

Utopia, the Philosopher, and the *Pir*: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideas of Plato and Rumi

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This paper aims to study two concepts that refer to ideal states in two different cultures: Western culture with its notion of utopia, and Eastern or oriental/Islamic culture with its emphasis on the Perfect Man (*insān-e kāmāl*). The paper argues that these two concepts are indicative of two different ways of thinking about man and his social milieu. These concepts show that in different cultures different idealized states prevail, that while the western man's ideal was a society based on certain characteristics—the Republic of Virtue—for the Oriental man the equivalent was the Perfect Man. In the West this utopia is best expressed in the writings of Plato, the *Republic* in particular, whereas in the Orient the expression of the Perfect Man can be seen in various philosophical and literary works. This paper concentrates on the works of Rumi, especially the *Mathnavī*, for although he does not use the expression *insān-e kāmāl*, the idea of *pir* (master) or *mard-e ḥaqq* (man of God) as the embodiment of the perfect man, is central to his worldview.

Plato's portrayal of the communist utopia came as the ideas and the ideals of the polis were on the decline. The notion of utopia was based on the idea that man can only reach happiness and perfection in a political unit. This was a fundamental belief of the Greeks that we can find not only in Plato, but also in Aristotle. The latter argued that different social organizations had different aims, only the highest social organization—the political entity—embodied the highest aim. In short, happiness was the aim of and could only be attained in a political entity. Underlying this Greek idea was the belief that no man is an island unto

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himself and that it is impossible to be happy in an unhappy society. For the Greeks therefore, personal well-being and happiness was closely tied to the social and political life of the city. Aristotle was once asked by a caring father, what he thought the father should do to ensure the future happiness of his children. Aristotle replied, make them citizens of a polis that has good laws. This sums up the Greek attitude to happiness and its relation to political authority.¹

The major concern of Plato's political theory is social justice. This is in marked contrast to the views of Rumi, who lived during the time of the barbaric Mongol invasion and yet did not mention anything about the atrocities from which he and his family fled. For Rumi, as is clear below, the only "world" worth paying attention to is the world within.

For the Greeks, and this includes Plato, Aristotle, the Sophists and the tragic poets, the polis provides the context for moral action. "The common Athenian assumption then is that the virtues have their place within the social context of the city-state. To be a good man will on every Greek view be at least closely allied to being a good citizen."²

Plato wrote about utopia from within this tradition. For him utopia was the political arrangement within which man could truly live in happiness. This can clearly be seen in his *Republic*, especially in the section known as the simile of the Cave. This section, in some ways, goes to the very heart of Plato's argument and shows clearly the differences between the Greek and the Persian conceptions of happiness and its relation to political order.

Plato's political theory is based upon certain philosophical assumptions/ideas. These are widely known and can therefore be summarized here in a few sentences. The theory of Forms, which is central to the *Republic*, is pushed aside in some of his later books, e.g. the *Laws*. But

¹ For an extended discussion of the issue see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 135.

as our concern here is with the former text, the central importance of this theory should be born in mind. Truth is ultimately to be found not in the World of Shadows but in the Forms. Our sense impressions are those of images that are themselves removed from the World of Forms. To attain true knowledge we must go beyond these sense impressions to the Forms. Yet as Plato makes clear, we already know the truth and are only in need of someone to bring it to our attention. It is especially in *Meno* that the theory of Anamnesis (recollection) is discussed and the idea of the philosopher as the midwife is introduced. As Socrates says in this text “If the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal so that you should always confidently try to seek out and recollect what you do not know at present—that is, what you do not recollect?” to which Meno replies “Somehow, Socrates, I think that what you say is right.”³

The immortality of soul for Plato, therefore, implies that man is not born with a *tabula rosa*. We already possess the truth and all that the philosopher does is make us aware of this fact. The philosopher, unlike the *pir* (the Sufi master) or *mard-e haqq* (man of God) in Rumi, is not the sole possessor of the truth. He is, however, self-conscious of the fact that he knows the truth. This, it may be argued, is his only advantage over others.

Plato’s position, however, is made more complicated by some of Socrates’ claims. As Hegel makes clear, Socrates is a complex character. According to Hegel, “[. . .] with Socrates the particular law has become vacillating, there now comes in the place of the universal single mind, which, with the Greeks was unconscious determination through unreflective morality, individual mind as individuality deciding for itself.”⁴ However, Hegel makes an important point about Socrates when he writes “The genius of Socrates is not Socrates himself, not his opinions and

³ *Meno* 86b, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 886.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. E. S. Holdane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 420.

convictions, but an oracle which, however, is not external, but is subjective, his oracle.”⁵

It seems therefore, that whereas the Platonic philosopher in general has views that are quite distinct from the mystic notion of the *pir*, Socrates comes close to the latter. According to Hegel’s statement just quoted, he [Socrates] is more than a midwife whose job is to bring the truth out of other people. He is somehow in the unique position of possessing an internal oracle that guides him on. This internal voice, as will be shown below, is close to the Sufi idea of a pure heart that receives messages from God.

