



'IMMORTAL SAINTS OF TIME': AN EXAMINATION OF SOME COMMON IDEAS OF PLATO AND JALAL-UD-DIN RUMI

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to carry a comparative analysis of some of the ideas of Plato and Jalal al-Din Rumi, together with occasional mentions of similar elements in the works of associated figures. The main purpose of the study is to demonstrate that there are a great number of striking parallel ideas expressed by both Plato and Rumi and that these common elements account more for the universal influence, both carry in their fields. The author will study common elements in the selected works/verses of both and try to locate few key concepts from their perspectives than the question of influence of one over other. So, it would be very interesting and apt comparison between these two legends, one explores his theory on the strong foundations of philosophy of 'rationality' and the other on the philosophy of "non-rationalism" or Mysticism (Sufism), but the quest of both is to distinguish illusion from reality.

Keywords: *Theory of Forms, Love, Knowledge, Soul*

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INTRODUCTION

Plato was born in 428 BC in Athens to a family of long aristocratic lineage, a fact which must have shaped his philosophy at many levels. At the age of 20, Plato, like many other young men, fell under the spell of controversial thinker and teacher Socrates. He makes comments on poetry in many of his dialogues- *Apology*, *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Cratylus*, and most systematically in *Ion* and *Republic*. The philosopher, A. N. Whitehead states that "all western philosophy is a series of foot- notes to Plato" (Habib, 19, 23).

On the other hand, Rumi was born on 30 September 1207 (6 Rabi al-awwal 604) and died on 17 December 1273. His life therefore, covers almost the entire span of the thirteenth century. He also was not an obscure person even as a child, for he was the son of a great father who had set up for himself a reputation rivalled by few in his own generation.

Jalal-ud-Din Rumi has been described by professor E.G. Browne as "without doubt the most eminent Sufi poet whom Persia has produced, while his mystical *Mathnawi* deserves to rank among the great poems of all time. The French writer, Maurice Barres had once confessed:

"When I experienced Rumi's poetry, which is vibrant with the tone of ecstasy and with melody, I realized the deficiencies of Shakespeare, Goethe and Victor Hugo." (Afzal Iqbal, 1, 50)

After giving brief life sketch of these two immortal saints of time, it would be appropriate to engage with the main task of exploring the few key concepts of the two. It is very interesting to make a comparison between two such philosophers who belonged to two different fields yet have a great resemblance in their thought and the perception of world, and the ultimate reality. Plato believed in the rationality of mind and Rumi like Romantics, in the rationality of heart. As Romantic slogan was:

"Enough of science and of art;
close up those barren leaves;
come forth, and bring with you a heart
that watches and receives.

(The Tables Turned)

Rumi has admired Plato in his *Mathnawi* at various occasions. At one place, he personifies him as love and praises the Greek philosopher as:

Hail love, that brings happiness;
(You) the physician of all our ills
You are the remedy of all our ills

Oh love you are the PLATO and jalniwuuss (physician)

DISCUSSION

1. THEORY OF FORMS:

According to Plato, the familiar world of objects which surrounds us, and which we apprehend by our senses, is not independent and self sufficient. Indeed, it is not the real world, because it is dependent upon another world, the realm of pure forms or ideas, which can be apprehended only by reason and not by our bodily sense perceptions. This world of forms being changeless and eternal, alone constitutes reality. It is the world of essence, unity and universality, whereas the physical world is characterized by perpetual change and decay. (Habib, 21)

Jalal-ud-Din Rumi is of the same opinion. He also believed in two world theory. Rumi like Plato, says that there are two worlds, 'the spiritual world or world of meaning' (command) and 'the world of forms or the physical world' (the world of creation). Rumi remarks that the world of form passes away, but the world of meaning remains forever (eternal). Rumi while echoing Plato's 'theory of forms' says:

"Know that the outward form passes away,
but the world of reality remains forever. How
long will you play at loving the shape of the
jug? Leave the jug; go, seek the water!
Having seen the form, you are unaware of the
meaning
If you are wise, pick out the pearl from the
shell. (M II,1020-1022)

The goal of both the philosophers is same, but the way they approach it is altogether different. Plato regards world of forms as eternal and calls thought/idea as the supreme reality through which he undermines the physical world. While as Rumi regards the world of meaning as supreme and everlasting through which he undermines the world of forms (physical world for Rumi). Rumi beautifully explains this through the following verses:



“forms are the oil, meaning the light-
otherwise,
You would not keep asking why.
If form is the sake of form itself, then
Why ask why?
Pass beyond form, escape from names! Flee
Titles and names toward meaning!

