

The Ocean of Nonexistence

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In this article, I would like to offer some remarks on what Rumi has to say about love. What, in other words, is it? From his perspective, inquiring into the nature of love can only give one partial answers, since the very inquiry into what love is entails a partial question. The easiest way for Rumi to explain what love is, is by saying that we will know what it is when we get there. Consider these lines:

Someone asked, 'What is Love?' I said, 'Do not ask about these meanings.

When you become like me, you will see. When you are invited by It, you will sing of It.'¹

Thankfully, Rumi himself left behind nearly 65,000 verses of poetry, most of which sing of the nature and reality of love. Yet, even after having attained to love, he acknowledges that some things are better left unsaid, precisely because love is too vast to be encompassed by human thought and language:

Whatever I say about Love by way of commentary and exposition, when I get to Love, I am ashamed at that.

¹ Rumi, *Kulliyat-i Shams ya Diwan-i kabir az guftar-i Mawlana Jalal al-Din Muhammad mashhur bi Mawlavi, ba tashihat wa hawwashi*, ed. Badi' al-Zaman Furuzanfar, (Tehran: Sipih 1363 A.Hsh./1984), vv. 29,050–51. Cf. William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1983), p. 195. It can be noted that these verses resemble a passage at the end of the preface to Book 2 of the *Mathnawi*. See Rumi, *Mathnawi-yi ma'nawi*, ed., trans., and ann. R. A. Nicholson as *The Mathnawi of Jalal'uddin Rumi*, (London: Luzac 1925–40), I, p. 246. For an important Ottoman Sufi's commentary on this preface, see Alberto F. Ambrosio, 'Boundless Love: Isma'il al-Anqarawi's Commentary on the Preface to the Second Book of the *Mathnawi*', in *Mawlana Rumi Review* 3 (2012), pp. 68–94. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Although explanation with the tongue is clear,
that Love which is tongue-less is even clearer.²

Since love is so difficult to pin down, Rumi finds an apt metaphor for what it is by referring to it as an 'ocean', which, incidentally, he does more so than any other poet in the Persian or Arabic language. The image of an ocean as an all-embracing entity furnishes Rumi with ample material in order for him to convey the vastness of love. He says, for example:

Love cannot be contained in speaking and listening.
It is an Ocean whose bottom cannot be plumbed.
The drops of the sea cannot be counted –
Before that Ocean, the seven seas are mud.³

Love, therefore, is a fathomless ocean, one that cannot be encompassed by an individual because of the finitude of the human situation. Yet the picture is much more nuanced than this. There is a reason that human beings cannot explain love. The reason, Rumi tells us, lies in the secret of the reality of love. It is nothing other than the basis of our existence, and, since the individual aspects of existence cannot encompass the more general scope of existence, so too can the individual aspects of love do nothing more than grope at the reality of the more general scope of love. Love, in other words, is tantamount to saying 'existence' or even 'life':

Love is the Ocean of Life which has no bottom.
The least of its gifts is eternal life.⁴

Amongst the many names of God to be found in the Qur'an are the Living (*al-hayy*) and the Lover (*al-wadud*). Hence, if life and love are equated by Rumi, it is because God the Living is also God the Lover. As a lover who is alive, God thus has objects of love, which is to say that God can only be called a lover when there are people whom He can love.

² Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, I: 112–13.

³ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, V: 2731–32. In rendering *na-padid* in the second hemistich of v. 2731 as 'cannot be plumbed', I follow Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, p. 195.

⁴ Rumi, *Kulliyat-i Shams*, v. 23,469.

This means that the quest of love is not a one-sided affair. God is sought by His servants, but He also seeks them.

With this in mind, it is a good idea to turn to a famous tradition to be found in many Islamic sources, known as the *hadith* of the Hidden Treasure. It is reported that the Prophet Muhammad said that God told him, 'I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known. So I created the universe that they may know Me.'⁵ Without delving into all the metaphysical implications of this particular tradition, it is important to keep in mind that any mention of God as the Hidden Treasure who loved to share Himself has nothing to do with a deficiency on God's part. Rather, it has to do with the fact that God, out of His infinite bounty and love, desired to share Himself so that He could see Himself in the mirror of the cosmos in an objective manner, and thus not only in a purely subjective manner. This is to say that in order for God to actualize the infinite possibilities and plenitude found within Himself, He created the universe so that He could see Himself in one of the many modes of His own self-perception.

