

*The Complaint of Rumi's Reed: It's Significance as the Identity of Man in the  
Concept of Existence*

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**Abstract**

The Quran opens with “In the Name of God the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate”. Muslims read this verse in their daily life, in prayer, before eating and even before driving. For the Muslims this verse is not only a way of life that is rooted in tradition, but also it signifies a cosmological and ontological statement of existence. In the Unity of Existences school of thought, the world is created as a manifestation of God's All-Merciful name which itself is a manifestation of His own creative will. Rumi, the mystical Sufi poet expressed this idea in the opening couplet of his magnum opus, the Mathnawi: “listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations”. In this paper I will explain how to relate the couplet to the given verse of the Quran and from it we will understand its conception of ethics. Later on, with the given structure, we shall apply it as a response to some philosophical questions such as the problem of evil and design argument; and also scientific challenges to theism such as the big bang theory and the evolution theory as well as the formulated ethic will be compared to moral relativism, consequentialism, and utilitarianism.

Keywords: Meta-ethics, Religion, Islam, Cosmology

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## Introduction

The subject that I will speak of here involve the metaphysic interpretation of the opening verse of the Mathnawi by the mystical poet Rumi as a commentary to the opening verse of the Quran. The Mathnawi, is known to be as the interpretation of the Quran by the Sufis. (Rumi, 2004) Nonetheless, even known as the interpretation of the Quran, the Mathnawi will not be itself without through the Hadis, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. In fact Rumi himself said of his Mathnawi as the ‘root of the root of the root’ of religion. Not as “the root of the root of religion”, denoting itself as at the third level of interpreting the truth from a religious doctrine point of view. (Rumi, 2004) In other words, the Hadis is known as the main interpretation of the Quran, and later followed by the Mathnawi.

The main inspiration for this paper I had derived from the work of one of the foremost Turkish scholar on Rumi, Abdalbaki Golpinarli. The son of the final generation of genuine Mawlawiyah Dervish from the Ottoman period, Abdalbaki Golpinarli is considered as the most authoritative scholar on Rumi in the current period of the Republic of Turkey. Born in 1900 in Istanbul, he spent a portion of his childhood in a Sufi lodge in Istanbul where he studied Arabic and Persian and later on traveled around Turkey as a teacher. His academic career as a university lecturer was short, as he retired rather at young age after he was accused by the government for inappropriate conduct in legal matters. After his early retirement, Golpinarli spent most of his time until his death writing books and doing translations from the works of Rumi and Yunus Emre. He died in 1982 in Istanbul. (Akun, 1996)

Abdalbaki Golpinarli wrote a ‘huge’ three volumes of commentary on the Mathnawi. His commentary of the first 18 verses of the Mathnawi contains important ideas that summarized the metaphysic world-view of Islam, and perhaps in my humble opinion, a great introduction for those who are new to learn about Rumi’s thought in a nutshell. The first 18 verses of the Mathnawi is known as the door to the Mathnawi. In fact it was the only verses that is hand written by Rumi who already composed it in his heart and remembers it. The rest of the Mathnawi was recorded in writings by Rumi’s student, Husam Chalabi as Rumi circling a pole and recites the poems out of ecstasy. (Turkmen, 2002) Stating this fact, the first 18 verses shares the same ontology importance to the Mathnawi as the Surah Fatihah (Opening Chapter) to the Quran. In other words, as the Fatihah chapter is the summary of the Quran, the 18 verses will be the summary of the Mathnawi. As the Mathnawi is the commentary of the Quran, in deduction, the first 18 verses is the commentary of the Fatihah. However, according to Imam Ali, the whole Fatihah chapter is summarized in the first verse, the *Basmala*, that reads “*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*” – “In the Name of God Most Compassionate Most Merciful”. The Basmala on the other hand, as according to Imam Ali, is summarized in the dot on the letter “*Ba*”. (Baldock, 2014) In his commentary of the Mathnawi, Abdalbaki Golpinarli noticed the first letter of both the Quran and the Mathnawi is the letter “*Ba*”. The Mathnawi starts with “*Bishnev in ney chun shikayet mi kuned*” – “Listen to this reed how it complains”. Abdalbaki Golpinarli in his commentary did not further discussed the importance of this similarity, however he did not dismiss the importance of the “*Ba*” letter, which is the first Arabic letter. (1985) This case has prompted me to assume that, or rather to make a hypothesis that, the first couplet of the Mathnawi, “*Bishnev in ney chun shikayet mi kuned. Ez judayeha hikayet mi kuned*” – “Listen to the reed how it complains, how it

tells a story of a separation” as the commentary of the first verse of the Quran, “*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*” – “In the Name of God Most Compassionate Most Merciful”.

