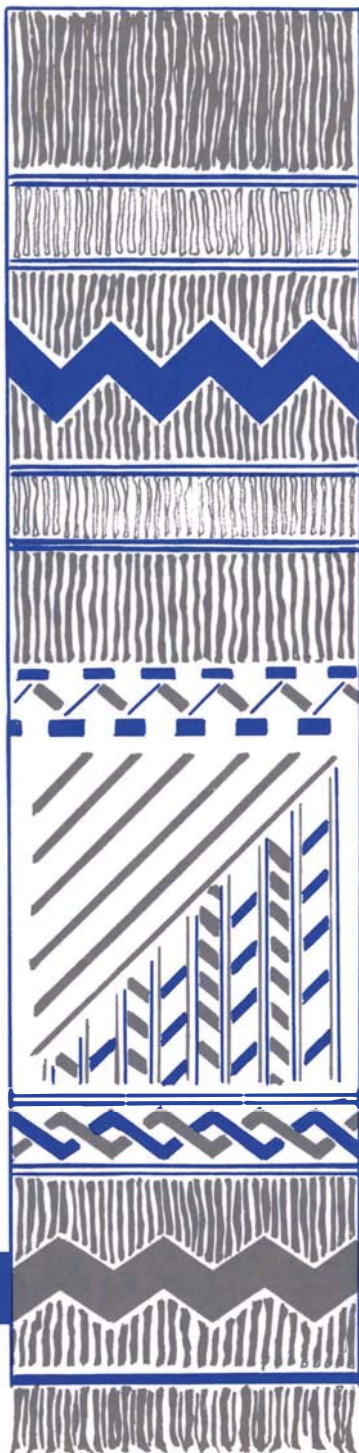


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# The Divine Roots of Human Love\*

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Ibn al-‘Arabi begins his long chapter on love (*mahabba*) in the *Futûhât al-Makkiyya* – as he begins most of the book’s 560 chapters – by citing relevant Qur’anic verses and prophetic sayings (II 322.16).<sup>1</sup> He points out first that love is a divine attribute, and he lists several of the Qur’anic verses in which God is the subject of the verb ‘to love’. Fourteen of these verses mention those whom God loves and another twenty-three mention those whom God does *not* love. In every case, the objects of God’s love or lack of love are human beings. Indeed, the Qur’an associates love only with human beings among all creatures. Hence love is a key term if we are to understand what differentiates human beings from other created things. Most other divine attributes – such as life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, mercy, and wrath – have no necessary connection with the human race.

When Ibn al-‘Arabi turns to prophetic sayings concerning love, he cites first the famous hadith of the Hidden Treasure: ‘I was a treasure that was not known, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures and I made Myself known to them, and thus they came to know Me.’ Second, he cites a prophetic saying that he mentions innumerable times in his works, more often, I am sure, than any other hadith. Again, it is a *hadîth qudsî*, which is to say that God is speaking:

Those who seek nearness to Me seek nearness through nothing I love more than the performance of what I have made incumbent upon them. My servant never ceases to seek nearness to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then,

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when I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks.

The Shaykh cites Qur'an and Hadith at the beginning of this chapter for the same reason that he cites them at the beginning of most chapters. He wants to mention what he calls the 'divine roots' (*al-usûl al-ilâhiyya*) of the discussion. On one level, this means simply that he wants to show that what he has to say is based on the revealed texts. On a deeper level, his reason for mentioning the divine roots has to do with his perspective on reality, a perspective that has come to be called the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujûd*, the 'Oneness of Being' or the 'Unity of Existence'.

In all his works, Ibn al-'Arabi focuses upon reality itself, and reality is *wujûd*, that is, being, existence, or that which is found. *Wujûd* is the Real (*al-haqq*), which is another name for God. In itself, *wujûd* is concealed and nonmanifest. In other words, it is the Hidden Treasure. However, *wujûd* loved to be known, so it created the universe in order to be known. Those who know *wujûd* in a full sense are true human beings, or Perfect Man (*al-insân al-kâmil*). But people cannot know *wujûd* unless *wujûd* makes itself known to them. It makes itself known by manifesting itself in three basic ways: through the universe, through the self, and through scripture. Scripture, the Qur'an in particular, is the key that opens the door to the universe and the self. Unless Muslims have recourse to the Qur'an, they cannot know the universe and themselves. And unless they know themselves, they cannot know God. Ibn al-'Arabi frequently reminds us of the Prophet's words, 'He who knows himself knows his Lord.' It follows that he who does not know himself does not know his Lord.

For Ibn al-'Arabi, as for other Muslims, the Qur'an is the means whereby one comes to know oneself and one's God. The Qur'an is God's self-revelation with the specific goal of guiding human beings to knowledge of reality. Hence the first task of the seeker of God is to search out the meanings of the Qur'an, because the meanings of the Qur'an are the meanings of *wujûd* itself.

In short, when the Shaykh says that Qur'anic verses are the divine roots of things, he means to say that the verses manifest the very principles of *wujûd*, the very sources of the existence that we find in our own experience. The Qur'an gives expression to the realities of *wujûd* in the clearest possible manner, and hence, in our search to understand the realities, we need to look first at the Qur'an. One of the most significant realities for understanding the nature of human beings, and therefore the reality of God Himself, is love.