In book 6 of the *Republic*, Plato divides knowledge into two sections that are in turn divided into two subsections each. He divides things into the visible and the intelligible kind. The former are objects of the senses whereas the latter can only be understood by thought. The realm of the visible things constitutes the lower forms of knowledge; *eikasia* (imagination) is the lowest because its objects are the shadows of the World of Shadows. The next one up is *pistis* (belief) whose objects are the original objects of the World of Shadows. In the realm of Forms too, there are two forms of knowledge, the lower one is *dianoia* (thought), by which Plato means geometry and mathematics. These sciences are based upon reasoning and hence thought. Therefore they belong not to the realm of the visible but to that of the intelligible. However, they are not purely based on reason, for they begin with hypotheses that they take to be first principles. The final and highest form of knowledge is *noesis* (understanding), by which Plato means “that which reason itself grasps by the power of dialectic. It does not consider these hypotheses as first principles but truly as hypotheses—but as stepping stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the unhypothetical first principle of everything.”⁶

Truth for Plato can be uncovered by the dialectical method. Dialectic is the method of reaching truth that has

⁵ Ibid, 421.

⁶ Plato, *Complete Works*, 1132.

two essential aspects. First, it is social. It is a social discourse in which at least two people engage. The scholar working alone in his/her study is not the image that is conveyed by Plato's discussion of the philosopher. More likely the philosopher is the person engaged in discourse in the agora. Truth is not to be discovered in isolation from others; it is a social process of discourse. Secondly, in this discourse nothing is taken for granted. There are no assumptions that cannot be challenged; everything can and must be questioned and proved before it is accepted. There are no taboo subjects. This is why in his simile of the Divided Line dialectic is higher than mathematics. The latter is based on certain assumptions that must be accepted before logical reasoning begins. In the social discourse of dialectic no such assumptions exist. One may of course question how far the discourse in the *Republic* lives up to this ideal, nevertheless the ideal of the open unprejudiced discourse remains an ideal that, one may argue, even Plato falls short of.

Leo Strauss argues that for Socrates and by implication Plato,

Philosophy consists, therefore, in the ascent from opinions to knowledge or to the truth, in an ascent that may be said to be guided by opinions. It is this ascent that Socrates had primarily in mind when he called philosophy "dialectics." Dialectics is the art of conversation or friendly dispute. The friendly dispute which leads towards the truth is made possible or necessary by the fact that opinions about what things are. . . contradict one another.⁷

Plato's conception of dialectic as social discourse implies that philosophy is also social and political theory. If truth is to be found in a social setting, philosophy cannot ignore the social. Indeed the social and political conditions have to be right in order to make possible the existence of an open and free discourse. Such discourse can only take place

⁷ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 124.

in a particular political arrangement. For dialectic to yield results, a certain political arrangement is necessary. Philosophy as the love of and search for truth cannot be separated from political theory. Truth can only be looked for in a certain political system. In a despotic/tyrannical state, one could not hope to find philosophers. In such systems truth remains covered up.

The discussion about the role of the philosopher and his relationship to truth is nowhere as clear as in the so-called simile of the Cave. In book 7 of the *Republic*, Plato gives an account of prisoners in a cave, which he argues is like our own condition in life. He writes, "Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling. . . They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them."⁸ The prisoners see their shadows as artifacts on the wall and take these for reality. The shadows are all the reality they know. Somehow one of those in the cave manages to come out and see the true light of the day and the real objects. His first reaction, as can be expected, is unbelief and even shock. However, once the initial reaction is overcome, the question is raised as to what he should do. Plato argues (in the person of Socrates of course) that the person who has seen true reality would count himself lucky and pity those who are still in the cave. The question now is, should he go back to the cave to rescue the others or should he disregard those in the cave and concentrate on enjoying his newfound liberty? Plato suggests that he go back into the cave, where his descriptions of reality outside will be ridiculed and he himself will be taken for a madman. The story, however, abruptly ends and Socrates tells us that

The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey, since

⁸ Plato, *Complete Works*, 1132.

that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it is true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it: In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in itself.⁹

