beloved and desired is Its very essence by Its essence. In the same way, when you love a person, you love her traces, though in reality your beloved is that person. Thus it has been said,

I walk the land—the land of Salma—

kissing this wall, kissing that wall.

It is not love for the land that impassions my heart

but love for her who dwells within it.²⁷



In his magnum opus, *al-Ḥikmat al-muta'aliya* (The transcendent wisdom, better known as The four journeys), Mullā Ṣadrā provides a long disquisition on love, again in the context of the seven essential attributes of the Necessary Existence. Here, however, instead of “desire” he calls the relevant attribute “solicitude and mercy,” thus making explicit that the philosophical term “solicitude” and the Qur'anic term “mercy” are synonyms. Most of the first fourteen chapters of this section deal with theodicy, explaining why both good and evil pertain to the divine mercy. The last eight chapters explain, in a structure based on Avicenna's *Treatise on Love*, how love pervades the entire universe, driving all things on the ascending ladder of the return to God.

UNIVERSAL LOVE FOR GOD

If philosophers understand the Qur'anic statement “He loves them” to mean that God's love for human beings is a necessary concomitant of

²⁷ Mullā Ṣadrā, *Mabda'* 215.

God's love for Himself, it should not be surprising that they read the second half of the verse, "They love Him," as an ontological imperative, not as a prescriptive command. Human beings and all creatures cannot not love God, which is to say that they love God by their very natures, and God responds to their love in the measure of their capacity to receive Him. Avicenna makes this the thesis of the concluding chapter of his *Treatise on Love*. Interestingly, he uses the term "self-disclosure" (*tajallī*) several times to designate the Sheer Good's manifestation of Itself to all things, though he does not use this word in his major works. It is derived from a pregnant Qur'anic verse about Moses at Mt. Sinai and becomes one of the most common expressions in Sufi literature both for the all-encompassing theophany that is the universe and for the specific theophany that is God's unveiling (*kashf*) of His mysteries to His friends (*awliyā*). Avicenna writes,



In this chapter we desire to elucidate that each of the existent things loves the Absolute Good with an innate love, and that the Absolute Good discloses Itself to Its lover. Their receptions of Its self-disclosure and their conjunctions with It, however, are disparate. The furthest limit of proximity to It is the reception of Its self-disclosure in reality, I mean, as perfectly as possible. This is the meaning that the Sufis name "unification." In Its munificence, the Good loves that Its self-disclosure be received, and things come to exist by means of Its self-disclosure.²⁸

Avicenna sums up his argument by explaining that the perfection of God's love is attained only by "deiform souls" (*al-nufūs al-muta'alliha*), that is, those who have fully actualized their intellects.

The love of the Most Excellent for Its own excellence is the most excellent love, so Its true beloved is that Its self-disclosure be attained.

²⁸ Ibn Sinā, *Risāla* 82.

This is the reality of Its attainment by deiform souls. This is why it may be said that they are Its beloveds. To this refers to what has been related in the reports where God says, “When the servant is such and such, he loves Me, and I love him.”²⁹

In one of his Persian philosophical tales, *Fī ḥaqīqat al-‘ishq* (“On the reality of love”), Suhrawardī tells the story of the three sons of the First Intellect: beauty (*ḥusn*), love (*‘ishq*), and sorrow (*ḥuzn*). Toward the end of the tale he sums up their role in bringing about the soul’s perfection:

One of the names of beauty is *jamāl* and another is *kamāl* [perfection]. . . . All existent things, whether spiritual or corporeal, are seeking perfection. . . . All are seeking beauty and trying to reach beauty. Reaching the beauty sought by all, however, is difficult, for arrival at beauty is impossible except by means of love, and love does not give itself to just anyone. . . . If on occasion it finds someone worthy of this felicity, it sends sorrow, which is its doorkeeper. Sorrow purifies the house and lets no one inside. It reports that the Solomon of love will be entering, and it gives out this call: “O ants, enter your houses, lest Solomon and his armies trample you” [Qur’an 27:18]. Then each of the ants—the outward and inward senses—will settle down in its own place and remain safe from the blows of the army of love, and no defect will find its way to the brain. Love will then wander around the house and look at everything. It will come into the room of the heart, destroying some of it and repairing some of it. It will restore the heart’s work to its first manner, staying busy with this for several days. Then it will set out for the threshold of beauty.³⁰

²⁹ Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla* 87–88.