Love has many similarities with *wujûd*. For example, like *wujûd*, it cannot be defined. At the beginning of his chapter on love, the Shaykh reminds his readers of this fact:

You should know that known things can be divided into two sorts. One sort can be defined, and the other sort cannot be defined. Those who know and speak about love agree that it is one of the things that cannot be defined. A person recognizes it when it abides within himself and when it is his own attribute. He does not know what it is, but he does not deny its existence. (II 325.13)

The Shaykh calls love 'a knowledge of tasting' (IV 7.2), which is to say that people cannot know love until they have tasted it and experienced it in themselves. But, even then, they cannot explain it to others. As the Shaykh says, 'He who defines love has not known it, and he who has not tasted it by drinking it down has not known it' (II 111.12).

Although God or *wujûd* cannot be known in Himself, He can be known inasmuch as He chooses to show Himself. Once He shows Himself, we can summarize what we know about Him by mentioning His attributes, or, as He Himself does in the Qur'an, by mentioning His 'most beautiful names'. In the same way, love cannot be known in itself, but its attributes and names can be known and described.

#### THE NONEXISTENCE OF THE BELOVED

Perhaps the first and most important attribute of love in Ibn al-'Arabi's view is that love's object does not exist. This flies in the face of common sense, because we like to think that

we love someone or something, not nothing. The Shaykh writes,

Many mistakes may occur in love. The first of them is that people imagine that the object of love is an existent thing. . . In fact, love's object remains forever nonexistent, but most lovers are not aware of this, unless they should be knowers of the realities. (II 337.17)

Ibn al-'Arabi's basic point is not difficult to understand. When people love something, they desire to achieve a nearness or a union with the object of their love. As long as they have not achieved the object of their desire, it does not exist in relation to them.

It is characteristic of the beloved to be nonexistent, and necessarily so. The lover loves to bring the nonexistent thing into existence, or for it to occur within an existent thing. (II 332.10)

In his chapter on love, the Shaykh explains why love's object cannot exist. It should be clear from his discussion that by 'nonexistent' he means nonexistent in a relative sense. In other words, the object is nonexistent in relation to the lover. Thus, the lover loves to have something that he does not have, or he loves to achieve something that he has not achieved.

Love never becomes attached to anything but the nonexistent thing, that is, the thing that does not exist at the moment the attachment is made. Love desires either the existence or the occurrence of its object. I say, 'or occurrence', because love can become attached to making an existent thing nonexistent . . .

We said that love desires the existence of the object of love and that, in reality, the object of love is nonexistent. This is because for the lover, the object of love is the desire to achieve union with a specific individual, whoever it may be. If it is someone whom it is appropriate to embrace, then he loves the embracing. If it is someone with whom sexual intercourse can be had, then he loves the sexual intercourse. If it is someone to be sat with, then he loves the sitting.

Hence the love of the lover becomes attached only to that of the individual which is nonexistent at the moment. He imagines that his love is attached to the person, but this is not so. It is this that incites him to meet and see his beloved. He does not love the beloved's person or the beloved's existence in entity, because the beloved already possesses personhood or existence, so there would be no profit in love being attached to the beloved's personhood. (II 327.2)

The Shaykh continues this passage by answering certain objections. Some people may say that they loved companionship, or kissing, or intimacy with a person. Then, when they achieved their goal, they found that their love persisted. Hence, love can exist along with its object. The Shaykh replies that, in fact, the object still does not exist, because love's object has changed. Now the object is the continuity of what was achieved, not the achievement itself. Continuity is not an existing thing. On the contrary, it is the arrival, moment by moment, of the nonexistent object of love. He writes,

When you embrace the person, and when the object of your love had been embracing, or companionship, or intimacy, you have not achieved the object of your love through this situation. For your object is now the continuity and permanence of what you have achieved. Continuity and permanence are nonexistent. They have not entered into existence and their period has no end. Hence, in the time of union, love attaches itself only to a nonexistent thing, and that is the continuity of the union. (II 327.11)<sup>2</sup>

#### GOD'S LOVE

All things are rooted in *wujûd*, which is God, and love is no exception. Hence, if it is universally true that the object of love is nonexistent, the reason for this must be that God's love, which is the root of all love, takes a nonexistent thing as its object. In fact, the idea that God loves what is nonexistent is a corollary to one of the most basic themes of Ibn al-'Arabi's works: God is *wujûd* and everything other than

God is not *wujûd*. Hence, everything other than God can properly be called '*adam*', that is, nonexistence.

One of the Shaykh's most famous technical terms is '*ayn thâbita*', 'immutable entity'. The immutable entities are the things of the universe as known by God for all eternity. God knows all things and God does not change, because God is eternal. It follows that God has always known all things and will always know them. These 'things' (*shay'*) are the 'entities', and they are referred to in the Qur'anic verses that mention that God speaks to a thing in order to create it. Thus the Shaykh writes,

God's words, 'I was a Treasure' affirm the immutable entities . . . They are mentioned in His words, '*Our only speech to a thing [when We desire it, is to say to it "Be", and it is]*' [16:40]. (II 232.12)

The things or entities found in the Hidden Treasure are immutable because God's knowledge of them never changes. Notice that these things are 'things' *before* God creates them. In other words, before they come to be found as existent entities in the universe, the immutable entities are nonexistent. Then, on the basis of His knowledge of them, God bestows existence upon them and they become manifest as what the Shaykh sometimes calls the 'existent entities' (*a'yân mawjûda*). However, the existence of these entities does not belong to them. Existence belongs to God alone. There is only one *wujûd*, and that is the *wujûd* of God, or rather, the *wujûd* that is identical with God. Hence, the immutable entities, as Ibn al-'Arabi remarks in a famous phrase, 'have never smelt a whiff of existence', and they never will smell it. Moreover, this is also true of the 'existent entities', since their existence in no way belongs to themselves, but rather to God.