Fundamental problems however, arise. The person who has seen the true light, whom we can now call the philosopher, faces an ethical question once outside the cave. Should he return and save others or should he live his own life irrespective of what others think. To do the former turns him into a prophet, a social (and presumable political) revolutionary who will have to fight social battles with uncertain outcomes. To choose to save only himself turns him into something of a Sufi, i.e. one who knows the truth but is not particularly interested in sharing his knowledge with others. The fact that Plato's philosopher chooses to go back into the cave is reflective of a fundamental Greek attitude that has already been noted; for the Greeks, happiness can only be found in a social context. The happy loner Sufi, living in isolation from society would not have made sense to them. He who does not share in life and society cannot, by definition, be happy. And yet once in the cave, the suggestion seems to be that others should follow the philosopher for he has seen the light and is the only person capable of rescuing others. Democracy seems unworkable in the cave, for it would lead to the dominance of those who do not know the truth and the defeat of the philosopher and philosophy. But what, then, is left of the Socratic emphasis on discourse. There is clearly a sharp difference between the Socratic idea of discourse as the method through which we can uncover truth and the Platonic allegory of the cave. At issue is the very nature of truth and the philosopher's relation to it. Does the philosopher possess the truth or is he a lover in search of it? If the philosopher already possesses the truth, discourse becomes meaningless and dialectic loses the

⁹ Ibid, 1135.

place it was given above. The difference between these two conceptions of truth and the role of the philosopher is absolute but Plato seems not to notice this, or intentionally overlooks these differences and continues the discussion in the *Republic*.

Salvation from the cave, if it could be called that, is a social phenomenon. It is not a private individualistic salvation. The philosopher does not appeal to individuals to abandon society and follow him to the true path. That is the task of the Sufi; the philosopher, on the other hand, aims to transform the society. In answer to the original question of what is justice, Plato suggests that justice can only be realized in a just society, in the utopia. In this sense, justice is a social question that can only be answered on the social level. Plato emphasizes education as the means to set up the just society. Different classes of people need to be educated in different things. As is well known, in Plato's utopia the populace is divided into three classes: the Guardians, the Auxiliaries, and the rest of the population. Each class has its own virtue, that of the ruling Guardian class is wisdom; they must be trained to become philosophers. The second class is made up mostly of soldiers whose main job is the defense of the country against foreign powers. They need to be brave. Moderation is the virtue not only of the third class but also, in fact, of everyone. The just society does not allow excesses.

The Guardian class rules because they are philosophers. If a member of this class fails to live up to the standard of the philosopher, he is demoted to a lower class. In other words, what we witness here is the rule of philosophy rather than (the rule of) the person of the philosopher. His only claim to rule is his love of wisdom and truth. As we shall see below, this is in sharp contrast to the position of the *pir*, for example, in the story of *Shaykh San'an* in Aṭṭar's *The Conference of the Birds*.¹⁰ There the followers of the Shaykh are advised to follow their master even when

¹⁰ For an English translation of this work, see Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. A. Darbandi and D. Davis (London: Penguin Books, 1984).

he is clearly in the wrong. Only the Shaykh knows the secrets of existence and his followers should blindly follow. But for Plato, the edicts of reason are universal. Reason is not the monopoly of any one person. So we can all judge the acts of the philosopher on the basis of our own reason and decide when he goes wrong. Needless to say, the faculty of reason is not developed in everyone to the same extent. In some it is clearly more developed than in others. But it is not the monopoly of any one person. In some Sufi texts it is suggested that the secrets of God and the universe have been revealed to a select few who are not allowed to share it with others.

Plato's discussion in the *Republic* is not without its problems. On the one hand, Socrates' claim to know nothing suggests that the philosopher is only a lover of truth and not a possessor of it, and yet the suggestion seems to be that this book itself is the voice of the man who has come out of the cave and seen the true light and is now writing about it so as to guide the rest of those who live in the cave. For reasons of clarity we can conclude that there are two positions in the *Republic*. The first position, which we can call Socratic, claims that the truth of justice can only be uncovered in a social discourse in which nothing is taken for granted and everything can be freely discussed. The Socratic position is best seen in book 1 where the dialogue between Socrates and his companions does not lead to a definitive result. Socrates is characteristically more interested in asking questions than in giving answers. The second position may be called Platonic. This is the view that at least implicitly sees the philosopher as more than just the lover of truth. In some sense he is the possessor of truth and is therefore in a unique position to guide the rest of us out of our ignorance. This is more the view we find in books 6 and 7 of the *Republic*. Needless to say the importance of discourse is downplayed here. Justice can only be realized in utopia.