(M IV, 2994-95, 98, 1285)

Rumi has nothing but pity and disdain for those who look at the world around and within themselves and do not understand what they are seeing is a veil over reality. The world is a dream, a prison, a trap, foam thrown up from the ocean, dust kicked up by a passing horse. But it is not what it appears to be. Rumi (spiritual mentor of Allama Iqbal) while echoing Plato says, “if everything that appears to us were just as it appears then the prophet, Mohammad s.w.s who was endowed with such a penetrating vision, both illuminating and illuminated, would never have cried out ‘oh lord show us things as they are’.” (William C. Chittick)

2. SOUL AND KNOWLEDGE

The second resemblance between Plato and Rumi is that both believe in the immortality of soul.

Plato believed that soul was made of three parts. The three parts of soul are man's appetite (Black Horse on Left), Spirited (White Horse on Right), and reason (Charioteer). Each part of soul has its own virtue as well as its vice. Temperance is the virtue of appetite, courage the virtue of spirit and wisdom is the virtue of reason. It was Plato's belief that goodness and justice come from the correct balance of the three parts of the soul. In other words, for Plato, soul is immortal and its three parts appetites, high spirits, or emotional and rational forms a complete whole. Plato is famous for his quote “when man is moved by the guidance of reason and the soul becomes the author of the good”. So he prefers the rational part of the soul and believes the rest of the two lead to the deception. (Russell)

For Plato, soul can be viewed from two aspects. The ordinary soul in the world is in bondage of the body. But the real nature of the soul in its pristine glory before its fall in bondage is pure, contemplating the idea of the good. Hence, the culture of the soul means working out the release of the soul from its bondage. So Plato says soul has its

origin in the world of command or divinity and it wants to go back to meet with its origin. It wants to liberate itself from the vulture clutches of senses and want to mingle with its origin. The interesting argument of Plato's epistemology holds that learning is the development of ideas buried deep in the soul; soul existed before birth with the form of the Good and a perfect knowledge of ideas. Thus when an idea is learned, it is just actually “recalled”. The second argument put forth by Plato is that we are born possessing all knowledge. The soul is trapped in the body. The soul once lived in “reality”, but got trapped in the body. It once knew everything, but forgot it. The goal of recollection is to get back to true knowledge. To do this, one must overcome the body. This doctrine of recollection implies that nothing is learned, it is simply recalled or remembered. (Russell, p.139)

Jalal-ud-Din Rumi expresses same ideas to formulate his mystic theory on soul. Like Plato For him, the soul belongs to the placelessness of the place (khora of Plato) and also wants to go back in order to meet its origin. Rumi remarks:

“You are in the space but your essence is in
the spaceless realm,
close your business here and open it there.
This world (of space) has
come into existence out of the
spaceless, and out of placelessness it has
secured a place” (Mathnawi II, 687)

Rumi says the soul is a substance and the entire phenomenal world is a collection of attributes. Rumi like Plato believes in the innate knowledge, to prove this point, he gives a number of parables in *Mathnawi*. In one of the parable he says that ‘how a spider know how to make a complex and perfect web? Again he says who taught a chicken not to go into the water but the ducklings, enjoy great tides of water, even of the sea.

Rumi does not distinguish clearly and absolutely among the heart, the spirit and the intellect. Each of these pertains to man's meaning as opposed to his form. The spirit is the broadest in scope, embracing the whole of man's inward reality; the term “intellect” lays stress upon the spirit's power of discernment; and the word “heart” emphasizes God-consciousness.



"Sense perception is in bondage to the intellect, oh friend!

And know too that the intellect is in bondage to the spirit (M,III 1824)

The body is outward, the spirit hidden; the body is like the sleeve, the spirit the hand

Then intellect is more hidden than spirit: the sense perceive the spirit more quickly.

You see a movement, you know there is life. But you do not know it is filled with the intellect, The spirit of prophetic revelation is beyond the intellect; coming from the unseen, it belongs to that side.