The hadith of the Hidden Treasure tells us that God created the creatures out of His love to be known. Hence love is the motivating force of creation. The creatures that He creates are the objects of His love. They are, in themselves, nonexistent immutable entities. Hence the objects of God's love are nonexistent. God's love is true love, the source of all

love. It follows that love, by definition, is directed toward the nonexistent, or, to use the Shaykh's terminology, 'attaches itself' (*ta'alluq*) to nonexistence, that is, takes nonexistence as its object.

If love is directed toward the nonexistent, and if love is the source of all God's creative activity, it follows that nonexistence exercises power throughout existence. In other words, the whole universe is rooted in nonexistence and depends upon nonexistence to exist. All activity of all things in the universe stems from God's love. And all the loves and desires of the creatures follow in the pattern of God's love, which is to say that they also are directed at nonexistence. Hence, nonexistence itself is the root of all creation. The Shaykh writes,

We maintain that every effect exercised upon an existent thing belongs to the nonexistent thing. The ultimate goal is nonexistent. That is why it is correct for the seeker to seek it. No one desires what is existent. Thus the nonexistent goal exercises effects in bringing things into existence. In other words, the nonexistent thing is the cause of God's bringing into existence whatever He brings into existence. (IV 431.8)

We can summarize the importance of nonexistence in the Shaykh's ontology by saying that *wujûd* and nonexistence, or the Real and everything other than the Real, are the two pillars upon which the whole universe stands. On one side, God alone is *wujûd*. On the other side, the creatures have no *wujûd*. *Wujûd* on its own simply is. Nonexistence on its own simply is not. But love is an inherent attribute of *wujûd*, and it is the nature of love to express that which is unexpressed, to bring into manifestation that which is hidden, to create that which has not yet been created. Thus love is the inherent tendency of *wujûd* to become manifest, to assert its own reality by showing itself to everything that is not. Love is the overflow of infinite *wujûd* into every possibility of existing, and the possibilities of existing are defined by entities that do not in themselves exist, though they are known to God. Each immutable entity is a specific mode of not existing, because each represents a possible mode in which *wujûd* can be



delimited, defined, specified, and determined. When *wujûd* delimits itself through the entity, *wujûd* shows itself as less than its infinite self, and hence it becomes differentiated from *wujûd* as such. The infinite creatures of the universe are the infinite differentiations and delimitations to which *wujûd* is susceptible. Each creature is a self-showing or a self-disclosure (*tajallî*) of *wujûd* and, at the same time, it does not exist, because *wujûd* alone is *wujûd*. It follows that each creature is *wujûd*/not *wujûd* or, as Ibn al-‘Arabi commonly expresses it, He/not He (*huwa lâ huwa*), that is, God/not God.<sup>3</sup>

Why is love an inherent attribute of *wujûd*? One answer is simply that reality is the way it is, and it is not our task to understand why. The Shaykh, however, prefers to provide answers. In one passage, he explains the genesis of love by referring to two divine names, Beautiful (*jamîl*) and Light (*nûr*). The Qur’an calls God the Light of heaven and earth, while the Prophet employs the name Beautiful in the famous hadith, ‘God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.’ This hadith is especially important because it makes explicit the principle that every beautiful thing is inherently lovable, and this principle has repercussions throughout Islamic thought. Beauty, in short, is that which attracts love, just as love is attracted by everything beautiful.

The Shaykh associates love both with the divine beauty and the divine light. Light is that which is manifest in itself and makes other things manifest. Thus *wujûd* is light, because it is the Manifest (*zâhir*) and it makes other things manifest by creating them. In contrast, the immutable entities are nonexistent, which is to say that they dwell in darkness and nonmanifestation, because they have no *wujûd* and no manifestation in themselves. Hence, when God brings the entities into existence, He showers light upon darkness. In themselves, the entities are simply possibilities of existence known to God. They do not pertain to any mode of actualized existence until God’s light shines upon them. The Shaykh writes,

The divine love derives from God’s names Beautiful and Light. Light goes forward to the entities of the possible things and dispels from them the darkness of their gaze upon themselves

and upon their own possibility. It occasions for them a seeing that is Light's own seeing, because light alone allows anything to be seen. Then God discloses Himself to the entity through the name Beautiful, and it falls in love with Him. (II 112.33)

The Shaykh is saying that the Hidden Treasure is both beautiful and luminous, because it is *wujûd*. The nonexistent things have nothing of their own with which to perceive the divine beauty. In order for God to be able to say to the things 'Bel', they must be able to perceive His words, and all perception, as the Shaykh tells us, depends upon light, that is, manifestation.<sup>4</sup> Light makes itself and others known by its very nature. God's light, shining upon the nonexistent entities, bestows upon them the ability to see, and they see that which is found, which is God. 'God is beautiful', and beauty occasions love by its very nature. Hence the entities fall in love with God, but they can only see God with God's own light. They have no light of their own. In other words, they come into existence only through God's *wujûd*, because there is no other *wujûd*. Thus God's love for the immutable entities gives rise to their love for Him, and His *wujûd* gives rise to their existence. This explains one of the meanings of the Qur'anic verse, 'He loves them and they love Him' (5:54).