### **The Unity of Existence School of Thought**

In the Unity of Existence school of thought, although we say that the Creator and the Creations are in one existence, we are not saying that they are the same as that would be Pantheism, nor we are saying that one is a ‘small’ part of the other as that would be Panentheism, rather we are saying that these two are completely different two entities but one is dependable on the other. In this case, the world of creation is dependable on the Creator – as even though the created world is created after it does not become independent itself. (Golpınarlı, 1985) If the world of creation becomes independent itself for one moment, that moment itself it is not a created thing in metaphysical sense but rather an independent existence itself. Therefore we insist that the Creator is an independent existence, hence in a metaphysical sense, it the only thing that is Real, while the world of creation is completely dependable and subjected to the Creator. Because of it being dependable itself in existence, it is an Attribute. (Al-Attas, 1995; Izutsu, 2007) To illustrate this idea better, let’s imagine, a man has a shadow. The shadow is not the man, as the man himself. The shadow is completely dependable on the man, although it is not the man. If the man disappears, the shadow too will disappear. However, if the shadow disappears, it is ridiculous to say that the man will disappear too. Therefore, as we are saying that the man is the real object, and we refer the shadow as the man’s attribute.

For the Sufis, the world is created out of God’s own creative expression; as based on the hadith, that God says: “I am a hidden treasure, I am desired to be known, so I created creations that they may know Me”. When God says “I” in that context its already indicates that God is a unique self individual, with a free-will of Self-expressing Himself. However, the “I” is not God, but rather it is God’s own attribute – like man who says “I”, his self identification is the attribute of him being aware of himself. (Izutsu, 2007) As God is the originator of the universe, God also is the end of the creation of the universe as the purpose of creation is for Him to be known. Human as the greatest creation is created for this purpose, to know God. We say human as the greatest of creation because human know God through both of His Names that originates good and evil.(Al-Ghazali, 2007) Human is created of two souls.(Al-Attas, 1995) In Rumi’s language, human is like a donkey with angel’s wing.(Arberry, 2006) In other words, human are composed of the rational soul and the animal soul. The rational soul through knowledge will know God’s “The Most Beautiful” name (*Al-Jamil*) whereas the animal soul, through ignorance will know God’s “The Most Mighty” name (*Al-Jalal*). The reason we come to this conclusion is that because, is that *Al-Jamil* and *Al-Jalal* in essence are not the opposite, but the effect that they produce are different.(Wan Daud, 1998) With knowledge, human are tend to be humble towards God and witnessing god’s creation in awe (the effect of *Al-Jamil*), whereas, in ignorance, man tend to be arrogant, forgotten who their real selves. Within this arrogance, man will feel comfortable to disrespect others and take things for granted, and because of this man tend to harm others or to oppress them. Arrogance which is the result of ignorance does not separate from fear. This thinking is conformed in many Western thinking tradition especially noted by Hobbes and other school of realist, where man constantly live in fear due to uncertainty in

life.(1994) The fear or the uncertainty ultimately will be the force that humble man, and this may take in the form of regret in this world or the after world (the effect of *Al-Jalal*).(Al-Attas, 1995)

### **The Connection**

The ‘reed’ is the symbol of the perfect man – a man who possesses the knowledge, that makes him great. The right attitude for others toward a learned man is to be humble, and by humble, Rumi started his *Mathnawi* with the word “listen” for no man can actually listen if he is too full of pride. (Golpinarli, 1985) “Listen”, the first word in *Mahtnawi* is not accidental, for the first Quranic word that is revealed to Prophet Muhammad is “read”. Both of the actions, “listen” and “read” are actions of “input” – what I mean by this is that, these actions are tool to perceive and acquire knowledge. The first step to acquire knowledge is the need for knowledge – like a desire, and this is impossible if man at first does not realize that he is in ignorance. Even if man is comfortable and satisfied with the amount of knowledge he has, he must not be too comfortable with himself as man is made to be forgetful.

The knowledge that we are speaking of here is not simply knowledge as ‘information’, but rather it is the consciousness of God. The consciousness of God is not simply the act of thinking of God, but to know Him through life, the purpose of his act of creation at the first place. As time passes humans go through many consciousness and within this consciousness the desire to reach happiness teaches man to accept of his strength, weakness and with right judgment of what is necessary and what is unnecessary, which become his ethical code. Through happiness and sadness; through fear and security; through thankfulness and regrets; through heaven and hell, man learns the greatness that belongs to God. With this awareness or without awareness, man is living in this purpose, which is to know God; the only difference is amongst man is when they are aware of this. The most general acceptance of this is when man left the world after death. However, for certain men, they have this awareness while they are in this world, and this what may the Prophet meant when he said “die, before you die”.