Let us turn to a concrete example. It has just been stated that God is sought by His servants and that He also seeks them. This point is best illustrated by Rumi when he draws on the image of thirst and, by extension, the idea of 'belonging'. Since love is a two-way street, the thirsty may seek Water, a symbol for life and love, two of God's qualities. But Water also seeks the thirsty, since without Water having someone to thirst after it, it cannot be called 'Water':

The thirsty man laments, 'Oh sweet water!'
The water also laments, 'Where is the water-drinker?'
This thirst in our souls is the attraction of the Water:
we belong to It and It belongs to us.⁶

Since we belong to God, He also belongs to us. This means that since we have life, we have a share in what God is, namely Life itself. And since we can and do love, we have another share in what God is,

5 Badi' al-Zaman Furuzanfar, *Ahadith-i Mathnawi* (Tehran: Danishgah-i Tihiran 1335 A.Hsh./1956; reprinted Tehran: Amir Kabir 1361 A.Hsh./1982), p. 29, §70.

6 Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, III: 4398–99; cited, with a slight modification, from Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, p. 209. See also *Kulliyat-i Shams*, v. 17,361, where Rumi refers to Love as perfect or complete thirst (*kamal-i tishnagi*).

namely Love itself. At the same time, God seeks us out in the very relationships that He sets up as part of the human drama of existence. We are expected to work with God if we want to arrive at His door. And the surest way to do this is to realize that the Water of which Rumi speaks is here to quench our thirst, and that it actively wants to provide us with the nourishment we seek. That is to say that God is not a passive player in our lives. Rather, He is both the goal and, paradoxically, the means to that goal. What is required on the human side is to have the right kind of preparedness or spiritual sensitivity, which Rumi calls 'thirst'.

The duality that Rumi seems to be positing may be alarming for some of us. But Rumi, in keeping with the Sufi tradition in general, is careful not to posit the servant–God relationship as being on the same ontological plane; that is, he does not see God and human beings as equal players in the game of love. Rather, human beings, when they have truly understood their role as lovers, lose themselves completely in the Object of their love. It is only from this perspective that we can meaningfully speak of God as both the Subject and Object of love.

Rumi, it will be recalled, defined love as the Ocean of Life. This is from the perspective of God. Yet from the perspective of humans, it is more fitting to call love the 'Ocean of Nonexistence' (*darya-yi 'adam*). Hence, Rumi says:

What then is love? The Ocean of Nonexistence.
It is there that the foot of the intellect is broken.⁷

⁷ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, III: 4724. A point needs to be made here by way of clarification: It is often asserted in literature on Rumi that he denigrates the intellect, or that it has no role to play in his spiritual universe. This verse I just cited would seem to support that. And so would these famous lines:

The leg of the people of reason is wooden—
a wooden leg is terribly unsteady. (*Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, I: 2128).

As William Chittick observes with respect to this verse, Rumi does not say that the people of reason do not have a leg to stand on. On the contrary, they do, but it is not stable. So they have a basis for the support of their positions, but one which, in the end, cannot allow them to arrive at answers to life's ultimate questions. See Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil and Kazuyo Murata (Albany: State University of New York Press 2012), pp. 201–02.

The second hemistich is clear: due to the unstable nature of the intellect in coming to terms with love, Rumi is driving home the point that the intellect, despite its relative certainty and firm-footedness, loses its grounding when it comes to the reality of love (we will return to Rumi's treatment of the intellect shortly).