This is not to claim that real historical Socrates advocated the first view and the historical Plato the second. That question has been debated among Plato scholars for a long time and cannot be addressed in the short space of

this paper. The claim here is simply that there is a tension in the text and the different positions can be summarized in this way. The two names help us identify the two views. Hegel expresses the difference between Socrates and Plato in these words: “Plato finally set forth the belief of Socrates, which the latter put forward in regard to the moral self-reflection of the subject only, as objective, as the Idea, which is both universal thought and the existence.”¹¹ Once the Idea is seen as objective, truth is viewed as existing independently of us. The role of the philosopher then changes from that of a midwife and a lover of truth to that of the possessor of the truth.

This is what seems to be implied in book 7, when the discussion between Socrates and Glaucon reaches the Idea of Good itself. Here Socrates says “You won’t be able to follow me any longer, Glaucon, even though there is no lack of eagerness on my part to lead you, for you would no longer be seeing an image of what we’re describing, but the truth itself.”¹² The suggestion seems to be that Socrates can move on because he has an inner oracle that leads him on. Glaucon, not being equipped with an inner oracle, cannot follow Socrates’ lead.

This division itself is not without its problems. Plato’s attitude toward the philosopher is more difficult to determine because he wrote the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* but not the *Philosopher*. One must therefore try to find out, on the basis of his other works, what the *Philosopher* would have been like. In the *Sophist* for example, the Visitor says,

For all these reasons, Theatetus, we have to say that refutation is the principle and most important kind of cleansing. Conversely we have to think that even the king of Persia, if he remains unrefuted, is uncleansed in the most important respect. He’s also uneducated and ugly, in just the

¹¹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 54.

¹² Plato, *Collected Works* (*Republic*, 533a), 1148.

ways that anyone who is going to be really happy has to be completely clean and beautiful.¹³

This seems to suggest that the philosopher cannot be unrefuted. Hence he cannot be the possessor of the truth.

Both positions, however, share this belief that truth can only be uncovered and justice realized in a social process that implies the existence of certain political conditions. In the context of the *Republic*, it would be impossible to answer the question of justice without considering the political nature of man's social life. And man's political life can only reach its perfect form in utopia. Justice, properly speaking therefore, only belongs to the polis. It is only in utopia that full justice can be achieved. Setting up the utopia is hence the ultimate answer to the question of justice.

As is well known, Plato's philosophy spread to the land of the Muslim caliphate and Muslim philosophers, and though initially influenced mostly by Aristotle, it turned later to Plato. It is well known that their Platonism differed from the teachings of Plato himself. However, this paper does not aim to define or discuss Islamic Platonism. It aims to compare the views of Plato with those of Rumi, specifically on the question of justice. The choice of Rumi is based on two considerations. First, Rumi's poetry is written in Persian, whereas most of the work done on Islamic philosophy in the West is carried out by scholars who read Arabic, but often do not read Persian. The study of Rumi is, therefore, often ignored by philosophers and left to scholars of Persian literature who very often lack the philosophical training necessary to study Rumi's philosophy. The result is that Rumi's work has not been studied in a philosophical light.

Second, Rumi is not, strictly speaking, a philosopher. He is of course a poet. On the surface this might make it unsuitable to compare him with Plato. However, we must bear in mind the important fact that in Iran/Persia poets constitute(d) the heart of the people's culture. The philosophers' writings were often in Arabic and employed

¹³ Plato, *Collected Works* (*Sophist*, 230e), 251.

unfamiliar Arabic *and* Greek terms that meant that it had little effect on popular culture. If we are interested in studying this culture, or what Hegel calls the moments of consciousness of a people, then instead of concentrating on philosophers we must focus on poets. As Bertrand Russell once wrote, the Iranians are a nation of poets. In order to understand their psyche, or their consciousness, we must study their poetry. Avicenna may have been greatly revered; but Rumi, Hafiz, and Ferdowsi were widely read or listened to. Their poetry used to be sung or performed in the popular coffee-houses (*qahve khaneh*) or the Sufis' gathering places, the *khaneghah*. So even the illiterate could listen to and often even memorize these poems. Never is there a reference to one of Avicenna's books being read in such popular places.

Rumi, through the magic of his poetry and the attraction of his stories, sets up a world in which many Iranians lived (some still do so to this day). Rumi's *Mathnavi* was the basic text for those who frequented the *khaneghah*. Just as Plato's *Republic* was a fundamental text that helped set up a world with its own view of man, virtue, justice, and politics, Rumi's *Mathnavi* set up a world with its own definition of man and his purpose in life. Both these texts had far-reaching impacts upon the societies in which they were written and in fact their influence went far beyond the borders in which they were written. It is these similarities that make this comparison meaningful. And yet there are serious differences between these two texts and these differences will enable us to better understand the differences between the Greek and the Persian cultures. This is not to claim that all the Greeks were Platonists or that all the Persians were followers of Rumi. But if one agrees that both these thinkers set up their own worlds, then it becomes clear that comparing these two worlds would help understand part of the Greek and part of the Persian worlds. This will then enable one to better understand these two cultures.

