

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS IN SUFI THOUGHT

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Abstract

This article analyzes the main ideas of Sufi philosophy, particularly the essence of existence and non-existence, the inner meanings of the concepts of nafs, heart, and soul, as well as the interpretation of the process of spiritual purification in Sufi sources. Through the symbols frequently found in the works of Jalal al-Din Rumi such as the mirror, light, nothingness, and perfection the human spiritual world, self-realization, and inner elevation are explained.

Keywords: Sufism, spiritual purification, philosophy of existence, nafs, heart, soul, perfect human, mirror symbolism, inner beauty, spiritual elevation.

Introduction

The stage of Sufi teaching that is deeply integrated with philosophical meaning is generally associated with the 13th–14th centuries. During this period, many thinkers, gnostics, and Sufi scholars interpreted Sufism not only as a spiritual-moral path but also as a complete philosophical system for understanding existence. Representatives of this era Ibn al-‘Arabi, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Farid al-Din Attar, ‘Aziz al-Din Nasafi, Yahya Suhrawardi, Ibn Sab‘in, Abdurazzaq Kashani, ‘Abd al-Karim Jili, Mahmud Shabustari, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Abdurrahman Jami, ‘Abd al-Qadir Bedil, and many others play an invaluable role in the formation of Sufi philosophy.

Methodology

In their works, issues such as the interconnectedness of the universe and human beings, the meaning of life and death, the problem of free will and determination, the unity of form and meaning, the nature of intellect and spirit, and the inner essence of time and temporality were presented from a new perspective. These thinkers explained the heart as the center of the cosmos and analyzed the process of human spiritual perfection on philosophical and metaphysical foundations.

Discussion

Sufism of the 13th–14th centuries developed in Eastern intellectual tradition not only as a religious-ethical movement, but also as a profound philosophical school. As noted in earlier conclusions, Sufism (at-tasawwuf) emerged in the second half of the 7th century, initially appearing as a path of spiritual purification. Over time, however, it rose to the level of an independent philosophical and educational system. Those who devoted themselves to this path



were called Sufis, and they interpreted the essence of the human being in harmony with traditional anthropological views grounded in purely Islamic sources namely the Qur'an and the Hadith. This very feature enables Sufism to be regarded as one of the distinctive branches of Islamic anthropology.

In Islamic teaching, a human being is born inherently pure and endowed with the "Islamic fitra"; however, a person's later religious affiliation whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or another belief - is shaped by family, upbringing, and cultural environment. From this point of view, the human being is considered one of the central themes in Sufism, and nearly all spiritual and moral issues are interpreted in connection with the individual, the state of the heart, intentions, and inner realities.

Sufi literature also places particular emphasis on the concept of feminine beauty. Sufi sources clearly distinguish between outward beauty and inner perfection. They stress that one must be cautious of forming close relationships with women who may be beautiful in appearance but are morally corrupt or spiritually empty. According to the sources, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said, "Do not approach the beautiful flower that grows upon filth," referring to women of unclear lineage or immoral character [1.174.]. This idea reflects the Sufi view that the true criterion is not outward charm or attraction but a woman's inner purity, spiritual beauty, and good character. Therefore, in Sufism, marrying a woman who possesses various moral or spiritual shortcomings is considered undesirable. This perspective is not limited to women; rather, it is based on the broader principle that an individual's inner qualities are superior to external appearance.

Throughout history, human civilization has continuously evolved, and profound changes have occurred in the social, spiritual, and moral life of societies. In every era of humanity, culture and religion have been key forces shaping how people "live" and "think." Therefore, different peoples and nations around the world have developed diverse cultures and lifestyles according to their historical experience, social environment, and religious beliefs. This process is a crucial factor revealing the complex and multilayered character of human history.

In the region of Central Asia, this development manifested itself in a distinctive way. Beginning especially from the 7th century, the Islamic religion and its culture spread widely, leaving a deep imprint on people's daily lives, social relations, and spiritual worldviews. The Sufi doctrine that emerged during this period stood out as a path that purified the human heart, guided individuals toward spiritual perfection, and called humanity to moral and spiritual elevation. Sufi traditions were not limited only to religious practices and rituals; they became deeply embedded in all aspects of human life ethical values, family relations, and social norms of conduct.