But the first hemistich is not as clear: if love is the Ocean of Nonexistence, then why bother with it? That is, what does it mean to call love the Ocean of *Nonexistence*, and why should human beings devote themselves to something that 'is not'? As a provisional answer, and one that will become clearer in due course, it can be noted that Rumi is not trying to say that love is nonexistent in reality, or that love is somehow that which leads to nonexistence. Rather, love is the Ocean of Nonexistence on the human side of the equation. After having delved into the Ocean of Love, which is the root of existence for Rumi – since it is nothing other than God, the Living Lover – one's own qualities, self-perception, and 'ego' cease to 'be'. That is, the ego, overtaken by the tidal waves of love, becomes completely annihilated in the face of love's waters, and thus comes to be *nonexistent*. What subsists is not the individual ego, but the soul transformed by the power of love so that it can dwell in the sacred presence of God, not as an individual 'I' that is separate from God, but an 'I' that is wholly indistinguishable from the Ocean. In other words, once the individual waves of the Ocean ebb back into the Ocean, they lose their individual properties and return to their true source, which is the Ocean. It is at this moment that all traces of duality disappear, and it is from this perspective that such Qur'anic verses as VIII: 17 are to be understood.⁸

With respect to the intellect, Rumi distinguishes in his writings between two types. The first type of intellect, which is called the 'partial intellect' (*'aql-i juzwi*), is unsound and unhealthy. It can only see duality, otherness, separation and multiplicity; in short, it insists on the separate existence of the waves in the Ocean. It is the foot of this intellect that 'breaks' when it dips itself into the Ocean of Nonexistence. In contrast to the partial intellect is an intellect that is sound and healthy, and that is spiritually fit to discern the nature of reality. It can see unity, oneness and truth; in short, it can see the

⁸ 'Thou threwest not when thou threwest, but God threw.' Translations from the Qur'an in this article are taken from *The HarperCollins Study Quran*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. (San Francisco: HarperOne, forthcoming).

Ocean and does not insist on the separate existence of its waves. In keeping with the Persian Sufi tradition that preceded him, Rumi calls this type of intellect the 'Universal Intellect' (*'aql-i kulli*). For present purposes, we can refer to it simply as the 'Intellect'. In one well-known couplet, Rumi laments the manner in which the partial intellect has brought shame upon the Intellect:

The partial intellect has given the Intellect a bad name.
Desire for the world has made man desire-less for God.⁹

The partial intellect's greatest failure is not seeing things for what they are. Trapped by the outward forms of things, it cannot get to the heart of their true meaning. This is why Rumi refers to the partial intellect as having desire for this world. Rumi, along with the Islamic tradition, insists that this world is not to be loved in and of itself, but only for the sake of God, the true Object of love. If one desires what is other than God, then one experiences a deficiency in love for God commensurate with desire for that thing. The partial intellect thus chases after partial things, partial desires, and partial loves. Any love that is partial cannot lead one to God, since God is Love Itself.

This introduces a key theme in Rumi's poetry, namely that all beautiful things that call us to love them in this world point us to God's beauty and love. If we do not see them for what they are, namely a means to reach the Divine beauty, they are mere distractions. If we begin to value them as objects of beauty and love in and of themselves, we have missed the purpose of existence, which is to point us to what lies beyond them and informs their own existence. It is only the partial intellect that can have such an obscured vision, and thus takes the part for the Whole:

Whatever thing exists that absorbs your love
is merely gilded by God's Qualities illustrated therein.
When that golden glister returns to its source and base
copper remains,
human nature, now satiated, divorces it in disgust.
So spurn that golden glister gilded by God's Qualities.

⁹ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, V: 463.

Don't dumbly call 'pretty' what's just some tinsel gilded metal.
 For beauty's but transient in the base metal: it's on loan;
 beneath the ornament lies an ugly, unattractive source.
 Like gold returns from the counterfeit face back to the mine,
 you too go back to that same mine to which it returns.
 Like light that's cast upon a wall by the sun,
 you too return to that Sun that moves so fit and right.
 Go take your water after this from Heaven's source above,
 for you'll not find faithfulness from a gutter on the roof.¹⁰

A false love, Rumi tells us here, is the result of the partial intellect's inability to see what lies beneath the surface of existence. It cannot discern that it is merely the gilded face of the coin that comes from the mine that glisters, just as it cannot see that the individual rays of light that bounce off the wall come from the Sun. How then do we resolve this dilemma? The long and the short of it is that we have to discard our partial intellects for the sake of the Intellect. Yet how can this happen? The answer is much more complicated than to simply say that we are to replace our partial ways of looking at things with a more holistic and sound approach to life and ourselves. Even if that could be achieved, it would only last a few fleeting moments, and then we would be back to our old ways again, allowing the partial intellect to guide us across the Ocean of life's rugged waters.