Rumi's world is in many ways Platonic. He believes in the Platonic Forms but does not clearly state how this can be integrated into Islamic theology. In a famous story he

tells us about an unwise hunter who sees the shadow of a bird on the ground, and ignorant of the fact that this is merely a shadow and that the real bird is in the sky above, decides to hunt the shadow. In that story and in many others, his terminology is close to Plato's. He too believes that our material world is but a mere shadow of an eternal and beautiful Form. Rumi believes that man has been severed from his roots. At the beginning of the *Mathnavī* he likens man to a flute that has been cut *neistan*. The flute's melancholic music is a lamentation on its being cut off from its roots. This could of course be interpreted as man's fall from paradise. The idea that man lost his place in paradise is an old one; Rumi's bold twist on this is not to say that man should try to get back into the lost paradise, but that he should find the paradise inside himself. If man cannot live in paradise, paradise must live in man. This was Rumi's central revolutionary idea.

This idea had been hinted at by some Sufis before, but Rumi was the thinker who formulated it into a set of practical aspirations and on this basis, set up in the *Mathnavī* a world that won popular appeal among a large section of the Iranian population.¹⁴ The question remained, what did justice mean in this world and how was it to be achieved?

Rumi starts his great book by lamenting man's separation from God. Man had belonged entirely to the Platonic realm of Forms, then fell into the material world of shadows. Here Plato's dualistic worldview sits next to the Qur'ānic and Judaeo-Christian idea of the fall of man from heaven. It is not quite clear how Rumi combines the two views. If man belonged to the realm of the Forms, was he part of the idea of the Good? Before his fall was man God? Rumi's answer seems unclear.

Some Sufis had already decreased the distance separating man and God. Hallaj, for example, claimed that he was God, or more strictly that he was the Truth (*ānā-l ḥaqq*). The idea of *fanā'-e fī-llah* (annihilation in God) was

¹⁴ Before Rumi many Sufis had hinted at this idea. See Aṭṭar, *Tadhkirat al-'Awliya'*, ed. Reynold Nicholson (Tehran: Manuchehri Press, 1995).

a strongly-held belief of some Sufis. Rumi seems to have taken this idea, at least in part, and mixed it with Plato's notion of the two worlds. In the fourth book of the *Mathnavī*, Rumi tells the story of Bayazid who was a prominent *pir*.

Ba moridan an faqir-e mohtasham
Bayazid amad ke nak yazdan manam
Goft mastaneh ayan an do fonun
La elah ella ana ha fa bodun.¹⁵

That venerable dervish, Bayazid,
came to his disciples, saying "Lo, I am God"
That master of the (mystic) sciences said plainly
in drunken fashion

"Hark, there is no god but I, so worship me."¹⁶

For Rumi, it seems, man's spirit belongs to the realm of Forms whereas his body belongs to the World of Shadows. Concerning Rumi's view of man, Professor Schimmel writes,

By constant struggling with the lower faculties,
and by eliminating base qualities, man can reach
annihilation (*fanā'*) in the Divine Will, *fanā'* being
basically an ethical concept. Purified through love,
he then acts in conformity with the Divine Will,
similar to the Prophet in the Battle of Badr when
the Koranic verse was revealed 'Thou cast not
when thou cast, but God' (Sura 8/17).¹⁷

This way of looking at man is reminiscent of how some Christian theologians viewed Christ. Christ was seen by many Christians as having two natures: one godly, the other earthly. He was in spirit the Son of God, but in his bodily form he was a man. This view of Christ was of course central to Christian theology, for it meant that God

¹⁵ *The Mathnawī of Jalaluddin Rumi*, ed. and trans. Reynold Nicholson, 8 vols (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1925–40), 3:401. Hereafter referred to as *Mathnawī*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 4:388.

¹⁷ A. Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (London: East-West Publications, 1980), 263.

had taken human shape in order to suffer like man to atone for the sins of men.