Thus, Sufism found its significant place in history not only as a religious path, but also as a fundamental force shaping human culture, spiritual thinking, and the inner world of the individual. In Central Asia, the history of Sufism has played an invaluable role in regulating social and spiritual life, purifying the human heart, and ensuring harmony between the individual and society across various peoples and regions. This shows that Sufism served not merely as a religious doctrine, but also as an important instrument in the development of regional culture and philosophical thought.



When presenting their ideas, Sufi scholars primarily sought to grasp the spiritual nature of the human being and the inner essence of existence. Their works demonstrate the remarkable richness of philosophical thought and the profound meaning embedded in their perspectives. In the view of Sufi thinkers, attaining the true essence of existence becomes possible through self-purification, controlling the nafs, and leading the heart toward purity. Therefore, they devoted special attention to the fundamental issues of human spirituality and emphasized living honestly, embodying moral integrity, and following a path of spiritual awakening as the main criteria.

Indeed, the greatest value of Sufism is to fill the human heart with light, overcome the ego through knowledge, and awaken a sense of inner harmony within all existence. Even today, their intellectual heritage inspires individuals to better understand their spiritual world, to seek moral purification, and to pursue the true purpose of life. For this reason, the philosophical views left by the great Sufi masters remain an everlasting spiritual treasure whose relevance has not diminished in the modern era.

Below, some of the philosophical ideas and spiritual-moral views expressed in Jalal al-Din Rumi's (1207) great work *Masnavi-yi Ma'navi* (*Masnavi-yi Sharif*) are analyzed, with scholarly attention given to their profound meanings concerning human perfection, the perception of existence, and the purification of the heart. The scholar's reflections on eternal and universal questions of life retain their significance even today. For example, ...

“Accept my mirror, let it bring you joy,
And each time you gaze upon it, remember me.
That beautiful one once took a mirror to his bosom,
For the lover finds delight in the mirror's face.
Non-existence is the mirror of existence—if you reflect.
Choose non-existence, if you would not remain ignorant.
For existence becomes clear only within non-existence.
What wonder, then, if the wealthy shows generosity to the poor?
Bread itself is a pure mirror – revealing the one who hungers.
If there is poverty or deficiency—again,
That place becomes a mirror to every craft and skill.” [2.300.]

In these verses, Jalal al-Din Rumi symbolically expresses philosophical concepts related to the human heart, the nature of existence and non-existence, and the path of spiritual perfection. At the beginning, the giving of a “mirror” as a gift to the guest – Prophet Joseph (peace be upon him) – is described. Although the mirror appears to be a simple external object, Rumi uses it in a deeper philosophical sense as a symbol reflecting the human heart and consciousness. Through the mirror, he emphasizes that whenever a person sees a beautiful face, they should remember the Creator. The “mirror” represents the purity and clarity of the human heart, while beauty symbolizes spiritual perfection and true inner refinement.

Rumi also draws attention to the issue of existence and non-existence, explaining that the essence of being is philosophically connected to non-being. According to him, if a person pays less attention to the external world and instead turns inward toward the spiritual realm – toward non-existence, humility, and inner purity – he can attain the truth. This philosophical position



corresponds to the monistic and unity-centered doctrines found in the teachings of Suhrawardi and Ibn ‘Arabi, where all forms of existence are considered manifestations of a single ultimate reality.

Rumi further interprets wealth and deficiency through the symbol of the mirror. Material wealth or social status does not determine a person’s spiritual perfection; true wealth and poverty are measured by the state of the heart and the purity of the soul. Thus, he invites the individual to shift attention from the material world to the spiritual world, placing inner beauty above external appearance.

Rumi considers the mirror relevant to all crafts and places, implying that the external world is a reflection of the human inner state. From this perspective, the mirror is not merely an object but a doorway to philosophical reflection and self-awareness. Therefore, in these verses, Rumi highlights the superiority of spiritual purity over outward form, describing existence and non-existence, the material and the spiritual worlds as interconnected philosophical concepts. Ultimately, he teaches that the path to spiritual perfection lies in cultivating inner beauty and expanding inner awareness.

“The qualities of the self are like mirrors of perfection;

Humiliation is the mirror of honor and majesty.

It is through opposites that opposites become apparent — this is certain.

Thus, know that vinegar and honey are recognized through each other.” [2.302.]

In these verses, Rumi employs the concept of the nafs from both philosophical and Sufi perspectives. The nafs represents the inner world of a human being — one’s desires, inclinations, and spiritual state. The phrase “a mirror of perfected qualities” indicates that the nafs itself can serve the path of human perfection. If the nafs is disciplined and directed toward the right path, it becomes a “mirror” in which the stages of spiritual growth are reflected. Philosophically, this verse expresses the idea that the nafs, when purified, leads a person toward inner beauty and perfection.