(M II 3253-55, 58)

Again, Rumi while contemplating on the nature of knowledge says

"Consider the creatures as pure and limpid water, within which shine the attributes of the Almighty; Their knowledge, their justice, their kindness all are stars of heaven reflected in flowing water; Kings are a locus of manifestation of God's kingliness, the learned locus for His knowledge". (M VI 3172-73)

3. LOVE

Plato regards love as an essential element. He says that the senses are deceptive; and instead of revealing the truth, they keep it from us. Reasoning is the only road to truth; and this springs from love. The love of truth is but a particular form of universal love. The homesick soul, living in exile in the world of senses, fervently longs to be united with absolute, to come face to face with the principle of light and truth. This pure and holy desire seeks for satisfaction in earthly emotions, in friendship and aesthetic pleasures, but human embodiments of idea or the material incorporations of idea in art do not satisfy it. It has a need of pure ideas. It is said that the whole Sufi thought or mysticism is based on these few words of Plato (Frank and Thilly p. 65)

Rumi's concept of love is very complex. In his

"Mathnawi," he says:

"If love's pulse does not beat within a man

let him be Plato, he is but an ass.

To Rumi, growth, evolution, assimilation and unity in this world are manifestations of the form of love. He says, "If there had not been love," "there would have not been any existence. Had it not been for pure love's sake, how should there have been any

reason for the creation of heavens". The fundamental difference between the two is that Plato approaches reality through rational inquiry and regards love as mediator between the two worlds. Its goal is to find truth, which is objective, impersonal and outside the human soul, only to be looked and admired like a perfect piece of "art". While as Rumi's idea of love is "non-rational". For Rumi love and reason are contradictory. Reason for Rumi is light and a guide, but love is the goal. Rumi says:

"Love is the ocean upon which heavens are just a flake of foam; they are like a Zulikha madly in love with Joseph. The wheels of universe are turned by waves of love; without love this universe would become inanimate. How would an inanimate, except through sacrifice, change into a plant? How would vegetable, but by sacrifice, become one with spirit of man?"

(The metaphysics of Rumi, 45)

For Rumi, love stands higher than reason. Reason differentiates and separates while love binds and assimilates the heterogeneous and makes it homogenous with itself. One cannot help noticing a striking resemblance between Rumi's view of love and various types of the philosophy of intuition developed in post-Kantian idealism. As his conception of the pure ego is fundamentally the same as that of Fichte, so his utterances about ultimate intuition which he calls love have a marked similarity with the intuition of Bergson.

Rumi quotes:

"What is love? The sea of not being; there the foot of the intellect is shattered,

Servitude and sovereignty are known: lovehood is concealed by those two veils.

I wish this mortal had a tongue adequate enough to remove the veil of secrecy.

Whatever you say or do to remove the veil of secrecy from (Ishiq), you add another veil upon this mystery"

For Rumi love is the law of reason. Rumi has used the same word 'love' with the name of 'Ishiq' in his Mathnawi. For him, love is desire and need. The world is like a mirror displaying love's perfection. A German philosopher, Schopenhauer has replaced the Rumi's word for "love" with "will."



Although the commentary of tongue makes all clear, yet

Tongue less love is more clear without explanation. (Metaphysics of rumi 57)

4. PARABLES

Both, Plato and Rumi are the masters of parables. They have put forward abstruse and difficult ideas in the form of parables, so that each and every one will grasp the difficult ideas and be acquainted with the facts.

Plato's 'parable of cave' has got the universal appeal. We can say that Plato was the first man who set the ball rolling for the upcoming generations to follow his tradition.

It is also a fact that the name and fame which Rumi has earned in this field is matchless. In the words of Allama Iqbal "To explain the deepest truths of life in the form of homely parables requires extraordinary genius, Jesus Christ, Shakespeare and Jalal ud-Din Rumi are probably the only illustration of this rare type of genius" (Stray Reflections, 48)

CONCLUSION

It may be said that Plato and Jalal-ud-Din Rumi have examined elusive and subtle ideas concerning illusion and reality, soul and knowledge, the nature of being and the connection with the ultimate reality with such ardor and intensity that no one can match them. These two legends have left their un-removable foot prints on the sand of time. Let me conclude with the note that Rumi can also be compared with number of philosophers like Hegel (for evolution) Nietzsche (for ideal man) and so on.

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