This was in many ways close to Rumi's vision. Except that Rumi did not think of one man, Christ, as the only son of God. He considered not the entire human race, but the select few to be the children of God. The few (sometimes referred to as *pir* or *vali* or *mard-e haqq*) were godly. To love them was to love God; to obey them was to obey God; to be in their presence was to be in the presence of God. *Pish-e man āvazat āvaze khodast.*

Some Sufis and theosophers since Rumi and even before him have given an extensive and complicated account of the esoteric hierarchy of the men of God. Henry Corbin summarizes these in the following words.

[. . .] I will only call attention to the schema of the esoteric hierarchy established by a great Iranian Sufi Shiite of the thirteenth century, Sa'duddin Hamuyah, as reported by Haydar Amuli. This hierarchy of *awliyā'* or Friends of God comprise seven degrees: 1. The group of three hundred *nuqaba'*, men of God who, like all the *awliyā'*, remain *incognito* for the majority of men. 2. The group of forty *nujaba'* 3. The seven *abdāl*. 4. A group with five members of whom we are simply told that they assure the continuity of being. 5. The four *awtād*. 6. The triad formed by the *ghawth* and its two auxiliary Imāms. 7. The supreme pole or pole of poles.¹⁸

Compared with this tedious hierarchy, Rumi's view of the men of God is refreshingly simple. A rigid complex hierarchy is usually the sign of a decaying age. In Rumi's poetry, on the other hand, one sees the vitality and freshness of an idea in its youth.

Rumi believes that reason alone is unable to rescue man. Indeed if reason and science lead man to think he is powerful and can find happiness on his own, they become a hindrance that should be got rid of. Rumi holds that it is

¹⁸ Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. Philip Sherrard (London: KPI with Islamic Publications, 1986), 66.

better to be ignorant and humble before God than to feel confident as a result of one's wisdom and knowledge. The philosopher can only lead one to misfortune and ultimately hell. It is the prophet and the *mard-e ḥaqq* who has been touched by God who can save mankind.

The philosopher's wisdom is unable to save us because ultimately his tool, man's rational faculty, belongs to the World of Shadows. Reason does not partake of the Godly essence. It is futile to try to understand God through reason. It is only when man realizes this fact and admits his wretchedness and failure to find the true path that salvation becomes possible.

Pishbiy-e in kherad ta gur bud
Van-e saheb del benafkh-e sur bud.
In kherad az gur o khaki nagzarad
Vin qadam arseh ajayeb nasporad.¹⁹

The foresight of this intellect extends (only) to the grave,
While that of the spiritual man is till the blast of the trumpet [of Resurrection].
This intellect does not pass beyond a grave and sepulchre, and
This [intellectual] foot does not tread the arena of marvels.²⁰

Plato's philosophy seems a great distance from Rumi's poetry. However, as was shown above, there are two separate trends in Plato's thought, one that sees the philosopher as midwife and argues that truth should be uncovered through a social discourse in which nothing is taken for granted. This attitude is clearly opposed to Rumi's worldview. For Rumi, man's reason is unable to find truth on its own. However, there is a second trend in the *Republic*, in which Socrates claims to be guided by an inner oracle that seems to save him from error. This is a crucial admission for it means that for Socrates too, human reason is not enough. At critical moments some kind of

¹⁹ *Mathnawī*, 3:475.

²⁰ *Mathnawī*, 4:455.

supernatural force—an inner voice, the voice of God—must step in to allow the worlds of Forms and Shadows to be joined together. If there is no bridge between the two worlds, man is hopelessly lost. Salvation would then be impossible. If we are to allow Socrates an inner voice to guide him, why not recognize the *pir* as the voice of God that can lead us from the earthly world to the heavenly realm? Why give Socrates a unique position that no other man can have? Would this not amount to giving Socrates a Christ-like position?

In a famous *ghazal* in his *Divān-e shams*, Rumi sees the story of man as an ascent from the lifeless existence of earth, to the vegetable life, to animal life, and finally now to human life.

I died as mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was Man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar
With angels blest; but even from angelhood
I must pass on: all except God doth perish.
When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,
I shall become what no mind e'er conceived.
O let me not exist! For Non-existence
Proclaims in organ tones 'To Him we shall
return'²¹

Man should, therefore, not fear death for with each successive transformation he has ascended, not descended. His death too will be an ascent; he will then become an angel. For the angel too, there will be a death. He will then become pure light; a suggestion that implies that Rumi believes that man will finally become God. History is, therefore, the movement from pure matter to pure spirit.