“Humility” is also described as a mirror, yet one associated with honor and majesty (izz and jalāl). In Rumi’s thought, this reflects the dialectic between material and spiritual dimensions. Humility, modesty, and self-effacement can become a means of spiritual elevation. When a person becomes humble, they draw nearer to true greatness and spiritual nobility. This represents the Sufi notion that recognizing one’s shortcomings and accepting them sincerely opens the way to spiritual refinement.

The expression “Opposites are made manifest by their opposites” highlights the interconnectedness of contradictory concepts. Good and evil, light and darkness, ease and hardship — although they appear contradictory outwardly, in essence they complement each other. This corresponds to the Sufi metaphysical understanding that existence and non-existence, the external and internal worlds, form a unified truth.

In this metaphor, “vinegar” symbolizes bitter, difficult, or painful experiences in life — spiritual trials and hardships. “Honey,” in contrast, represents inner sweetness, serenity, spiritual maturity, and enlightenment. Rumi’s philosophical message is that every hardship (vinegar) ultimately becomes a means to sweetness (honey). The purification of the soul and spiritual elevation are attained precisely through trials. Thus, these verses illustrate several key



ideas: first, the nafs reflects a person's spiritual state and must be properly guided; second, humility is a path to inner elevation; third, apparent opposites are in fact complementary truths; and fourth, trials lead to spiritual sweetness and perfection.

In Sufi philosophy, self-discovery is of central importance. Aziziddin Nasafi states: "Dervish, the first and ultimate knowledge is hidden within you. Whatever you seek, look within yourself — why do you look outside? Knowledge that reaches your heart through someone else's ears is like taking water from another person's well and pouring it into your own: that water will not last. Moreover, it will soon decay, producing illness and corruption. Dervish, this disease turns into pride and makes you fall in love with social rank... Dervish, no matter who a person is, he has a well within him, though it is invisible. One must cleanse that well and make the water pure." [3.]

Results

All well-known Sufi scholars emphasized the necessity of gradually purifying that "inner well." According to them, a person must first be liberated from the norms imposed by mass culture and develop the conviction that it is God Himself who speaks within the human heart. This is possible only when one transfers the "self" from the plane of consciousness to the realm of the spirit. On this point, the famous Russian philosopher V. S. Solovyov wrote: "In a human being, apart from animal nature and socio-moral laws, there also exists a third, higher principle — the spiritual, mystical, or divine... In this third and True order, the primary element — endowed with its own laws — is wholly natural for the human being as a living being: it allows participation in the highest divine principle and mediates between it and the world. If the two lower elements — animal nature and social laws — are separated from the higher and taken as the foundation, they become unnatural." [4.185.]

The Sufi doctrine of the human being is a variant of religious anthropology, proposing the unity of the three principles within human existence — the physical, the social, and the spiritual. However, within this triad, the principle of spiritual supremacy is considered fundamental. Likewise, Islamic teachings emphasize that a person whose inner and outer conformity to Sharia norms is complete will attain a beautiful and harmonious life. One whose outward actions seem righteous but whose inner world is corrupt resembles a body separated from its soul. Conversely, an individual whose inner spirituality has matured but whose outward actions do not reflect this is like a person who is inwardly sound yet outwardly impaired — good in essence, but with a flawed appearance, a dim vision, or a limping gait. [5.]

Conclusion

Based on the above considerations, it can be emphasized, first, that Sufi teachings offer a profoundly immanent perspective on human spiritual development. They examine the human body, intellect, spirit, and heart from both religious and worldly dimensions, viewing these elements as interrelated factors essential to spiritual elevation. Together, they form the indivisible essence of the human being.

Second, Sufism did not emerge as a political movement, but as a spiritual-philosophical doctrine. Since its central purpose is self-knowledge and the spiritual perfection of the

individual, it quickly attracted a wide range of intellectual adherents. Another reason for the widespread acceptance of Sufism among various social groups lies in its recognition of multiple paths and means to the ultimate goal — the realization of God.

Third, from the Sufi perspective, the degree of human perfection is achieved only when inner beauty (spiritual refinement and its material reflection) and outer beauty exist in harmony. The majority of Sufi works highlight the fundamental aspects of attaining spiritual beauty, achieving self-awareness, and embodying these states in practical life.

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