³⁰ Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī, *Fī ḥaqīqat al-‘ishq*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Majmū‘a-yi Muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Isbrāq* (Tehran: Académie Impériale Iranienne de Philosophie, 1977), 284–285.

Sufi teachers often speak of God as the beloved of all, even though people imagine that they love this or that. Ibn 'Arabī describes the situation:

None but God is loved in the existent things. In every beloved it is He who is manifest to the eye of every lover—and there is nothing that is not a lover. So the universe is all lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him. . . . No one loves any but his own Creator, but he is veiled from Him by his love for Zaynab, Su'ad, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words writing about all these existent things without knowing, but the true knowers never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about Him, hidden behind the veil of forms.³¹



The poetry and prose of Rūmī (d. 1274) provide many descriptions of the divine love that permeates the universe. In a typical passage, he explains how love acts through the existentiating command, and then has God Himself explain the wisdom in love's work:

Love makes the ocean boil like a pot,
 love grinds mountains down to sand.
 Love splits heaven into a hundred pieces,
 love shakes earth with a mighty shaking. . . .
 "If not for pure love,
 why would I give existence to the spheres?
 "I raised the celestial wheel on high
 so that you would understand love's elevation."³²

³¹ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt* 2:326.18.

³² Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1925-40), 5:2735-2740; William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 198.

Mullā Ṣadrā also reminds us that everything is sustained by the divine solicitude and permeated by love and yearning for God. The reason for this, he says, is that the final goal of all is the everlasting existence of the Necessary, which is the sheer and absolute good from which no good is excluded. In one passage he explains this while repeating Avicenna's distinction between love and yearning:

God has established for each of the existent things—whether intellectual, soulish, sensory, or natural—a perfection, and He has planted in its nature a love and yearning for that perfection and a movement toward its completion. . . . Everything loves existence, seeks the perfection of existence, and shuns nonexistence and deficiency. . . . Hence love is constantly present in the thing, whether in the state of the existence of its perfection or the state of the lack of its perfection. As for yearning and inclination, these are present in the thing only when it lacks the perfection. Hence love pervades all existent things, but yearning does not pervade all. Rather, it pertains specifically to those who lack something of which they are in-formed.³³



Mullā Ṣadrā devotes a good deal of space to differentiating among the objects of creaturely love and describing where they are situated on the ascending and descending arcs of existence. He demonstrates that “every love for the low will be led and directed to a love for the high in the most complete and perfect manner. This will continue until love for the Necessary Existence is reached.”³⁴ In continuing this passage he explains the natural hierarchy of love for the high:

Given that the body becomes complete through nature, it loves that which completes it, which is nature. Nature becomes complete

³³ Mullā Ṣadrā, *Hikma* 7:148–150.

³⁴ Mullā Ṣadrā, *Hikma* 7:157.

through the soul that governs it, so it loves it. The soul becomes complete through the intellect, so it loves it. The intellect, or rather, all things, become complete through the Necessary, so the intellect loves It and all things become complete through It. Or rather, It is the all in oneness. It delights in Its essence, not in anything else, for there is nothing else . . . for It is the returning place of all and the final goal of all.³⁵

In short, the human soul achieves perfection by way of love and yearning for the Necessary Existence. Each lower level of the soul, and indeed, each faculty of the soul, has an appropriate love, but none of love's lower objects is a worthy object for the rational soul. Its true beloved can only be the First Intellect, which is the form of its matter, or God Himself, in whose form man was created. All objects of love other than the Real can be nothing but bridges leading in the direction of the true Beloved. Here Sufi texts like to quote a dictum well-known to literary theorists: "The metaphor [*majāz*] is the bridge to the reality [*ḥaqīqa*]." Mullā Ṣadrā stands in a long line of Sufi theorists when he says, "Human love is divided into real and metaphorical. Real love is love for God, His attributes, and His acts inasmuch as they are His acts. Metaphorical love is divided into soul-ish and animal."

