

The Perception of Human in the Theology of Jalalu'd-Din al-Rumi (1207-1273)

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Abstract

Jalalu'din al-Rumi is a Turkish sufi and was born in Balkh. He is one of the greatest of Sufi poets. The principal work of Rumi is his massive Mathnawi. Rumi is also a philosopher. He taught the Sufi doctrine that the chief end of life is to liberate oneself from human thoughts and wishes, human needs, and the outward impressions of the senses, so that one may become a mere mirror for the God. So bowdlerized an essence does one's mind become that it is as nearly as possible nothing, yet while in this state it can, by a union with the Divine Essence, mysteriously become the All. The general theme of Rumi's thought is essentially that of the concept of Tawhid. Rumi believed passionately in the use of music, poetry, and dance as a path for reaching God. For Rumi, God is the ground as well as the goal of all existence. For Rumi, religion was mostly a personal experience and not limited to logical arguments or perceptions of the senses.

Rumi, God and Human

I searched for God among the Christians and on the Cross and therein I found Him not. I went into the ancient temples of idolatry; no trace of Him was there. I entered the mountain cave of Hira and then went as far as Qandhar but God I found not. With set purpose I fared to the summit of Mount Caucasus and found there only 'anqa's habitation. Then I directed my search to the Kaaba, the resort of old and young; God was not there even. Turning to philosophy I inquired about him from ibn Sina but found Him not within his range. I fared then to the scene of the Prophet's experience of a great divine manifestation only a "two bow-lengths' distance from him" but God was not there even in that exalted court. Finally, I looked into my own heart and there I saw Him; He was nowhere else.

One of the core issues which Sufis have studied is the question of "What is human?" as humankind has a unique position in the entire universe.

Rumi's perception of being human is, in fact, one of the richest and most comprehensive perspectives among all others. For Rumi, human is like an index for the whole universe. He believes that a human is a *macrocosm* (though they may appear to be a microcosm in their singular form) as they are the recipients of God's Attributes.

The word *insan* in Arabic is a non-gendered, non-specific pronoun which refers to humankind in general, but also, in many instances, to any person—someone or anyone, in other words. This word, *insan*, is etymologically a compound made up of the terms *uns* and *nesy*. *Uns*, contrary to alienation, denotes proximity, fondness, love and interest, (Isfahani, 1986, al-Askari, 1974) expounding the person's ease in establishing relations and communication with their own kind as well as their Creator. *Nesy*, on the other hand, is the opposite of awareness of that which has been bestowed, meaning ignorance, forgetting after learning, not understanding, or falling into error; (Isfahani, 1986, al-Askari, 1974) in addition to emphasizing human's predisposition towards concealing the "first covenant,"¹ or the likelihood of human's rebelling against the Creator, the word also draws attention to a key subject of psychology, namely human beings' inherently weak memory and forgetfulness. The foregoing definition, comprising both the meanings connected with the term *insan*, or human being, concurs with Rumi's own definition of human as the meeting point of sublimity and sordidness, intellect and lust (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004)—the most precious of beings, yet one full of innate problems. In order to truly comprehend the nature of human, Rumi advises seekers to resort to the Qur'an and refer to the clear verse (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004): *Surely We have created human of the best stature as the perfect pattern of creation* (95:4).

As amplified by the verse, it is human, amid the whole of creation, which stands as the best. The concept of "the best stature as the perfect pattern of creation" mentioned in the verse, encompasses all intrinsic beauties, physical or spiritual, from humankind's visible form to their intellectual maturity, endowed as it is with the exceptional capability to recognize and distinguish the signs and indications of reality, not to mention

their moral beauty, entrenched with a natural inclination towards gradual development and maturity. (Elmalili, 1979) Rather than gaining visibility solely through the formal exterior, the true beauty of the human comes to the surface through their feelings and spirituality. Thus, by virtue of highlighting the fourth verse of the Qur'an chapter named *Tin*, Rumi effectively draws attention to both the outward and inward beauties of human, for among all creations, human's form and nature is the most exquisite. "Human with his general form and nature," says Rumi, "is greater than the *Divine Throne*, and exceeds the perimeter of thought." (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004) It is humankind that is the most polished and perfect mirror to God among all other manifestations of God's Attributes and Names in the universe. Thus, through a synthesis of both physics and metaphysics, Rumi emphasizes the sublimity of humankind for they carry "an essence from the Transcendent," a manifestation of God, which is the very determinant of their overall value.

Rumi also refers to the following declaration in the Qur'an:

It is He Who makes all things most excellent, which He creates; and He began the creation of humankind from clay. Then He made his seed from an extract of despised water. Then He fashioned him and breathed into him His spirit; and He appointed for you hearing, sight and hearts. Small thanks you give! (32:7-9)

These lines essentially establish the fundamental parameters of Islamic aesthetics, of which one aspect is the aesthetic proof for the Existence and Oneness of God, the argument for which is as follows: Human must not linger on nor contend with outward beauty; rather, they must use it as a steppingstone to find a way to the Absolute Beautiful. For it is God Who has bestowed beauty to creation, each carrying an appropriate beauty.² Thus, such aesthetic and artistic yearnings in human are natural, corroborated by human's privileged possession in regards to the Divine Breath: *When I have shaped him and breathed My spirit into him...* (15:29) means precisely that. (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004) Thus, while making each human unique, God has also endowed humankind with some of His attributes, a metaphor elucidated by Rumi as such: "God has created our temperaments and morals according to His Own; hence our attributes are a pattern of His." (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004) Rumi, evidently abiding by the

