

## Philosophy of Love As Viewed by Ibn Arabi An Overview

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**Abstract:** Love is an important human trait. Philosophers and scholars from historic past have had analytical views of love. This trait has attracted attention because of its effects on human beings - the effects that influence human lives and behaviors. In spite of long historical discussions about love, the literature on love is minuscule when considering love's mythical, mysterious, and symbolic effects on human lives. Love is a fundamental issue in mysticism. Love has enjoyed a deeply precise discussion in Islamic mysticism. It is possible to claim that love is a single issue that has been discussed the most by Islamic mystics and all mystical schools. This paper offers the lexical meaning of love, continues with a comprehensive discussion of love as viewed by mystics, and explains types of love. This paper looks into most notably views of Ibn Arabi (died 638 HD, 1240 AD) who was the founder of theoretical mysticism. The paper attempts to present the spiritual love as the real love by exploring different thoughts presented on this abstract subject intermixed with doubts and lust.

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### Love - A Lexical Definition

There is a general agreement on definition of love. Dictionaries define love as exaggerated affection, extreme fondness, and intensive kindness.

Arabic dictionaries define love as attraction to a desirable person and extreme attachment, whether sanctimonious or debauchery. Arabs consider affection higher than love because love involves extremism and lovers are blind to imperfections of the loved ones (*Ibn Manzoor*, 1996, p. 251,10).

*Taj al Arosh* provides similar definition for love (Morteza Zobidi, 6485).

*Maghes al Loghah* defined love as the state of surpassing friendship (*Ibn Fars*, 1404 HD, p. 503).

Sheikh Eshragh considered any love as affection but did not believe that any affection was love. He believed that love was extreme affection and, therefore, love was a special type of affection leading to his conclusion that not all affections were love (Suhrawardi, 1380, p. 53).

The late Ali Akbar Dehkhoda defined love in his dictionary as attraction of one to the beauty of loved one, crossing the limits of friendship, extreme kindness, or excessive affection. He quoted these definitions from such references as *Montahalareb*, *Annendrage*, *Tag-al Masader Beihaghi*, *Moeen Dictionary*, and other dictionaries (Dehkhoda, 1325, p. 265).

Doctor Moeen defines love as excessive affection, extreme attachment, or absolute kindness (Moeen, 1382, p. 2303).

*Maaref and Maarif Dictionary* defines love as extreme relationship or overwhelming affection to

someone, or strong attachment to something or someone (Hosaini Dashti, 1185, pp. 4 and 266).

### The Origin of Love

All scholars agree that the word *Eshgh* (love) originated from "*Eshgheh*", Sajadi stated that *Eshgh* was taken from *Eshgheh*, an ivy plant that feeds on other plants forcing it to defoliate and ultimately die (Sajadi, 1341, p 375).

Dehkhoda suggested *Eshgheh* as the origin of *Eshgh* quoted from *Aghreb al Mavared* (Dehkhoda, 1325, p. 265).

Altahanavi in *Kashf Estelahat al Phonon* stated that the origin of *Eshgh* is *Eshgheh*. *Eshgh* (Love) does the same to a lover that *Eshgheh* does to another plant - it saps the juice from another plant forcing it to weaken and ultimately freeing life from its body (Altahanavi, 1382, p. 1012).

Altahanavi in *Theosophy Terminology* indicated *Eshgheh* as the origin of *Eshgh* and further explained that as *Eshgh* reaches its climax, weakens will, makes senses ineffective, takes away appetite, encourages withdrawal, makes conversation with others uninteresting, and ultimately makes lover sick, lunatic, or die (Goharin, 1382, p.121)

Suhrawardi considered *Eshgheh* as a plant, which grew strong roots and attached itself to another plant depriving it from air and water to the extent of making it dry. He believed that *Eshgh* made human, which stood tall and had roots in heaven, die like a plant embraced by *Eshgheh*.

Suhrawardi further explained that the origin of *Eshgh* is *Eshgheh*. *Eshgheh* is a plant that grew a strong root at the bottom of a tree, gradually growing

tall, attaching itself to the plant covering the whole body. Eshgheh saps the juice from the plant and anything it feeds on to the extent of making it dry due to lack of air and water.