God loves the nonexistent immutable entities, and the goal of His love is to give existence to the entities. But the entities themselves never change, since they are immutable. They do not in fact come to exist. To call them 'existent entities' is simply a convention, not an expression of the actual situation.

God's love attaches to the created thing because the created thing is nonexistent. Thus the created thing is the object of God's love constantly and forever. As long as there is love, the existence of the created thing cannot be supposed along with it. Hence the created thing never comes to exist. (II 113.29)

If the created thing never gains true existence, then the existence that we perceive can belong only to God, the Manifest, who is *wujûd*. God makes Himself manifest in a form that is named the 'existent entity'. This entity is what

the Shaykh often calls a 'locus of manifestation' (*mazhar*). It is the manifestation of *wujûd* within specific and delimited confines. But *wujûd* alone is manifest, since manifestation belongs to light, not to darkness; to existence, not to non-existence; to God, not to the creature.

Once the Light of God becomes manifest in the entity and the entity comes to exist in a certain manner, it sees the Beautiful. Then it becomes a true lover of God. Hence it is utterly engrossed in the object of its love. It forgets itself and sees nothing but the Beloved. Having forgotten its own self, the entity knows nothing of itself, so it knows nothing of its own love. In fact, what occurs is that God loves Himself through the locus of manifestation that is the existent entity. Just as 'There is no god but God', so also 'There is no lover but God.' And the object of God's love is God Himself, since 'God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.'

The entity of the possible thing becomes a locus of manifestation for God, so it becomes nonmanifest within Him and is annihilated [*fanâ*] from itself. Hence it does not know that it loves Him. Or, it is annihilated from itself in Him while in this state, so it does not know that it is a locus of manifestation for Him. It finds from itself that it loves itself, for everything is innately disposed to love itself. Nothing is manifest in the entity of the possible thing but God, so none loves God but God. The servant is not qualified by this love, since love has no property within him. After all, nothing of the servant loves God save God, who is manifest within him. God alone is the Manifest. (II 112.34)

If the servant loves nothing but himself, this is because he loves his own nonexistent entity, which is to say that he desires to keep it coming into existence. But the servant's love is simply the reflection of God's love. If the servant loves none but himself, this is because God loves none but Himself. He loves that of Himself which is not yet manifest, and that is the Hidden Treasure. Hence He brings it into manifestation by disclosing it. The immutable entities that He loves are the possibilities of existence found in the infinite, nondelimited reality known as *wujûd* or the Hidden

Treasure. They do not exist in themselves, but they do exist as objects of *wujûd*'s self-knowledge. God loves these objects when they are nonexistent, and the goal of His love is to give them existence. At the moment He gives them existence, He ceases loving them, because love is directed only at non-existence. Hence He loves the next moment of the thing's existence, which is to say that He loves the continuity of the thing's existence. This is one of several ways in which the Shaykh explains his famous doctrine of the 'renewal of creation at each instant'. God continues to renew the existence of things ad infinitum. God never ceases to love the existence of the immutable entities for all eternity, because they remain forever nonexistent. Thus, at each moment His love for the existence of the nonexistent things produces a new creation. The Shaykh writes,

No lover loves anything but himself. This is why God described Himself by saying that He loves the loci of manifestation. These loci are a nonexistence in an entity. Love attaches itself to what becomes manifest, and He is the Manifest within it. The relationship between the Manifest and the loci of manifestation is love. But love attaches itself only to nonexistence. Thus, in this case, the object to which it attaches itself is continuity, and continuity has not been made present, for it extends to infinity, so it can never be made present. (II 113.7)

By loving the nonexistent things, or by loving the manifestation of the nonmanifest, God loves the Hidden Treasure and gives it existence. For the Shaykh, this explains the meaning of the divine name Loving (*al-wadûd*), which the Qur'an attributes to God in two verses. In one of these verses, the Qur'an says that God is 'the Forgiving, the Loving, the Lord of the Throne' (85:14–15). In his chapter on the divine names, the Shaykh writes that the meaning of the name Loving is that God constantly and without cease brings the universe into existence for our sake. We are immutable entities. But through the tongue of our own situation, which is nonexistence, we constantly beg God to bestow existence upon us.

We, with the tongue of our states and our words, never cease saying to Him, 'Do this, do that', and He never ceases doing it. Moreover, we say to Him, 'Do!' only as a result of His activity within us. Do you think His doing things is forced upon Him, when none can force Him? High indeed is He exalted above that! On the contrary, this is the property of the name Loving, for *He is the Forgiving, the Loving, the Lord of the Throne* [85:14–15]. (IV 260.6)

It is highly significant that this verse mentions that God is 'the Lord of the Throne'. The Qur'an associates the Throne with the name All-merciful. The All-merciful sits upon the Throne, and His Throne embraces the heavens and the earth. Hence God has mercy upon all things. In this case, God has mercy on all those who love, since all things are lovers. He is generous and bountiful by nature, because *wujûd* is infinitely full and infinitely effusive. He gives the best that He has with Himself, and that is *wujûd* itself, which is His own reality. Thus He constantly brings the creatures into existence, for they love what they do not have, which is *wujûd*.