By soul-ish love Ṣadrā means the love of one human soul for another, and by animal love he means love driven by the natural appetite of the animal soul. In soul-ish love the rational soul rules over the animal soul and thus, for example, observes the moral and legal strictures surrounding love. In animal love, the animal soul rules over the rational soul and leads to illicit forms of love. Concerning the soul's metaphorical love for another soul he writes,

³⁵ Mullā Ṣadrā, *Hikma* 7:157.



It softens the soul and brings about yearning, ardor, sorrow, weeping, and tenderness of heart and thought. It is as if the soul is seeking something inward and hidden from the senses. So the soul cuts itself off from its this-worldly occupations, turns away from everything but its beloved, and makes all its concerns one concern. This is why turning toward the real Beloved is easier for such a person than for others, for he does not need to cut himself off from many things. Rather, he turns his longing for one person toward the One.³⁶

As for real love, it occurs when the soul actualizes its intellective nature and is no longer attracted to traces and metaphors. As Ṣadrā writes,

Once the soul has reached perfection through the divine sciences and become an actual intellect, encompassing the universal sciences and possessing the habitude of conjunction with the world of holiness, it must no longer busy itself with love for these beautified, fleshly forms and subtle, human traits, for its station has gone beyond this station. This is why it is said, “The metaphor is the bridge to the Reality.” Once someone has crossed the bridge to the World of the Reality, returning once more to that from which he has crossed would be ugly and counted as a vice.³⁷

Among Sufi poets, Rūmī has frequent recourse to the distinction between real and metaphorical love. The beauty of beloveds in this world is simply gold plating, he tells us, so we should travel back to the mine.

³⁶ Mullā Ṣadrā, *Hikma* 7:174–175.

³⁷ Mullā Ṣadrā, *Hikma* 7:175.

Love is an attribute of God, who has no needs—
 love for anything else is a metaphor.
 The beauty of the others is gold-plated:
 outwardly light, inwardly smoke.
 When the light goes and the smoke appears,
 metaphorical love turns to ice. . . .
 When gold jumps from the face of counterfeit coin,
 it returns to sit in its own mine. . . .
 Those with eyes turn their love to the mine of gold,
 each day their love increasing.³⁸

Despite his frequent criticisms of metaphorical love, Rūmī also celebrates love in all its forms, for love is accompanied by the sorrow and pain of separation, and the awareness of this pain is the beginning of wisdom. As Suhrawardī pointed out, sorrow is inseparable from its brothers, love and beauty. It is no accident that Rūmī begins his monumental epic of love, the *Mathnawī*, with this line: “Listen to this flute as it complains, telling tales of separation.” The pain and sorrow of separation light up the fire of love. Rūmī sums up the positive role played by metaphorical love with these lines addressed to disappointed lovers:

Consider it His solicitude that you have lost in the lane of love.
 Put aside metaphorical love, for the end is love for the Real.
 The soldier gives his son a wooden sword
 for him to become a master and take a sword into battle.
 Love for a human being is that wooden sword.
 Once the trial ends, the love will be for the All-Merciful.³⁹

³⁸ Rūmī, *Mathnawī* 6:971–980; Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, 202–203.

³⁹ Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, ed. B. Furūzānfar (Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1336-46/1957-67), vv. 336–338.

ALL-PERVADING MERCY

In his vast corpus of prose and poetry Ibn 'Arabī discusses love in far more detail than any of the official philosophers. Like Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā he builds his vision on the concept and reality of *wujūd*, existence or being. Unlike them, however, he does not look at the human soul simply as a potential intellect that needs to be actualized. As important as intelligence and rationality are to the definition of what it means to be human, the true defining characteristic of man is that he was created in the form of the Necessary Existence, thereby receiving the potential to actualize all forms in the divine knowledge and to reach the Station of No Station. These forms are not limited to the intelligible realities, but also include the images and symbols that appear as nature and Scripture. For the soul to realize its full potential it must actualize along with intellect a complementary power of equal importance, namely *khayāl*, imagination.