Gnostic tradition, also alludes to the narration that, (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004) “God created Adam in His Own image.” (Bukari, Dawud) The image must obviously be taken in the spiritual sense and not the physical. So, for instance, as God is munificent, we should be generous; as He is a forgiver, so should we be; and so on. Clearly, the examples of our reflecting the manifestations of the Creator can be multiplied. The universe is the collection of the manifestations of God’s Attributes and Names, and those manifestations are focused on humankind. Individual members of humanity reflect a limited number of manifestations of the light of His Existence. In enunciating this issue, Rumi adds that, “Just how the Creator wants to be exalted and thanked, so does human.” (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004) For human, according to Rumi, is the recipient of God’s attributes. This demonstrates the high value accorded to humankind.

Owing to God’s rendition of human in His image, as knowledgeable and wise, human may occasionally witness the matchless beauty and theophany of God, in flashes, through the astrolabe of their own existence—a beauty which can never be detached from this mirror. (Rumi, Fihi Ma Fihi, 1959) For human, the road to attaining this beauty lies in wiping the mirror of the heart with repentance and polishing it with the remembrance of God. For this reason, Rumi’s entire endeavor is to emphatically stress the fact that by virtue of drawing attention to the relationship between God and humankind, humanity’s greatest virtue, ethically speaking, will be to attain the model of *Insan-i Kamil*, or Universal Human. Additionally, by giving mention to the aphorism of Caliph Ali which states that, “Human seems like a small universe but, in fact, he is the greatest universe,” (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004) Rumi elaborates the attributes that grant superiority to humankind over other creations through the application of analogy.

In effect, the purpose is to identify the main points of demarcation between the sublime and the base, between the angelic and animalistic attributes of human. Within this context, Rumi categorizes beings, as regards their natural creation, into three. The children of Adam, or humankind, in terms of their creation, possess both angelic and animalistic attributes. Thus, as observed by Rumi, human has a power of anger and lust in addition to their power of intellect and knowledge. A human being, in whom the power of lust has become dominant over the intellect, would be

prone to vices such as injustice; conversely, if the latter has overpowered the former, they would exhibit virtuous behavior such as chastity, courage and justice. (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004)

Applying this model, Rumi defines human (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004) by first acknowledging that a portion of human beings has devoted their entire lives to God. These, in a way, have joined the process of *angelization*, like Jesus Christ, by casting practical faith and Islam—submission to One God—into their daily lives. These people, in the words of Rumi, are “outwardly human, but inward *a la* Gabriel.” Indeed, they have been liberated entirely from anger, backbiting, lust and desire. Fasting, for instance, symbolizes this perfectly, as a fasting Muslim, by abstaining throughout the day from eating, drinking and the lower desires of the self in general, brings to the fore his angelic side.

According to Rumi, another portion of human beings have, on the other hand, joined the herd of donkeys. They have virtually become anger itself, embalmed from head to toe in lust. Akin to the rest of creation, they eat, drink and fulfill their animalistic desires just for the sake of appeasing their physical needs. As their relation with God is severed, they possess none of the angelic or spiritual attributes, as Rumi relates his observations to the verse, (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004) *O ye who believe! Respond to God and to the Messenger when the Messenger calls you (in the Name of God) to that which gives you life!* (Anfal 8:24) Thus it is critical for one not to become detached from the resuscitating revelation, as doing so will push him into the throes of depression. For this reason, Rumi lights the correct path for the perplexed to take by expounding, “Take your mind that is in the service of religion as a guide.” (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004)

Humankind, according to Rumi, is an enormous universe bearing all, and out of all creations, it is they who possess the most, and best, of God’s innumerable and exalted attributes. All of God’s Names, which have given existence to the whole universe, are manifested in humanity in direct proportion to their obeying God and His Messenger. They have been created capable of both good and bad that they might use their will to succeed in the trials of life. Thus, with the free will they possess, humankind is instructed to utilize their capabilities for the service of good.

Rumi explicitly repudiates the incongruence of the materialist notion of human by pronouncing, “If human was considered only as a physical entity, Ahmed (i.e., Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace) and Abu Jahl would have been level.” (Rumi, Masnavi, 2004) As described by matchless prose and poetry of Rumi, human contains such immense love, greed, lust and sorrow that even if they were to own hundreds and thousands of universes, they would still find peace elusive. For all these pleasures and desires are analogous to a ladder whose steps are made to walk over and climb, not as a surface on which to rest. (Rumi, Fihi Ma Fihi, 1959) Therefore, human must not, in vein, search for peace and tranquility upon each step, but in the ultimate faith in God to which they must ascend.

Notes

1 See the Qur’an, 7/172: “And remember when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their reins, their seed and made them testify of themselves, (saying): ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said: ‘Yes, assuredly. We testify!’ That was lest you should say at the Day of Resurrection: ‘Of this we were unaware’”.

2 See the Noble Qur’an, Baqara 2:138 “We take our color from God; and who is better than God at coloring? It is God Who we worship.”

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Biographical Sketch

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