Human, as an all-encompassing being, resembles a medium height plant connected to high heavens by deep affection growing roots in the sacred land. When this plant grows tall and reaches maturity, Eshgh starts to grow from the bottom and attaches itself so strongly to sap all humane juice from its body. The tighter the body is embraced by Eshgheh, the weaker it gets. This plant ultimately loses interest in physical being and turns into a spirit deserving a location in heavens (Suhrawardi, 1387, p. 287).

#### **Definition of love by mystics and scholars:**

In spite of definitions offered by different scholars, most believe that love is a condition that escapes definition and identification. Love does not fit into words and those who attempt to define it do not fully understand it. Anything stated about love was about its obvious effects rather than love itself. Anyone who says anything about love speaks of his own understanding.

Scholars confess that love does not fit into verbal or written words and therefore, escapes definition. Anything written about love is just another description. Love is not a simple expression to be defined in a given framework. It is understandable but not describable.

“The secret of love can not even be revealed through any written descriptions

Just as the desirous feelings are for beyond any boundaries of verbal or prose expressions”(Hafez, 1382, p. 310)

In fact, love is a condition to be personally experienced instead of trying to define. Love can be identified only with the help of ones feelings.

“One is not able to deeply disclose the essence of the subject through saying and hearing in the sanctuary of love

Because it is the place where the whole body should be turned into eyes and ears”(ibid, p.207)

Mehdi Elahi Ghomsheyee, a mystic scholar, offered this explanation for love:

"Love is beyond limit, adjective, and word. It can only be understood by its effects and outcomes (Elahi Ghomsheyee, 1336, v. 1, pp. 140-142).

The reality of love is so encompassing and great that limited words and expressions cannot explain and reflect its existential concepts.

Sheikh Ahmad Ghazali stated as follows (Mojahed, 1370, p. 113):

Love does not fit into words because its domain is so pure that words cannot reach to the limits.

Ghazali offered another explanation in another place

Marvel of love is beyond explanation, wording, understanding, and wisdom (Ghazali, 1321, P. 10)

“Love is a concealed substance and no one has yet observed it clearly

So far how long are these lovers going to continue their nonsense boastings

Everyone brags about love on the basis of his/her thoughts

Whereas love is something beyond any imagination and this and that thinking”

Khaje Abdollah Ansari in his book named "Mohabbat Nameh" compared love to a drink - a drink to be sipped in order to taste it - and believed love was not something to hear or enquire about (Ansari, 1377, p. 111).

#### **Love in Ibn Arabi View**

Ibn Arabi considered affection as a state that should be experienced. Anyone who experiences affection can explain it - an explanation that stems from personal taste and perception.

Ibn Arabi believed that love was a spiritual and logical kindness coming from high heavens. He further believed that though it was difficult to offer a precise definition of love, it was a familiar reality and could be personally experienced by anyone. The nature of love defied definition and anyone who attempted to propose one did not know anything about love (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 111).

Ibn Arabi explained love in a poem translated as:

Kindness is attributed to human and in some ways is attributed to Holy God. Our knowledge of love is not so extensive to help us understand the reality of affection.

Love and affection are special and extraordinary kindness, whose nature is not well understood. Isn't it strange? I swear to God that love and affection are interesting, delightful, and yet strange.

Love and affection take over me like nice clothing - clothing in two colors appearing in front of me but non-attending and absent.

I say it clearly that every time beauty manifests itself in our being and in reality, it is solely related to love and affection.

Anything I have said about love and affection, I am apologetic to God that my words do not provide deserving definitions and explanations for love and affection. I provided these definitions to offer my thanks for the love and affection bestowed upon me. Otherwise, how words can serve justice to explain the delight and excitement drawn from love and affection (Mahmood Gharab, 1389, pp. 23 & 24).

Ibn Arabi believed that the inability to provide a definition for love stemmed from its inherent limitless boundaries (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 325). He further elaborated that the essence of human being came from love and affection.

Manifestation of love and affection were the basis and principal of creation of this universe. Holy God existed from all eternity when there was nothing else. God initially showed affection to himself. As he loved to see himself in others, he created universe after his own glory. He looked upon universe, showed affection, and created it after his own elegance. (Mahmoud Ghorab, 1389, pp 29-31)

Love flows through whole life. It is a gift bestowed from God who planted love and affection in any being (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 133).