Man's greatest enemy is not external to him; it is his own *anima brotus* (*nafs ammāra*). The real hero is not the man who, like Rostam, can overthrow an enemy on the battlefield. The real hero is the Sufi who fights the base animal instincts inside himself and kills his *nafs ammāra*

²¹ Schimmel, *Triumphal Sun*, 328.

to reach union with God. "It requires long and hard struggle to tame the *nafs*, but eventually, by the grace of God, it will pass over the stage of *nafs ammāra* and *nafs luwama* (comparable to 'conscience' cf. Sura 75/2), and reach the state of *nafs mutmainah*, the 'soul at peace' (Sura 89/28)."²²

Rumi focuses his attention on man's heart and soul. The mind's eye has been turned wholly inwards. This is clearly one of the main differences between Rumi and Plato. *The Republic* is after all a text that, if not wholly political, is at least mainly concerned with political and social questions. Justice for Plato is a socio-political issue. Whether Plato's philosopher is a political leader or not may be open to debate; his (the philosopher's) deep concern with political and social questions is beyond dispute. Rumi's *pir*, however, has come to the conclusion that the world with its petty concerns and evil distractions is not worth paying any attention to. One may only guess at the underlying reason(s) for this hatred of this World of Shadows.

One important reason must have been the barbaric Mongol invasion that occurred during Rumi's lifetime. The world of politics had become so utterly evil as a result of this invasion that one could not possibly hope to find justice or happiness in that world. The historical position of Rumi can be likened to that of the Greek Stoics who lived at the time of the breakup of the polis system and colonization by the Romans. Of these Hegel writes in his book *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

[. . .] Stoicism is the freedom which always comes directly out of bondage and returns into the pure universality of thought. As a universal form of the World-Spirit, Stoicism could only appear on the scene in a time of universal fear and bondage, but also a time of universal culture which had raised itself to the level of thought.²³

²² Ibid., 270.

²³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121.

This is a significant statement that reveals a great deal about Rumi too. No doubt Rumi lived “in a time of universal fear and bondage.” Oriental despotism always brought with it universal fear and bondage, but this was heightened to unprecedented levels as a result of the Mongol invasion. The chilling story of the invasion can today be read in a historical work that was written soon after the event: *Tārikh-e jahangoshay-e joveini*. In this work we read that whole towns and cities were completely destroyed by the invading armies. Not only was the country defeated and for the most part occupied, but much of its population was put to the sword. Houses were flattened, crops burned, and livestock slaughtered. This was the greatest calamity that had ever befallen Iran. To many it seemed like the end of the world had arrived. It had a devastating effect upon the Iranian consciousness.

Rumi was personally affected by this great tragedy. As is well known, his family was originally from Khurasan, a province in northeastern Iran, the first place that was attacked; it bore the brunt of the Mongol attack. His father had taken his family and moved westward until finally settling in Anatolia. There, Rumi lived in relative safety all his life. Yet the danger from the Mongols was never far away, and he must have had relatives, family, and friends in Khurasan who had been killed.

The Mongol invasion made the existing fear and bondage absolute. Rumi's inward turn may therefore be seen as a response to this absolute fear. It is understandable why someone living in mid-thirteenth century Persia would want to ignore the world with all its pains and tragedies and turn the mind's eye inward to the joys of the heart.

To achieve happiness, man must “polish the mirror” of *del*. “The image of the mirror is common: it has to be polished by piety, good works and love until man can see in it ‘the science of the prophets without books and without preceptor and master.’”²⁴ Rumi believes that by praising God, man is in reality praising himself. Man has a dual

²⁴ Schimmel, *Triumphal Sun*, 278.

nature: one earthly, the other godly; therefore to worship God is to worship the godly in ourselves. The ultimate perfection of this godly side of man was achieved in the person of the Prophet Muhammad. The pir is one who comes close to this ideal. It is he, therefore, who can lead us out of the cave into the light of the day.

There are two differences between the figure of the pir and that of Christ as understood in Christianity. First, unlike Christ, the pir lays down the law that must be obeyed. If the essential requirement for a Christian is to *love* Jesus, the essential requirement for the Sufi is to *obey* the pir. This difference is probably due to a fundamental cultural difference between the Christian West and Persia. Whereas the former is based on suffering, the latter is based on fear. For (most) Christians the Son of God had to suffer for our redemption. Our love of him connects us to him and ensures our redemption. But pre-Islamic Persian society was based on despotism that runs all the way from the family to the tribe to the royal throne. The culture was founded upon and functioned on the principle of fear. Despotism refers to the lack of any right for those who do not exercise and hold power. Those without power have no protection from the arbitrary will of the powerful. In such conditions, the powerless can only hope to achieve some security by showing their obedience to those in authority. This is as true of the position of a child in relation to his father as it is of people at large in relation to the *Shahanshah* (the *King of Kings*).