Rumi, of course, is all too aware of what human beings are prone to. He thus does not support the idea that one should simply wear a new hat in order to solve problems caused by the partial intellect – problems that are much more deeply rooted than surface impressions may seem to suggest. In order to get to the Intellect, Rumi says that something has to take place within the knowing subject. There needs to be an entire transformation of the individual's being so that it can come to perceive things the way they truly are.

The way this is done, Rumi insists, is by accessing the heart. In one of his poems, he encourages people to return to their true selves, namely their hearts:

Oh heart! Return to yourself, for from the heart
 a hidden road can be found to the Beloved.

¹⁰ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, III: 554–60; literal translation graciously provided by Leonard Lewisohn.

If in the world of the six directions there is no door,
 when you come to the heart, you can make a door.
 Come into the heart, the place of contemplating God!
 Although this may not now be the case, it can be made to be so.¹¹

As we find in many other religions and cultures, the heart often symbolizes the innermost reality of an individual, spiritually speaking. That is, it is the thing that makes the human being what it really is. With respect to the Qur'an and Prophetic sayings, references to the heart abound. Verse XXII: 26, for example, says that it is people's hearts, rather than their eyes, that become blind to the truth.¹² And the Prophet Muhammad is known to have said that the heart of the faithful believer is the very Throne of God (*qalb al-mu'min 'arsh al-rahman*).¹³ The Sufis, taking Islam's twin sources very seriously, have thus written extensively upon something called the science of the purification of the heart. There are indeed scores of books in classical Islam that are concerned with explaining to the reader the problems of the heart, including what taints it and obscures its 'vision', and how these forms of spiritual blindness can be overcome. Needless to say, by the time Rumi spoke about the heart, it was a very familiar concept to his immediate audience.¹⁴

One of the most common analogies used by the Sufis to explain what the heart is, is to say that it is like a mirror. When a mirror is stained with dirt, it cannot properly reflect the image that appears in it. Some aspects of the object standing before a grimy mirror may come through, but not the object in its actual pristine form. The heart, likewise, is capable of becoming sullied by things such as evil actions and thoughts in general, and by the forgetfulness of God in particular.

11 Rumi, *Kulliyat-i Shams*, vv. 6885–87; cited, with very slight modifications, from Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, pp. 37–38.

12 'Truly it is not the eyes that go blind, but it is hearts within breasts that go blind.'

13 For a comprehensive treatment of this and related teachings, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'The Heart of the Faithful is the Throne of the All-Merciful', in James Cut-singer, ed., *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and Eastern Christian Orthodoxy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom 2002).

14 For a discussion of Rumi's understanding of the heart, see Rustom, 'Rumi's Metaphysics of the Heart', *Mawlana Rumi Review* 1 (2010), pp. 69–79. A helpful treatment of Rumi's cultural, political and religious context is to be found in Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford: Oneworld 2000), pp. 272–87. See also Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1993), pp. 12–36.

In short, the heart becomes tainted whenever it does not conform to God's will. With respect to the image of the mirror, the Sufis say that whenever a human being is in a state of forgetfulness of God, the mirror of his heart becomes rusty and is therefore in need of cleaning. As Rumi famously put it:

Do you not know why your mirror does not glitter?
Because the rust is not cleansed from its surface.¹⁵

How does one polish the mirror of the heart? The Prophet Muhammad says in a well-known tradition that the polish of the heart is the act of invoking or remembering God (*dhikr Allah*). In other words, the more one remembers God and burnishes the mirror of his substance, thereby cleansing it of the stain of forgetfulness that stubbornly clings to it, the more the heart becomes alive and receptive to the truth. Rumi explains it in this way:

Through remembrance and meditation, the heart is polished
until the mirror of the heart receives virginal images.¹⁶

A debated aspect of the etymology of the term 'Sufi' is that it comes from an Arabic root that means 'pure'. Thus, a 'Sufi' is an active and reflexive form of this root, which is to say that the Sufi is one who purifies his inner self. He no longer clings to books and formal learning, since these reflect qualities specific to the partial intellect only. The pen of the scholar is thus no match for the heart of the Sufi. This is because the authority that comes with the spiritual life derives from following those spiritual masters who have withstood the test of time and have entered the Divine Presence, only to return to show others how to follow their way. The scholar or the person devoted to the partial intellect, on the other hand, only follows that formal kind of knowledge available through books written by people who are also dominated by the partial intellect. As Rumi says:

15 Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, I: 34; cited, with modifications, from Rustom, 'Rumi's Metaphysics of the Heart', p. 70.