The philosophers understood imagination as an internal sense of the animal soul, more to be overcome than to be actualized. They described it as the faculty that perceives sense objects without the intermediary of the five outward senses, as in memory or dreaming. In some lesser-known works, especially the symbolic tales of Avicenna and Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), philosophers acknowledged the important role of imagination in the perception of metaphysical realities. Aaron Hughes has argued that such treatises were written as practical aids in the development of the fullness of human understanding. As he put it, "These tales focus poetically on this world and attempt to show how the beauty within it relates to the divine world. . . . Imagination becomes crucial to the philosophical enterprise, since the imagination is the faculty that is ultimately responsible for bridging the gap between the phenomenal and the transcendental."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Aaron W. Hughes, *The Texture of the Divine: Imagination in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 171. For a broad-ranging investigation of this issue in philosophy and Sufism, see Cyrus Ali Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the*

Whether Ibn 'Arabī was aware of these symbolic tales or not, he objected to the widely accepted notion of imagination as a mere faculty of the soul. To some extent he was motivated by an attempt to integrate the received philosophical wisdom into the symbolic and imagistic language of the Qur'an and the Hadith. This is to say that he explained the Origin and Return not only in terms of the existentiating command—as was the wont of the early philosophers—but also in terms of the prescriptive command, claiming that the imagistic and symbolic depictions of the soul's becoming, linked by Scripture to commands and prohibitions, provide a far more accurate portrayal of the soul's reality than the abstruse analyses of the philosophers. In one of many passages where he critiques the approach of mere rationality, he offers a visionary tale of his own. Perhaps he is responding to Ibn Ṭufayl's well-known philosophical novel, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, in which an autodidact philosopher attains the same level of understanding as a prophet.⁴¹ In Ibn 'Arabī's tale, a philosopher and a follower of Muhammad ascend together through the heavenly spheres in the direction of God. At each level of ascent, the follower is given a plethora of richly imagistic lore by the prophet who rules over the sphere in question—Moses, Abraham, Jesus, and so on—but the philosopher perceives only the qualities and characteristics of the relevant planet.⁴² In effect, the Prophet's follower reaps the fruit of the promise made in the verse of conditional love: "Follow me, and God will love you." It is this path of following that Ibn 'Arabī calls "the religion of love" in a famous poem referring to the Station of No Station, even if most



Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism (London: Oneworld, 2017). See also Kazuyo Murata, *Beauty in Sufism: The Teachings of Rūzbihān Baqlī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

⁴¹ See Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān: A Philosophical Tale*, trans. Lenn E. Goodman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁴² For a translation, see Stephen Hirtenstein, trans., *The Alchemy of Human Happiness. Chapter 167 of Ibn 'Arabī's Meccan Illuminations* (Oxford: Anqa, 2017).

Western observers have ignored his commentary on the line and read it instead as an ecumenism before its time.

My heart has become the receptacle for every form,
 a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for monks,
 A house of idols, a Kaaba for the circumambulator,
 tablets for the Torah, a volume for the Qur'an.
 I practice the religion of love wherever its camels turn their faces.
 This religion is my religion and my faith.⁴³

In any case, imagination played a far more central role in Ibn 'Arabī's worldview than it did in the vision of the philosophers, but to see the importance he gave to it, we need to understand that he added new dimensions to the word's meaning. In Arabic, *khayāl* means both imagination and image, which is to say that it designates both the mind's power of picturing things and images independent of the mind. Ibn 'Arabī insists that the word simultaneously affirms and denies what it signifies. Thus, images we see in mirrors or in our own thoughts are and are not what they appear to be. The key to the meaning of imagination lies in its ambiguity, which Ibn 'Arabī finds in three primary sorts of intermediacy. In the broadest sense, *khayāl* designates the universe in its entirety, for every possible thing dwells in an ambiguous realm between the Necessary Existence and absolute nonexistence, so it is an image of both being and nonbeing, belonging in truth to neither side. In a second broad sense, imagination designates one of the three hierarchically ordered worlds of the cosmos, namely the world of images, which is located above the world of bodies (what we call "the physical world") and beneath the world of spirits and intellects. In a third sense, imagination designates the human soul as a totality, for the soul is an



⁴³ William C. Chittick, "The Religion of Love Revisited," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 54 (2013): 37–59.

image of both spirit and body; in itself it is neither spiritual nor bodily, or it is both spiritual and bodily at the same time.