Ultimately, this culture survived the Islamicization of the country and is once again reflected in the relationship between the pir and the Sufis. Rumi tells us to show absolute obedience toward the pir, for he alone is able to save mankind. Human reason, for Rumi, is clearly limited. It can only, as he says, lead as far as the grave. We need a different kind of reason to see beyond that. Human reason is very limited in scope and outlook. One can never rely on it to find the truth. For truth ultimately appears in revelation and we must seek it in God's words. However, we are in no position to ensure that we can understand God's message. This is where the pir comes in. He discloses

the true meaning of the revelation to us and shows us the path to God. To follow him is to follow the Word of God.

The second difference between the pir and Christ is that whereas the latter's position is unique, theoretically anyone can become a pir. To do so he would have to go through a rigorous training program whose aim is to destroy his *nafs-ammāra* in order to let his godly side take control of his actions. Plato's Guardians and the philosopher-king have to go through a long educational program, as outlined by Plato. But the Guardians already come from a distinct class, something that cannot be said of the pirs.

Our ability to become pirs is perhaps best reflected in Aṭṭar's *Conference of the Birds*. Rumi had great respect for Aṭṭar, whom he considered one of his great teachers. In this book we find the story of birds that wish to reach and see *Simorg*, the famous mythological bird of ancient Persia. On this hazardous and long journey, *Hodhod* is the pir, the guide whom everyone must obey. A great many birds die on the way and only thirty arrive at *Hodhod's* place, and find that they themselves are or have become the *Simorg*. The suggestion is that we are to follow the pir on the Sufi's journey to God. Many of us may not survive the journey, but those who are determined to see the journey it to the end will become god-like. This again is similar to Rumi's idea about the progress of life from pure matter to pure spirituality.

Rumi's notion of spirituality however, needs to be clearly defined lest it be confused with the idea of spirituality in Western philosophy. For Rumi, the notion of free subjectivity does not exist. The idea of the move from matter to spirit may sound similar to Hegel's conception of history but there is a major difference between Rumi and Hegel, a point that Iqbal failed to understand. For Hegel, the move away from matter and toward spirit is understood in terms of the development of the free subjectivity that comes about in modern European philosophy. Nothing could be further from Rumi's mind. For him, liberation can only come when the *nafs ammāra* is destroyed. Man's claim to be the subject may have seemed blasphemous to Rumi. It is only in admitting to the fact

that one has no power, that one is nothing, that ultimately one does not exist, that one can be saved and become God. To become God means to join God in His Godness or divinity. This can only be achieved by denying one's humanity. Free subjectivity is the very opposite of what Rumi wants to achieve.

Conclusion

Plato's notion of the philosopher cannot be easily determined. Broadly speaking, there seem to be two positions in his philosophic system. The first position, the "Socratic," is best seen in book 1 of the *Republic* and is marked by the endless search for truth. Here the philosopher is a kind of midwife who, by posing intelligent questions, helps the interlocutor uncover the truth. The philosopher is not the sole possessor of the truth; uncovering the truth is a social act that can only take place in a discourse free of all taboos and restrictions.

The second way of looking at truth and the philosopher has been termed Platonic here. It is based on the existence of a world of Forms in which absolute concepts reside. The highest concept is the Idea of the Good, which it may be argued, only the philosopher knows. The simile of the Cave also points to this conclusion: only the man who leaves the cave and sees the sun can distinguish truth from falsehood. According to this reading, the philosopher is more than a midwife, he is the possessor of truth and as such he has to be followed. The only salvation from the cave lies in following his lead.

Rumi's pir is in some ways close to the Platonic way but is totally different from the Socratic view of truth and the role of the philosopher. The pir is the man who has destroyed his own *nafs ammāra* in order to experience *fanā' fī Allah*. He can see the depth of souls and determine what we need to do in order to become closer to God. He is a spiritual guide who can rescue us from our lost world of the senses and lead us as with Plato's philosopher to the intelligible world of the intellect, but to a world beyond that, the world of being lost in God. The pir is, therefore,

not simply the Platonic version of the philosopher; his goal is different. Ultimately, he does not trust human reason.

For Rumi, truth is covered up by man's earthly existence. Truth is spiritual and cannot be expressed in our earthly material existence. The task of the *pir* is to uncover the truth. It is he who can help us see through the *hejab* (or "cover") of the earthly body. Truth is hidden behind a veil and the *pir* will uncover it for us.

The *pir* is, in some ways, like the midwife who helps us discover the divine within us. The "self" that we discover is based on the denial of subjective individuality. This "self" is the universal One in which all individuality and particularity is lost. The Sufi becomes "free" by denying his own individuality.

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