He has mercy only upon the ardor of the lover, which is a delicate yearning for the encounter with the Beloved. No one encounters the Beloved save with His attribute, and His attribute is *wujûd*. Hence He bestows *wujûd* upon the lover. If there was anything more perfect than that with Him, He would not have been stingy with it . . .<sup>5</sup> If there had been something else and He had kept it to Himself, this would have been a stinginess that is incompatible with generosity and an incapacity that contradicts power. Thus God reported that He is *the Forgiving, the Loving*, that is, fixed in love in His unseen reality. After all, He sees us, so He sees His beloved. Hence He delights in His beloved. (IV 260.6)

#### HUMAN LOVE

God loves the nonexistent things called the immutable entities. They remain forever nonexistent in themselves, but His love for them brings them into existence continually and forever. From one point of view, God has a single object of love,

which is the universe and everything it contains. Everything He loves is nonexistent and remains nonexistent forever. From another point of view, the universe itself is nothing but the manifestation of *wujûd*. Hence God loves Himself, and through loving Himself He gives manifest existence to that which was nonmanifest.

Human beings, as images of *wujûd*, also possess the attribute of love. The object of their love is always nonexistent in relation to themselves. When we consider God and the universe as two different realities, the object of human love may be God or something in the universe. But when we understand that the universe is nothing but the self-disclosure of God, the object of human love can only be God. And since God in His Essence is forever nonmanifest, unknowable, and unattainable, the true object of love is always nonexistent in relation to human beings.

In one passage, the Shaykh makes this point while discussing the proper attributes of the disciple on the path to God. Literally, the 'disciple' is the 'desirer' (*murîd*), and he should desire God alone. Nevertheless, the Shaykh insists, the object of his desire is in fact nonexistent, both in the sense that is absent from him because he has not reached it and in the sense that it will always remain nonexistent for him because he can never reach God's Essence.

In our view, the object to which desire attaches is nonexistence. You already know that knowledge of God is desired by the servant, and you know that no created thing can gain knowledge of God as He knows Himself, even though creatures have the desire to achieve that. As long as the servant stands in this station, he is inseparable from desire's property, that is, attachment to the nonexistent thing.

Knowledge of God, as we have said, cannot exist, so the property of desire is more complete in the servant of God than in someone who perceives the object of his desire. Hence desire is true desire only when it is attached to an object that cannot be perceived. Desire itself remains qualified by existence only so long as its object is qualified by nonexistence. If the desired object were to be found or established, then the property of desire would disappear. If the property disap-

peared, desire itself would disappear. It follows that desire will never disappear from us, because its object can never be achieved. (II 522.4)

The Shaykh makes a similar point when discussing the attribute of 'seeking' (*talab*). As he says, 'The object of seeking is nonexistence; it is either the bringing to nonexistence of an existent thing or the bringing into existence of a nonexistent thing' (III 317.13). The seeker, like the desirer, is trying to find God. But the God that can be sought is the God that can be conceptualized and understood. Such a God is not God in Himself, but rather, 'the God of belief', which is God as He shows Himself to the seeker.<sup>6</sup> God in Himself can never be found, and the object of the seeking does not exist, since only the God who can never be found by the creature has true *wujûd*.

It is impossible for anyone to love God, because the object to which love attaches is nonexistence, but it is impossible for any relationship of nonexistence to be ascribed to the Real or to what derives from Him. Thus no love attaches to God from any created thing. (II 113.27)

If God in Himself cannot be sought, then what are the seekers seeking? What have the Sufis been singing about in their poetry if not love for God? The Shaykh replies that they are loving and seeking not God in Himself, but the God that they can encompass and embrace. They cannot embrace God in Himself, but they can embrace God as He shows Himself to them. But that God is not *wujûd*, but rather the radiance of *wujûd*, the self-showing of *wujûd*. What people gain from this seeking is their own benefit.

The Real cannot be sought for the sake of Himself. On the contrary, He can only be sought for the sake of benefit. After all, the profit of seeking is to gain [*tahsîl*] the object of seeking, but the Real cannot be gained by anyone. Thus He cannot be sought by anyone in the cosmos. (II 605.29)

The benefit that the seeker seeks is the joy and bliss of

knowing, seeing, and witnessing God in His self-disclosure.

In respect of His Essence and His *wujûd*, nothing stands up to the Real. He cannot be desired or sought in His Essence. What the seeker seeks and the desirer desires is only knowledge of Him, witnessing of Him, or vision of Him. All of these are *from* Him. They are not He Himself. (II 663.9)

Since God in Himself cannot be sought, those who truly know things as they are – those whom the Shaykh calls the ‘gnostics’ or the ‘Folk of God’ – make no attempt to seek Him, since He is unattainable. Rather, they seek their own benefit, and their own benefit is ‘felicity’ (*sa’âda*), that is, the everlasting vision of God in this world and the next. As the Shaykh puts it, ‘God cannot be attained through seeking. The gnostics seek their own felicity, not God’ (IV 443.1). In other words, what they seek is the joy of participating with full awareness in the never-ending creation of the universe, the never-ceasing process whereby God loves the nonexistent things and brings them into existence.