As man always in the mode of knowing God, the process itself is called Love. Love as defined by Plato is union,(2015) and knowledge as defined by Al-Ghazali is the union of the knower and the known.(2010) As man starts to know God better, he is in union with Him in deeper level. But God, is completely unknowable except to Himself.(Arberry, 2006) If God is knowable then it is not God. Hence for this fact, the flame of love for the lover of God is always in flame and this inextinguishable flame is the complaint of the reed about a separation, between creation and the creator that always exists.

According to another great Anatolian philosopher-mystic, Ibnu Arabi, the world is like a body and the perfect man is the soul.(Chittick, 1982) Like when the body is dead after the soul left the body, the world too is destroyed when there is no the Perfect Man left. Our dependency in existence is already known as ‘love’ (*ashq*) and it is the effect of God’s name “The Most Merciful” (Ar-Rahman) as God is independent – (the real existent), and our existence is dependable on Him, for He is Merciful and to express that He created us as His lovers. When Rumi said “listen to this reed how it complains, telling a story of a separation”, God already answered him

through the revelation given to Prophet Muhammad roughly 600 years before Rumi was born, as “In the Name of God The Most Merciful, The Most Compassionate”.

The metaphysic structure of Rumi’s thought that I have presented so far, is perceived to be ridiculous for some because of anti-theism scientific discoveries. I am myself, not a biologist nor a physicist, nor I am a metaphysician, I am not qualified to discuss the matter that I am about to bring up. However as a student, and for the purpose of this conference I must state that for Rumi, scientific truth and metaphysic truth is inseparable, as they are organically linked together.(2004) Therefore to embrace this approach in one’s intellectual activity, one must be able to put the scientific theories (or discoveries) in the proper ontological place of the metaphysic sphere, although the theories might be proven wrong later.(Nasr, 1997) The result might show a different conclusion, nonetheless, it does not betray the scientific effort and culture.

### **Possible Anti-Theistic Criticisms and Theological Aristotelian Answers**

For the metaphysic deniers the universe is created out of randomness. However governed by natural laws life is made to be possible. The first randomness would be under the law of quantum physics, the accidental clash of the positive and the negative particles created a space, which eventually the starting of time and the beginning of existence. This randomness that cause expansion of space and time, from warm energy cool down out into mass like dust and from this dust the earth was came to be in existence.(Hawking, 2010) The presence of certain chemical properties and with the right temperature on earth made water possible to exist and there from the first living being in the form of fish came to existence. It is considered to be alive because it is able to move, grow, and reproduce and sense of the need to survive present in them. In other words, they do have consciousness. Out of pressure and the need to survive, the fish reach the land and in order to adapt the need for change biologically is programmed in their gene will be passed down to their offspring to be manifested. The process continues in millions of years until human takes place in existence.(FORA.tv, 2011) The brief narrative that I have provided, briefly in a sketch explains the existence of human from the big bang and through evolution. Their ‘truth’ in this narrative is not about the question “why?” but rather about the question “how?”. The question “how?” has no concern about the future, as oppose the question “why?” because the question “how?” is only concerned about the present with no other aim, which according to Rumi is rooted in arrogance in the form of heedlessness.(Arberry, 2006) However, in order to answer the question “why?”, the question “how?” is not necessary neglected. Whilst the answer to the question “how” might undergo changes or improvement, the answer to the question “why?” will never change.

Another challenge to theistic metaphysic is the philosophical problem for the apprehension of God. The weakness in the design argument and the problem of evil have created a vacuum for the mind to accept this God that is worthy to be worshipped and whose rules and laws to be obeyed. When God is difficult to be accepted, randomness will be a stronger conclusion and the spirit of humanity that is based on visible kindness become the principle of ethic and moral code. Supported by Kant’s universal duty and the urge of liberation modeled by the spirit of utilitarianism as suggested by Mills, humans are racing to produce what is the most beautiful

consequence, be it in economic, politic and the environment. The progress of humanity in this term is tremendous. Nonetheless, the “why?” question should not be left unattended. Some may find contention on the “how?” question but some may not. If there is any little benefit of this paper for this particular conference, it will be my humble attempt to realign the scientific and philosophical issues according to the metaphysic structure provided of our discussion on Rumi’s legacy.