Ibn 'Arabī held that Aristotelian logic, with its insistence on either/or, fails to grasp the nature of things, for it wants to strip the images found in and by the soul from their specific designations and turn them back into abstract, intelligible realities dwelling above and beyond. But the images in their particularity and exactitude, on whatever level of existence they may appear, convey the immanent presence of the Necessary Existence while simultaneously affirming nonexistence. Each thing in the universe dwells in the ambiguity of imagination; it is both there and not there. We perceive the things, but they have no independent existence. All perceived reality is in fact a *barzakh*, an “isthmus” between existence and nonexistence, displaying the properties of both sides without being reducible to one or the other.⁴⁴

The great virtue of intellect lies in its ability to perceive universals and disengage forms from their matters, allowing it to set up distinctions, differences, and classifications. Only intellectual discernment, Ibn 'Arabī insists, can provide an adequate understanding of God's utter transcendence, which is the nakedness of the Necessary Existence, bereft of anything other than Itself. In contrast, the great virtue of imagination is the ability to perceive the presence of some things in other things. Actualized properly, imagination witnesses the omnipresence of the Necessary Existence in the possible things. The quest for human perfection, then, demands a balanced vision of transcendence and immanence, which can only be actualized by seeing simultaneously with “the two eyes of the heart,” intellect and imagination.

For Ibn 'Arabī and others, the urgency of developing imagination derives from the fact that the only way to achieve the soul's perfection is to actively engage in the return to the One, and the only power

⁴⁴ On some of the philosophical implications of this notion of intermediacy, see Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn 'Arabī's Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).



that can actualize this return is love. As Suhrawardī said in the passage quoted earlier from *Fī ḥaqīqat al-‘ishq*, “Arrival at beauty is impossible except by means of love.” The motivation for love comes not from abstract concepts and demonstrative proofs but from concrete visions of beauty, that is, the immanent presence of the Good and the Beautiful in the created realm. As Ibn ‘Arabī remarks in one of his critiques of intellect’s limitations, “If we had remained with our rational proofs . . . no created thing would ever have loved God.”⁴⁵ The proper role of love, as Rūmī tells us, is to be a fire that, “when it blazes up, burns away everything except the everlasting Beloved.”⁴⁶

In one of the many ways in which Ibn ‘Arabī adds an imaginal dimension to the philosophical positions, he describes the relationship between the Necessary Existence and the possible things in terms of love. Though he talks about Avicenna’s “love that pervades all things,” he typically uses more concrete language, speaking, for example, of “the marriage act that pervades all atoms.” All possible things, in other words, are pervaded by a sexual intercourse that can be perceived on every level of existence. The first of these existentiating marriages takes place between God’s essence and His infinite knowledge and brings about God’s delight (*ibtihāj*) in the presence of the things.

That which is desired from marriage may be reproduction—I mean the birth of offspring—or it may simply be enjoyment. The Divine Marriage is the attentiveness of the Real toward the possible thing in the presence of possibility through the desire of love, so that there may be delight along with desire. When the Real turns His attentiveness toward the possible thing as mentioned, He makes manifest the existentionation of this possible thing. Hence, that which is born from this union is the existence of the possible thing. . . . This

⁴⁵ William C. Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 4.

⁴⁶ Rūmī, *Mathnawī* 5:588.

marriage is constant and continuous in existence. There can be no cessation or divorce in this marital contract.⁴⁷

One of Ibn 'Arabī's better-known technical terms is "fixed entity" (*'ayn thābita*), which he employs in place of the philosophers' "quiddity" (*māhiyya*). He points out that the fixed entities are the possible things known to the Necessary Existence for all eternity. The entities can never have existence of their own, since real existence pertains exclusively to the Necessary. When It sees that the moment for a possible thing's existence has arrived, It issues the existentiating command and brings the thing into relative existence, though the thing remains forever nonexistent in itself. Why then does God bother saying, "Be," to nonexistent things, giving them a whiff of existence in the cosmos? He does so because of love and mercy, or in philosophical terms, because of solicitude.