The Folk of God know that they can never attain to their Beloved and hence that they can never know their Beloved. Their Beloved is nonexistent in relation to them and will remain forever nonexistent, and this for them is the source of the greatest joy and felicity, for it requires that they leave nonexistence and enter into existence continually and forever. All creatures love by their very nature. The difference between the Folk of God and ordinary people is that the latter think they know what they love. In fact, their true beloved remains forever nonexistent and inaccessible, and hence it can never be known. They are ignorant of their own ignorance.

Although there are many lovers – or rather, everyone in existence is a lover – no one knows the object to which his love attaches. People are veiled by the existent thing within which their beloved is found. They imagine that the existent thing is their beloved, but, in reality, it is their beloved only indirectly.

In reality, no one loves a beloved for the sake of the beloved’s self. Rather, he only loves the beloved for the sake of



his own self. This is the verified truth. After all, the nonexistent thing is not qualified by desire that the lover should love it for its sake and should abandon his own desire for the sake of the beloved's desire. Since this is not the actual situation, there remains only that the lover loves the beloved for the sake of himself. (II 333.21)

## POVERTY

We have seen that the Shaykh's explanation of love needs to be understood in the context of the relationship between *wujûd* and the nonexistent immutable entities. Another way to understand it is in the context of 'poverty' (*faqr*). The term *poverty* is well known as one of the preferred synonyms for Sufism. Few Sufis in Islamic history have called themselves Sufis. Much more commonly, they refer to themselves as the poor (using the Arabic *faqîr* or Persian *darwîsh*).

Poverty is an innate creaturely attribute in face of God, who is the Wealthy or the Independent (*al-ghanî*). The terms are derived from several Qur'anic verses, especially 35:15: 'O people, you are the poor toward God, and God, He is the Wealthy, the Praiseworthy.' God is the source of all good and all existence, while people have nothing of their own. Hence God is not only infinitely wealthy but also praiseworthy, that is, He is to be praised for every good and for everything that exists.

In Ibn al-'Arabi's vocabulary, poverty is equivalent to the philosophical term possibility (*imkân*). It refers to the nonexistence of all things in themselves. In contrast, wealth or independence refers to *wujûd* and the fact that God has need for nothing, because He is all reality. Hence, in Qur'anic terms, 'God is independent of the worlds' (3:97).

Some Sufis debated as to whether the goal of Sufi practice was to be poor and needy *toward* God or to be wealthy and independent *through* God. For the Shaykh, poverty toward God is identical with independence through Him. However, poverty is the fundamental situation of created things because they have nothing of their own. Since they are inherently poor, it is their very nature to love and to seek what they do not have. The object of their love and seeking

is always nonexistent in relation to themselves. Ultimately, everything in the universe is poor, so everything in the universe is a seeker and a lover.

He who is independent through God is poor toward Him. But the relationship to God through the word *poverty* is more appropriate than the relationship through *independence*. This is because independence is a description of the Essence that abolishes the interrelationship between the Essence of the Real and creation, but every seeking announces an interrelationship, since no one aspires for what is already present. Hence people seek only something that is not with them in the state of seeking. This is why seeking attaches itself only to non-existence, which is the same as the nonexistent thing. The sought object may be within an existent entity, or not within an existent entity.

There is nothing in the engendered universe save a seeker, so there is nothing in the engendered universe save the poor toward what he seeks. (II 263.34)

People are poor toward God. They also love God, and nothing else. However, just as people become confused by the forms to which they are attracted, so also their poverty and need become specified and focused on specific things, rather than on God. The goal of the Sufis – those who know their own poverty for what it is – is to have no object toward which they are poor save God. But, as we have seen, the object of seeking can only be nonexistence. So here again, the Sufis love God by loving that which cannot be delimited, defined, constricted, or understood.

Poverty is an affair that is inherent in everything other than God. There is no way to escape from it . . . However, poverty's goals are diverse in terms of the specification of that toward which the poor person is poor and the meaning for which he has need.

Know that, since it is known that poverty and need are an attribute of the very essence of things, the object to which things attach themselves and toward which they are poor is the seeking of the continuation of their engendered existence

and of their bliss in the most perfect manner, such that the contrary does not interrupt them.

The people of this path do not see this in their states or beliefs save in God. Hence they are poor toward Him and toward no one else.

Their poverty toward Him is not correct in their existence when they exist. Their poverty toward their existence is only in the state of their nonexistence. That is why He gives them existence. So the object to which poverty is forever attached is nonexistence, that He may bring it into existence for them, since in His hand is bringing it into existence. (II 600.32)

The goal of the lover and the seeker should be to strive for God alone, not for any specific gift of God. To love some specific thing would be to be unaware that true love is focused on that which is nonexistent relative to us in an absolute sense. Since only *wujûd* is absolutely other than the nonexistent thing, the true object can only be God.

When you come to understand that poverty has this quality, keep it in mind constantly in every breath and in every state, and attach your poverty to God in a nondelimited sense, without any specification. This is more appropriate for you. If you are not able to achieve the lack of specification, then at least attach it to God with specification. God revealed to Moses, 'O Moses, place none other than Me in the place of your need and ask Me even for the salt you put in your dough.' (II 264.19)

### THE GOAL OF LOVE

The hadith of the Hidden Treasure tells us that God loved to be known. The Qur'an and the tradition in general make it clear that the knowledge that God desired to actualize through creation can be achieved only by human beings, who are God's chosen representatives. Since God created only human beings among all creatures in His own image, they alone are able to know God's self-disclosure in a full sense. Thus the Qur'an tells us that God taught Adam all the names, and one of the interpretations of this verse is that

these were the names of God, that is, the names that designate *wujûd*, the Real. This special knowledge that God taught to Adam explains his superiority over all other creatures. The goal of human life is to actualize the knowledge of the names that were taught to Adam when God created him in His own image.