The positive and negative particles that started the big bang should not be taken as an independent existence. We must note that the real object is the “particle”. The being of positive and negative denotes its attributes, as positive and negative are adjectives. Adjective ontologically is not an independent existence; they are predicates that attach to object. If we apply Aristotelian metaphysic and analytic on the big bang theory, human’s consciousness would suggest there is an Intelligent being who is responsible for the bang. The reason is, for Aristotle, no greater should come out of the weaker, as it should be the other way round.(2011) Human despite able to act freely is not subjected to randomness. Humans able to organize, making plans and able execute actions to reach their desired objectives. Furthermore, a constrain to randomness is not definition of free-will, as free-will is greater than randomness for free-will is about absolute control. In other words, the energy of free-will must reflect the existence of the law that allows it to exist. The theory I suggested here is in line with Kant’s cosmology of existence that explains the relationship of God and the universe based on the a priori nature aesthetic judgment in man.(Kant, 2008) The only difference between the Kant’s deity and Rumi’s would be that Rumi’s God is an active being as proven by man being active himself. Furthermore in our discussed our Metaphysic frame-view in this context, our consciousness is made to experience the bigger consciousness, which is God Himself. If this is the case then there is a weakness in the evolution theory. However, I am not denying the theory completely, rather I would suggest that the theory is only applicable to the plant and the animal kingdom, not the human kingdom with having the option that the evolution theory might be flawed as a whole. There is a distinction between human and animal and that is the intellect. Although the biologists would argue that there is a slight in DNA differences between human and chimp that makes human as extremely intelligent than the animals, we must be more pragmatic to come to this conclusion. The biologists have classified species into genus, and the modern humans are the only survivor species of the homo genus. The Homo species are descendent from the ape. Cousins for the human species are including chimpanzees and bonobos.(Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science, 2009) The biologists argue that to find the first human is a fruitless effort, because evolution takes millions years of process and the changing occurring within that frame. To find the first creature to be in the human shape is utterly impossible to be recorded.(FORA.tv, 2011) We do not agree with the biologists simply due to them limiting their observation on the physical matter. We also disagree with their deduction and hypothesis. All four kingdoms, minerals, plants, animals and humans share the same basic element of chemical properties. All of them are made of carbon, hydrogen and ultimately as atoms of neutrons and electrons. Nonetheless, the attributes they possess are different. While the minerals are considered to be non-living, plants are restricted to the growth and reproduction, while the animals have the capacity to move whilst humans have the greatest attribute or power, which is ‘thinking’. However I am not saying that a non-thinking human is not a human, but rather the “potential” made possible due to the components that made up its being. If matters in existence are arranged in natural laws that allows the

study of chemistry and physics made possible, it means that the natural law has the potential of 'thinking' exists in it even before the human brain is in physical existence; if not, matters cannot be arranged to produce this effect (*thinking*). "Thinking" we argue is the most powerful attribute because it does not only involves problem solving, but also the power to understand and to create. Therefore, if we apply Aristotle's metaphysic again on this matter, the thinking potential precedes any other potentiality of existence. That is why in Islamic metaphysic world-view, the first creation is the Light of Muhammad.(Golpinarli, 1985) The Light of Muhammad according to Rumi, under Aristotle's glossary, is the highest Active Intellect that governs the other active intellects.(Rumi, 2004) In other words when it concerns to the human soul, the rational soul is greater than the physical body. The act of thinking is possible because of the consciousness of an individual being, as Descartes says "I think therefore I am", so we cannot agree with the biologists that the first human being cannot be recorded as an individual being, as the first existent of thinking being to be actualizes in physical existence must be in term of in the body of a man with an individual consciousness; hence the first man is able to be recorded. (*In the Abrahamic faith, this man would be Adam.*) Given this narrative argument, we come to a conclusion that, although human species shared many physical and biological similarities with apes, they are not in the same genus. Relating to metaphysic world-view that we have, we must insist that because the first man has great consciousness as a human that relates himself to the universe, the body which his soul inhibits must be an original body as whole, if not his consciousness must descends from the consciousness of an ape, which we argue is in lesser degree, and this is in our Aristotelian calculation is not possible.