### Types of Love

Mystics divided love into different categories in their works. Dictionaries offer different philosophical interpretation of love, which are indicative of different types of love. The following list provides some types of love offered by different scholars:

Superficial love, spiritual love, sacred love, figurative love, Holy love, physical love, platonic love, and real love (Dehkhoda, 1325, pp. 268 & 270), instinctive love, divine love (Saliba, 1381, p. 468), junior love, medium love, senior love (Sajadi, 1341, p. 357), lowest love, highest love, middle love (Goharin, 1382, p. 125), virtuous love, rational love, ignoble love (Sajadi, 1341, p. 357), . . .

Following definitions have appeared in literature:

Real love is affection to God and to divine mannerism and behaviors (Sajadi, 1341, p.357). Real love has many other names such as God's love, divine love, senior love, superior love, rational love, and plutonian love.

Real love is vested in human being when his existence is created by or with it. Human essence is at home only with real love, i.e. love towards God, when one forgets oneself next to God. It is love and nothing else. Love and affection to God is buried under cover when human essence is lowered from its high position and blinded by veils. It can only be unveiled by serious endeavors.

Figurative love is the same as junior love and superficial love (Sajadi, 1341, p. 356). They are unreal, temporary, and transient. They are the types of love that attract living beings to each other resulting to survival of races and species (Dehkhoda, 1325, pp. 268 & 270).

Figurative love is divided into two groups: humanistic and animalistic. Unification of initial essence of lover and loved one creates superficial

humanistic love. Superficial animalistic love involves animalistic sexual desire (Sajadi, 1341, pp. 356 & 357).

Figurative love is not limited to human-to-human love and has a wider scope. It includes loving anything other than God. Figurative love is only limited to the number of loved ones. Human-to-human love is figurative humanistic love. This love is humanistic when it is based on characteristics of the loved one or similarity between lover and loved one.

Figurative animalistic love is the one when origin of love is physical beauty of loved one or when love is based on desire, especially sexual desire - a shared characteristic of human and animal. This type of love is shame and dishonorable if it is not controlled.

“Loves which are based on deceits are not only not true but they finally end up to ignominy”(Molavi,1338,p.7)

A careful study of different definition of love proves that they are mostly synonym with similar meanings in spite of different wording. It is possible to group all these definitions into two general categories:

1- Real Love

2- Figurative love, which itself can be divided into two types: a) humanistic love and b) animalistic love.

Real love means love to God and divine traits and behaviors. According to divine philosophers, whole existence loves Holy God and all living beings desire eternal survival and closeness to God. This love flows through the universe and all wish God's closeness. This is the real love.

Humanistic figurative love is superficial and unreal. It originates from internal elegance and its tranquility resides in the lover. As human inherently values beauty, the origin of this love is human tendencies to admire beauty, especially in the loved one, notwithstanding the sexual attraction. In humanistic figurative love more attention is paid to internal beauty or to beauty intermixed with logical enjoyment. The objective of humanistic figurative love is mental enjoyment.

Animalistic figurative love refers to any type of earthly pleasure including pleasures derived from eating and drinking. The origin of this love is animalistic desires and instincts. The lover wants the loved one only for the sake of taking enjoyment and self-satisfaction.

### Types of love as viewed by Ibn Arabi

Mohyeddin considers three levels for love and affection: holy affection, spiritual affection, and

natural affection. He believed that there were no other levels of love.

Holy affection is the affection that God has toward human being and vice versa. (Mahmood Gharab, 1389, p. 139). Holy affection has the highest order in the three-level classification of Ibn Arabi. This affection can be divided into two categories: a) God's love toward human, b) human's love toward God.

#### a) God's love toward human

God's affection to human is indicative of God's love. This love has two sides: one side is God himself and the other side is human (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 327). In other words: 1) God loves us for his own sake and 2) God loves us for our own sake.

1) God loves us for his own sake

Ibn Arabi believed that God created us only for his own sake, so that we get to know him. In other words, God created human to praise him:

(Zariat/56) وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ

It is clear that the objective of creating human was for God to introduce himself to human and become subject of worship. For God to become subject of worship, as was stated in Asra/verse 44, is manifestation of God's glory bestowed upon human as an inherent quality.