The fundamental focus of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s writings is not, as many would say, upon *wahdat al-wujûd*, the Oneness of Being. Rather, his basic concern is to explicate the nature of human perfection. Although he never mentions the term *wahdat al-wujûd*, he refers repeatedly to *al-insân al-kâmil*, Perfect Man. His most famous work, the *Fusûs al-Hikam*, begins with a discussion of Adam, the original Perfect Man, and the rest of the work deals with the various modalities of human perfection. Hence it is natural that Ibn al-‘Arabi’s discussion of love should lead to an explication of how Perfect Man is the object of God’s love. For example, he devotes a significant portion of his relatively short subchapter on the divine name Loving to the explanation of how Perfect Man is the goal of God’s love and actualizing perfection is the goal of human love.

Given that Perfect Man is Ibn al-‘Arabi’s most prevalent theme, the idea is extremely difficult to summarize in a few words. By explaining the nature of Perfect Man, the Shaykh clarifies the reality of God, the nature of the cosmos, and the diverse modalities of human existence, since all of these are brought to their full actualization through Perfect Man. Hence Perfect Man has divine, cosmic, and human dimensions. In the section on the divine name Loving, the Shaykh focuses on the cosmic dimensions. I will quote part of the passage shortly. Before doing so, however, let me summarize how human perfection is bound up with the infinity and inaccessibility of *wujûd* and, at the same time, with love for nonexistence.

God in Himself is no thing, which is to say that He is no existing thing, because He is *wujûd* itself, which is the source of all existing and nonexisting things. If human beings are to attain to the perfection of the divine image, they cannot be any specific thing. They must be, at one time, all things and no thing, just as God is all things and no thing.

When ordinary human beings love specific things, they focus their aspirations and desires on specific, designated objects. By doing so, they turn away from an infinite number of other possible objects of desire. God, on His part, loves all things in the state of their nonexistence. Hence His love embraces everything that can possibly exist, and through His love He brings the universe into existence moment by moment for all eternity. As for Perfect Man, he is like God in that he loves everything and nothing. Thus he is totally different from ordinary people, who love this and that.

The Shaykh calls the state of human perfection achieved by Perfect Man 'the station of no station' (*maqâm lâ maqâm*). Every other human being stands in a specific station that is delimited and defined by the specific objects of his love and aspiration. Perfect Man alone stands in no station, because he has fully actualized a love that has no specific thing as its object. Rather, the object of his love is the infinite Essence of God, and that always remains inaccessible to him and nonexistent for him. He is defined by his love and aspiration for the 'nothing' that is the source of everything. Hence he has perfected the divine image, for he is indefinable and inaccessible, just as the object of his love is indefinable and inaccessible. By living in no thing and no station, Perfect Man is freed from every thing and every station. By being poor and needy toward all things, or toward nothing whatsoever, Perfect Man is poor and needy only toward God. Hence he is independent through God.<sup>7</sup>

In love, the mark of Perfect Man is a universal poverty, that is, an utter annihilation of self that brings about a need for God in the full wealth and independence of His total self-disclosure. That full self-disclosure is the universe in its entirety. Through a love for God that is absolute and non-delimited (*mutlaq*), Perfect Man loves all things. The characteristic of this love is to be nonspecific, and it may appear in the seeker who has not yet fully actualized the state of perfection. In the following passage the Shaykh provides a brief description of this type of love and points out its relationship to human poverty.

The subtlest thing that you may find in love is an excessive

passion, a longing, an agitated yearning, a passion, a wasting away, and an inability to sleep or to take pleasure in food all the while that you do not know who it is or how it is that you love, and your beloved does not become specified for you. . .

This is similar to the covenant made with the children of Adam that He is our Lord, so that no one can deny it afterwards. Hence you find in the original nature [*fitra*] of every human being a poverty and need toward an existent thing that can support him, and that is God, but he is not aware of Him. That is why God says, '*O people, you are the poor toward God*' [35:15]. He is saying to them that the poverty and need which you find in yourself is attached to God, no one else, but you do not recognize Him. So we come to know God through Him. (II 323.35, 324.7)

The Shaykh sometimes calls the nonspecific and nondelimited love that is actualized by the Folk of God and Perfect Man 'divine love', since, like God's love for the universe, it does not distinguish among the entities.<sup>8</sup>

The mark of divine love is love for all engendered things in every presence, whether suprasensory, sensory, imaginal, or imaginalized.<sup>9</sup> Every presence has an eye from His name Light through which it looks upon His name Beautiful, for that light clothes it in the robe of existence. (II 113.6)

On the cosmic level, Perfect Man plays the role of the intermediary between God and created things. Perfect Man is the actualized image of God, and hence he embraces everything in the divine reality. The cosmos in all its diversity also discloses the divine reality, but in a dispersed, differentiated, and specified manner. Hence Perfect Man is one through God's Oneness and many through the infinite things that he encompasses, which are the objects of God's knowledge, the immutable entities. The universe is infinitely dispersed, God is One, and Perfect Man is both one and many. Only he has a complete knowledge of God's manifestation through creation. Only he knows the Hidden Treasure in its fullness. Hence Perfect Man alone is the true beloved of God. From this point of view, Perfect Man is the reality of the whole cosmos.