The spirit of human kindness, if we turn on the news is tremendous; despite there are conflicts like politic interests. The noble duty of being kind and generous itself, with the ambition of counting the number of people to gain happiness, awareness of injustice is clear and the spirit where human take actions are clear, although there are subtle injustice in politics and economics. The challenges to the established philosophy for ethics in the West is lack of preparation of psychological strength. The reason I said this is because, it is the principle of the Western philosophy to come with a thought that is expected to be universal right even with challenges arguments it faces is subjected to flaws to understand them correctly. However in certain cases, an ideology that carries the opposite magnitude is considered to be the 'enemy'. When one belief or expectation is forced on the other, a form rebellion to emerge should be expected. When scarifies were made for the hope of a returning kindness, the feeling of betrayal becomes the seed of negative thoughts. That is why the remedies and solutions provided by psychology is found to be very similar with spirituality, such as focusing the thought on positive matters and accepting the flaws on others by not demanding too much out of them. However, without the bigger picture in the mind frame to only practicing kindness without expectation can be exhausting. Under the metaphysic view we discussed, every comfort we have is a pleasure whilst every pain a trial. In every situation, action arose from intention covers the purpose of ethic in life. The act of kindness is not psychologically understood as scarifies, instead, it is considered as an act of generous, that comes willingly from the heart in order to see the The Most Generous (Ar-Raheem) manifests in our consciousness. In the time of trial on the other hand, is an opportunity for us to remember that arrogance belongs to God alone and with this consciousness inspired us to be nicer and kinder to other beings as a respect to the Creator who created them. While Kant's noble duty is

restricted to the Universal Maxim, Rumi's ethic is open to interpretation in order to manifest God's names in the consciousness and to catch oneself if one living his life in sincerity. Mill's utilitarianism is unfavorable for some because question such as, is the murder one is justified for the lives of five people? The disturbing question is a challenge. In the beginning part of the Mathnawi, Rumi answered this question by justifying the murder of an injustice man initiated by a just king. (Rumi, 2004) The murder is done not out of the King's lust, instead it is the manifestation of God being the All-Wise (*Al-Hakm*). This is the principle of the saying that goes like this, "the death of a learned man is worse than the death of a village of ignorant people". Therefore, the greater good is not within the count of a human body, but which aspect of God that is needed to be manifest for each individual beings in their own experience as reflected in the saying of God that "my mercy precede my wrath". That is why prayer for Rumi is important. Therefore the God in Islam, although it is separate being from the creation, it is not completely alien, hence it very relatable on the personal level of an individual being. Unlike the concept of the God that is criticized by anti-theists, for the Sufis, life as a worship, is not about restrain one's individual freedom for another being (God), but rather, the living of life in the moment, regardless by making mistakes or not making mistakes, in observing God's manifestation of Himself in the consciousness. Therefore, moral relativism under this metaphysic view is utterly not true, because moral relativism justifies multiple dimension of truths. If this the case, then existence is not possible, as multiple truths cannot be in one existence. Therefore, we insist that, despite the presence of different cultures and religions in our world, the consciousness of every human being regarding existence is the same although in different level of intensity.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the rarely discussed Islamic metaphysic world-view. Often, Islam is understood as what is observed. But these observers failed to acknowledge that if either these Muslims really understood their religion as how they should understand. If the observers argue that it is religion themselves – the belief of it – the reason these poor people are in ignorance; they must consider too if these religions too actually necessary in the development of human civilization at the first place. My intention in writing this paper is that to show that there is an advanced understanding of the world that is worth to be explored or even criticized. Just because of one bad apple, a worthy world-view that is associated with the institute should not be buried away. The Islamic metaphysic world-view that I presented in this paper is not new, even perhaps, it is not in details as it should justly be presented. However I do provided an original suggestive narrative of a philosophical interpretation by a mystic of a religious doctrine. I said 'suggestive' because it does not represent the original mystic's intellect, but rather, my own assumption of what is necessary valid. The mystic I am mentioning here is none other than the mystic poet Rumi, and the religious doctrine that I am talking about here is the first verse of the Quran, proclaiming that God is All-Merciful.

From the world view that we have discussed, we can see that certain philosophical key concept that is understood in modern Western world is not applicable to the Muslim understanding. The design argument, problem of evil, big bang theory, evolution theory, the infinite regress argument, universal maxim and utilitarianism, are alien concepts to the Muslim thought. Therefore the judgment of Islam as a whole

in a just manner is not possible if the judgment is limited to foreign prism. The Muslims themselves on the other hand must understand their own tradition properly as well as foreign concepts and thoughts in order to distinguish and clarify what is proper and necessary.

### **Acknowledgement**

Although I did provide my own narrative in this work, I am totally in debt to the works of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas who revised the world-view of Islam in relate to the current mainstream epistemic structure. For those who are interested I recommend his works such as *Islam and Secularism*, and *The Prolegomena to the Metaphysic of Islam*.

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