16 Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, I: 3154. See also Rustom, 'Rumi's Metaphysics of the Heart', p. 71.

The 'book' of the Sufi is neither of ink nor letters.
 It is nothing other than a white heart, like snow.
 The provisions of the scholar are the traces of the pen.
 What are the Sufi's provisions? Traces from the footsteps
 of the saints.¹⁷

The purity of the Sufi is due to his constant remembrance of God. The more he remembers God, the more he comes to know Him; and the more he comes to know Him, the more he comes to love Him. This is why the act of polishing the mirror of the heart is the key to entering into a love-relationship with God. The Sufi's heart, in other words, is like white snow because of its purity, which it has arrived at through the remembrance of God, and through following His friends or saints.

Turning our attention back to the image of the Ocean of Non-existence, Rumi explains that the heart that is pure not only heads towards the Ocean, but it also becomes a part of It:

That heart has become clean and pure from mud.
 It has become excellent and complete.
 It has cast the mud aside and come towards the Ocean.
 Free from the prison of mud, it has become *of* the Ocean.¹⁸

In one important tale, Rumi seeks to illustrate this idea in a more concrete way. He tells the story of a naked man who jumps into a pool of water in order to escape from being stung by a swarm of bees that have been chasing him and will not relent in their efforts to attack him. But since he cannot remain submerged for very long, he resurfaces for air only to find the bees waiting for him so they can resume their assault. The story sheds light on an important point, namely that the bees represent our remembrance for things in this world, while the water represents the act of remembering God. When an individual flees from his remembrance of things in this world and actively seeks to remember and invoke God, he is safe from

¹⁷ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, II: 159–60. For an alternative translation of these lines, see Chittick, 'The Sword of *La* and the Fire of Love', *Mawlana Rumi Review* 2 (2011), p. 13.

¹⁸ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, II: 2249–50; cited, with slight modifications, from Rustom, 'Rumi's Metaphysics of the Heart', p. 71.

remembering that which distracts him from his Goal, which is to say that he is momentarily safe from the shackles of the world that pin him down and cause him to forget his true home. But since he is not completely submerged in the water, because he has not become drowned in it, he sticks his head back out of the water for what he perceives as 'a breath of air', only to realize that the thing from which he was safe is now there to assail him again. The solution, Rumi says, is to become completely absorbed in the water and to drown in it:

The water is the remembrance of God, while, at this moment,
the bees are
the remembrance of so and so a woman and so and so a man.
In the water of remembrance hold your breath and be patient,
so that you may be released from reflections and whisperings of old.
After that, you yourself will entirely take on the nature of
that pure water, head to foot.¹⁹

It is key that Rumi speaks of the one who has drowned in the water of the remembrance of God as gaining the 'nature of that pure water, head to foot'. So characterized does he become by the object of his quest that he actually 'is' it; and it can also be said that it 'is' him.

In light of Rumi's reference to love as the Ocean of Nonexistence, we can see how the tale of the man who fled from the bees provides us with a framework to understand what Rumi was getting at: Extinguished by the remembrance of God, the person characterized by the Intellect rather than the partial intellect – that is, the one with the pure heart – is no longer 'there', as his ego has been wiped away along with the stains of forgetfulness that taint his heart. All that is in 'his' heart is the object of his desire and love, namely God. So dominated has he become with the remembrance of his Friend that he has lost himself in the act of remembrance. Thanks to the constant remembrance of God, the waves of love for 'other than God' have resided, and all things have ebbed back into the Ocean of Nonexistence.

¹⁹ Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. Nicholson, IV: 437–39.

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