To bring this discussion to a close, let me quote the promised passage from the Shaykh's explanation of the divine name Loving. The passage can serve as a convenient summation of the Shaykh's main teachings concerning divine and human love.

The whole cosmos is one human being that is the beloved. The individuals of the cosmos are the bodily parts of that human being. God did not describe the beloved through the love of its Lover. Rather, He made it a beloved, nothing else.

When God provides someone with a love for Him that is like His love for that person, He bestows upon him witnessing and He gives him bliss through witnessing Him in the forms of the things. Hence God's lovers in the cosmos correspond to the pupil of the eye in the eye. Although the human being has many parts, nothing witnesses and sees save only his two eyes. Thus the eye is like the lovers in the cosmos.

God bestows witnessing upon His lovers because He knows their love for Him. This knowledge of His is a knowledge of tasting. So His activity toward His lovers is the same as His activity toward Himself, and that is nothing but witnessing in the state of the *wujûd* that is beloved to the beloved.

God *created the jinn and mankind only to worship Him* [51:56]. Hence, among all the creatures, He created them alone for His love, since none worships Him and none makes himself lowly before Him save a lover. All those other than human beings glorify Him in praise, because they do not witness Him in order that they might love Him. Thus He discloses Himself to none of His creatures in His name Beautiful save to the human being and within the human being – so far as I know.

This is why a human being does not become totally annihilated and enraptured by love except in love for His Lord or for someone who is the locus of disclosure for his Lord [that is, another human being, created in God's image].

The entities of the cosmos are all lovers because of Him, whatever the beloved may be, since all created things are the pedestals for the Real's self-disclosure. Their love is fixed, they are loving, and He is the Loving. The whole situation is concealed between the Real and creation through creation and

the Real. That is why God brought the name Forgiving along with the name Loving [in the verse *He is the Forgiving, the Loving, Lord of the Throne, the Glorious* (85:14–15)]. After all, Forgiving means literally ‘curtaining’. Thus it is said that [the famous Arab lover] Qays loved Layla, since Layla derives from the locus of disclosure. In the same way, Bishr loved Hind, Kuthayr loved ‘Azza, Ibn al-Durayj loved Lubna, Tawba loved al-Akhyaliyya, and Jamil loved Buthayna. But all these women were pedestals through which the Real disclosed Himself to them.

The beloved is a pedestal even if the lover is ignorant of the names of what he loves. A man can see a woman and love her, without knowing who she is, what her name is, who her relatives are, and where she lives. Love, by its very essence, requires that he seek out her name and her home so that he may attend to her and know her in the state of her absence through the name and the relationship. Thus he will ask about her if he lacks the witnessing of her.

So also is our love for God. We love Him in His loci of self-disclosure and within the specific name, which is Layla, Lubna, or whatever, but we do not recognize that the object is identical with the Real. So here we love the name but we do not recognize that it is identical with the Real. Thus we love the name and do not recognize the entity.

In the case of the created thing, you know the entity and you love. It may be that the name is not known. However, love refuses anything but making the beloved known. Among us are those who know God in this world, and among us are those who do not know Him until they die while loving some specific thing. Then they will come to understand, when the covering is lifted, that they had loved only God, but they had been veiled by the name of the created thing. (IV 260.12)

## Notes

1. References throughout are to *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, Cairo, 1911. For a French translation of the chapter on love, see *Traité de l'Amour* by M. Gloton (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986).



2. Compare the following: 'Love attaches itself only to a non-existent thing. It desires to see that thing as existent within an existent entity. Then, when love sees the thing, love is transferred to the continuity of that state whose existence it loves in that existent entity' (II 337.18).

3. On this phrase as the most succinct expression of the Shaykh's ontology, see W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabî's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), *passim*.

4. On light as the source of perception, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 214.

5. In the dropped sentence, the Shaykh supports his argument by referring to the famous statement of al-Ghazali that this world is the best of all possible worlds. See Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 409n6.

6. On the diverse gods of belief, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, Chapter 19 and *idem*, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabî and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), Chapters 9 and 10.

7. On human perfection and the 'station of no station' see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, Chapter 20, and *idem*, *Imaginal Worlds*, *passim*.

8. In the explications given to his disciple Ibn Sawdakî, the Shaykh said, 'When you see that love or something else is non-delimited, then you should know that it is a divine affair, because the relationship of the Real to all things is the same. But when you see that love is specified, then you should know that it is a property that pertains to accidents and constitution.' (M. Profitlich, *Die Terminologie Ibn 'Arabîs im 'Kitâb wasâ'il al-sâ'il' des Ibn Saudakîn* [Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1973], p. 2).

9. In the last sentence of the subchapter from which this passage is taken, the Shaykh adds a gloss for the benefit of those who are not sure of the difference between imaginal (*khayâlî*) and imaginalized (*mutakhayyal*): 'Know that all of imagination is real, but some of imaginalization is real and some unreal' (II 113.32). He seems to be implying that imagination pertains to the external, cosmic World of Imagination, which he sometimes calls 'discontiguous imagination'. In contrast, imaginalization refers to the microcosmic imagination of individuals, or 'contiguous imagination', such as what appears to people in dreams. On the problems with defining exactly what the Shaykh means in such passages, see Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, Chapter 6.