(Asra/44) (و ان من شيء الا يسبح بحمده)

Therefore, human loves God and praises him without suffering heavy burden.

All those exist in universe praise God. This praise is based on the fact that God has showed his kindness to human so that they praise God and nothing else. When human respond in kind to God's love and affection, it means he has praised God in return (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 328).

2) God loves us for our own sake

God's affection to human and for human is for introducing human to certain conducts and providing guidance for felicity and salvation. God provides evidences to make us understand what he would like us to learn. God also provides guidance to discover the direction we should move to. God has bestowed human with so many things as proof of his love. (ibid)

Ibn Arabi explained it in another poem (Ibn Arabi v. 2, p. 330) as translated below (Mahmood Ghorab, 1389, pp 140-141)

I have expressed love to my own being, the kind of love only God can give to the ones he has created. A part of this love and affection is natural and a part is divine.

A part of this affection is heavenly brought to you by enlightening heavenly words - the same words in Quran that clearly provide supreme and total guidance.

#### b) Human Love toward God

Ibn Arabi believed that as cause manifests itself into love and affection - the fundamental basis for the creation of universe - sound was also the cause for creation of the universe (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 428).

Hearing and listening to God's words originated human love and affection towards God at the time when human was in state of complete ignorance and lacking insight (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 331)

According to Mohyeddin, our love toward God was either spiritual or natural. We love God in both ways. He divided human love to God into four categories (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 329):

1- Loving God for God's sake

2- Loving God for one's own sake

3- Loving God for God's sake and one's own sake

4- Loving God for neither one of the above

#### Spiritual Love and Affection

Spiritual affection attempts to satisfy the loved one. The only consideration here is the desire and will of the loved one. There is no consideration for the desire and will of lover (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 327). The ultimate objective of this type of affection is becoming a mirror image of each other. This affection is beyond measurement and limits (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 111). This type of affection is a complete love when lover loves the loved one for the sake of loved one. Love is intellectual when lover has intelligence and wisdom, has learned the interpretation of love, and fully understands affection (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 332).

#### Natural Love and Affection

Mohyeddin believed that love was natural when lover only thought about achieving his own objectives, whether or not it delighted the loved one. He acknowledged most loves fell into this category (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 327). In his view, natural love can be one of the two types: natural and specific.

Natural affection is general because most lovers are attracted to natural beauty and their purpose is to reach their own objectives in satisfying own desire. Natural love was selfish because lover loved the loved one only because he could draw satisfaction from the relationship.

Ibn Arabi believed that natural love was inherent in any animal. Human, as a form of animal, also had this type of love. Natural love is the element that attracts any being to its own species (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 334).

The second type is specific. In spite of being natural, it is different from the previous type. Natural affection does not fit into any specific format and like amber attracts all light objects. Nevertheless, specific

love fits into a given format and manifests itself into a special form. This type of love stems from resemblance between lover and loved one. It acts like a magnet that only attracts ferrous materials. Examples of this type of love are Majnoon and Laili or Ghase and Lebeni (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 335).

Ibn Arabi considered a love as natural when lover came from nature irrespective of whether the loved also came from nature. The triggering factor in natural love could be special look of the lover or his voice (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 111).

### Effects of Love

Love is a powerful elixir with capability to change one matter into another one. In view of Shahid Motahari, love is the element that turns heart into real heart. There is no heart in absence of love.

Oh God, bestow me a fiery chest

In which a heart full of warm feelings is placed

A heart with no feelings therein is no heart

A depressed heart is nothing but a handful of

mud

(Vahshi Bafghi)

Love produces its own effects, results, and blessings. Love has its own inherent ethics. Love has certain general characteristics and effects irrespective of the type of love or the loved one.

The following is a list of some general characteristics of love:

- Preferring loved one over everything else including oneself

This is the first and best effects of love and its etiquette. Lover selects, takes, and honors the loved one over anything else (Motahari, 1368, pp 48-49)

- Energizing and Empowering

Love is energizing and empowering. As Motahari put it, love turns a timid person into a strong personality; it increases resisting power against life's pressure, pain, and hardship; and turns an impatient personality into a tolerant one.