In discussing human love, Avicenna maintains a relatively detached stance, describing it as an ontological attribute coursing through all things. Ibn 'Arabī and other Sufi teachers give equal or greater weight to the need for right thought and right practice in order to participate in God's conditional love. They insist that the human existential plight derives from inherent love and yearning for union. Unless people understand that they are in fact lovers of God, they will not step into the path of following the guidance that brings down God's conditional love. They should strive to become aware of their innate love and intensify it through praxis. Sufi poets aim to stir up this love by highlighting beauty. As Rūmī put it, "What is Love? Perfect thirst. // So let me explain the Water of Life."⁴⁸

Thirst is the pain of separation, driving lovers to seek the water of union. Avicenna states that the Necessary Existence lacks nothing, so it has no such yearning. Ibn 'Arabī takes a somewhat different

47 Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt* 3:516.3. On "macrocosmic marriage," see Murata, *Tao*, ch. 5.

48 Rūmī, *Kulliyāt*, v. 17361.



standpoint, arguing that every beloved is nonexistent in relation to the lover. All things other than the Necessary Existence, the Supreme Lover, are nonexistent by definition, so all are objects of His love. “The created thing,” he writes, “is nonexistent, so it is the object of God’s love constantly and forever. . . . As long as there is love, one cannot conceive of the existence of the created thing along with it, so the created thing never comes into existence.”⁴⁹ God loves the possible thing eternally, so it can never truly appear in the realm of being. At the moment it makes an appearance, God ceases loving it, loving instead the next moment of its appearance. This is one of his arguments to prove his well-known doctrine of “the renewal of creation at each instant” (*tajdīd al-khalq ma’a’l-ānāt*).

Given that possible things never truly come into existence, they are in fact images of existence, not real existence. Ibn ‘Arabī explains this imaginal existence in many ways, such as having recourse to “the Breath of the All-Merciful” (*naḥās al-raḥmān*). Drawing from Qur’anic references to the universe as the words of God, he devotes a book-length chapter of his *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (The Meccan openings) to a description of the circle of Origin and Return in terms of the All-Merciful’s articulation of twenty-eight successive letters corresponding to the Arabic alphabet. The first and second letters designate the First Intellect and the Universal Soul. The intermediate letters represent the descending and ascending stages of the universe. The penultimate letter designates the human being, and the final letter represents the ascending degrees of human perfection in the climb to the intellect and beyond.⁵⁰

In explaining how all possible things are embedded in the All-Merciful Breath, Ibn ‘Arabī says that things have the same status

⁴⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt* 2:113,29. For more on Ibn ‘Arabī’s views on love, see William C. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), chs. 2–3; Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*.

⁵⁰ See Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, xxviii–xxxii.



in relation to the divine breath as our words have in relation to our breath. We bring words into existence because of our desire and love to put them there, though they disappear instantly. So, also, God's eternal speech brings the possible things into existence at each instant, but once they exist, they immediately disappear. God's existentiating command then articulates the next moment of their existence, and so on without end.

God's words appearing in His All-Merciful Breath are images of Himself, just as our words appearing in our breath are images of us. They are the same as ourselves, yet different. In this extended meditation on the divine and human form, which he develops in many directions, Ibn 'Arabī tells us that what we call "existence" is nothing but the divine mercy that permeates all things. "The cosmos is identical with mercy, nothing else."⁵¹ Existent things can only be understood as the self-disclosures of a loving, merciful, and compassionate God, a God who has given us to ourselves so that we may benefit, who has articulated His Breath as existentiating words for the sake of the ultimate happiness of all beings. More than any other Muslim theologian and philosopher, Ibn 'Arabī insists that all shall be well. In a typical passage he puts it this way: "The final issue will be at mercy, for the actual situation inscribes a circle. The end of the circle curves back to its beginning and joins with it. The end has the property of the beginning, and that is nothing but existence."⁵²



⁵¹ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt* 2:437.24.

⁵² Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt* 4:405.7. See William C. Chittick, "The Hermeneutics of Mercy," in *Ibn 'Arabī: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), ch. 9.