- Freedom from selfishness and self-obsession

Love pushes away selfishness as soon as it starts to flourish. Selfishness starts to lose ground to love; the stronger love gets the farther set back selfishness faces (Shojaee, 1387, p. 91)

- Obedience

One of the outcomes of love is lover's obedience of the loved one to do what loved one wishes. Any love that comes from heart brings about obedience. Both real love, i.e. love of God, and virtual love produce this effect. Lover does not get to object the loved one when love comes from heart.

- Energizes talents and induces creativity

"Love has an awakening power and can free tapped powers. Love helps self-actualization and brings out extraordinary talents, like breakig up of

atom to release energy." (Motahhari, 1368, pp. 49-50)

- Takes away aggression and hard-handedness

A lover who gives up his freedom and allows himself to become captivated by love achieves daintiness in heart and eventually trade off aggression for more affable behavior.

Kindness turns bitter into sweet

It also changes copper to gold

Kindness turns thistles into flowers

And vinegar into wine

(Molavi 1338, p. 150)

- Creating unity and focus; eliminating conflict and separation

Lover breaks away from all preoccupations and focuses all his efforts on pleasing the loved one. Lover concentrates all his outer and inner powers on one focal point and frees himself from separation and conflicts seeking tranquility and peace of mind in the loved one.

### Effects of Love in View of Ibn Arabi

- Love makes human deaf and blind

Ibn Arabi believed that love made lover deaf to anything other than spoken words of the loved one. Love also made lover disinterested to see anything but the beauty of the loved one. Love is like a lock that closes off lover's heart to everything but love and affection of the loved one. Even lover's imagination is locked into solely seeing the image of the loved one (Ibn Arabi, v.2, 325).

- Fear and Trepidation

Lover constantly imagines that a sizzling fervor is hanging over him. The continuous fear of something standing on the way of this sizzling fervor to distance lover from the loved one or to inflict harm to them is overburdening. Fear of losing loved one is another effect of love (Ghorab, Mahmood, 1389, p. 168)

- Energizing and Empowering

Lover engages himself in any familiar and unfamiliar endeavor without thinking about its outcome. There is no goodness in rational and wise love affair (Mahmood Ghorab, 1389, pp. 174-175).

- Excitement and Enthusiasm to Meet

Ibn Arabi believed that fervor for reaching to God was innate to mystics. This fervor is required and is a factor for expressing affection. However, reaching to ultimate state requires patience, which has to be acquired. He further believed that fervor is a spiritual drive directed toward the loved one (Ibn Arabi, v. 4, p. 368).

The same fervor becomes a natural, physical, and sensual eagerness to meet, when the loved one is in the same form and image of the lover. Lover

reaches a state of stability and tranquility after meeting the loved one.

Lover wonders how the urge to move revives after meeting the loved one (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 340). Lover's fervor subsides every time he meets the loved one. However, the desire creates another urge to seek the loved one again (Ibn Arabi, v. 4, p. 368.).

Lover senses that the fervor is increasing and that sense brings about fear and tension. He feels that the fear and tension is one-sided resulting to separation and distance. He senses an inner urge that pushes him to seek union (Ibn Arabi, v. 2, p. 340).

### Conclusion

In spite of all discussions about love in mystic literature, most scholars special Ibn Arabi and Ibn Sina believed that love could not be defined and/or identified. They believed love did not fit into words and this inspirational experience should be discovered personally. They believed that anyone who attempted to define love did not understand it.

The more I feelingly describe love

The more ashamed I will be of my expressions  
when I fall in love

Love is not specific to human being and flows through all that exist. Love is in many types. Real love is the love of God. It is the type of love that makes one to abandon everything and seek God for the love of God and not for the benefits he can draw from it.

Any love not directed to God is virtual love. Virtual love is of two types. Virtual human love is an acceptable love and originates from personality resemblance of lover and the loved one. A love stemmed from attraction to physical appearance, shape, color, and parts of the loved one is animal and beastly love.

Open and sexual love fall into animal virtual love category, which degrade human values. Sexual desire should not have the opportunity to present itself as love. Love should remain sacred and pure. Earthborn loves should never take over spiritual loves.

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