

An Enquiry into Sufi Metaphysics

A. Introduction: Sufism is said to be *the* religious philosophy of Islam from a broad point of view (Nicholson 1989, p. 1) and there seems to be a one-way generalization concerning doctrinal aspect of Sufism. However, there are some problems:

1. Diversity among Sufi sects
2. Oversimplification in textual analysis

Given these problems, we may not be justified in assigning the same doctrinal structure to all Sufi texts.

B. My project: (I) I set forth the traditional approach on Sufi metaphysics.

(II) I aim to come up with an analysis of *The Conference of the Birds* by Persian Sufi Farid ud-Din Attar (c. 1120- c. 1221), emphasizing its metaphysical connotations.

(III) I present a reading of the relevant aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, which focuses on the debate of pantheism, and, show that this reading captures some metaphysical assumptions that match the plausible alternative interpretation of the above-mentioned literary text.

Therefore, I aim to show that we are not justified in thinking that Sufi metaphysics is only what Islamic philosophers so far offered us.

C. Sufi Metaphysics by Philosophers of Islam:

a. I take the "traditional approach" to be Ibn al-Arabi's view, in which:

- there are two uses of *wahdat al-mujîd*:
 - as a term for existence in general,
 - as "Being", which refers to God in Himself (Chittick 1989, p. 6)
- these two aspects characterize the metaphysical hierarchy: the things that exist - the whole cosmos- are spatial and temporal and Being provides the possibility for things to exist, so things exist through Being (Chittick 1989, p. 79).

b. Objections against the pantheistic interpretations of this view: Objection 1 by Burckhardt, objection 2 (Clay analogy reversed), objection 3 by Chittick.

When all this criticism is taken into account, there is no room for monism or pantheism in Sufi metaphysics.

Is the traditional approach only metaphysical doctrine that is revealed in all Sufi texts? My answer is no.

D. Metaphysical Connotations of *The Conference of the Birds* by Attar the Sufi:

a. Question: What can *The Conference of the Birds* as a piece of Sufi literary work offer philosophically?

b. A brief analysis:

- There are 106 references to the the conceptions of God, of man and of universe which are grouped according to the schools their content fall close to.
- There are 56 references in the text that point out pantheistic conceptions of God and of universe.

c. The overall narrative: *The Conference of the Birds* is the story of birds who wish to find their king. The allegory reveals at the very end of the journey that they take in order to find their king: Only thirty birds survive the journey and they get to the gate of God. There they meet Simourgh, which literally means thirty (si) birds (mourgh), and they come to know that Simourgh is actually they themselves.

d. The dominant metaphysical assumptions throughout the text:

- The visible world (i.e. what is known to us/all-to-us) and the invisible world (i.e. what is not known to us).

- Duality in unity: The world visible and the world invisible (i.e. all-to-God) are distinct, but they - together- are only God and there is nothing else. Namely, God includes the visible world, but He is not only it. Then, there occurs a duality between the world visible and the world invisible for human subjects due to their scope of knowability, while God as the unity of these two worlds has the knowledge of both.

E. Spinoza's God – The Divine Mind and Reflections on Simourgh

a. Spinoza?

- a pantheist: Deus sive natura!
- a panentheist: Deus sive "natura"!
- a pan(en)theist: What if panentheism coincides with pantheism? The case in which God is a single infinite mind that both contains the attributes of thought and of extension and at the same time consists of these attributes!

b. Spinoza's God?

"By God I understand an absolutely infinite entity, that is, a *substance* consisting of infinite *attributes*, each of which expresses eternal and infinite *substance*." (E1D6; my emphasis)

"By attribute I understand that which intellect perceives of *substance*, as constituting its essence." (E1D4; my emphasis)

"By substance I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that which does not need the concept of another thing, from which concept it must be formed." (E1D3)

c. How can we argue that Spinoza's God is a single infinite mind?

Given E1P17S, E1P14, E1P20; we can form the following argument:

1. God's intellect constitutes the essence of God. (in E1P17S)
 2. The essence of God and the existence of God are one and the same. (E1P20)
 3. God's intellect constitutes the existence of God. (1, 2)
 4. God exists as one and the only substance that consists of infinite attributes. (E1P14)
 5. God's intellect constitutes one and the only substance that consists of infinite attributes. (3, 4)
 6. God's intellect constitutes infinite attributes of the substance. (5, transitivity of identity)
- Therefore, God's intellect constitutes God. (6, 4)

If constitution as an expression of the identity between the constituter and the constituted applies to this conclusion, it results as the following: God's intellect is identical to God. God, then, *is* an infinite mind.

d. How do pantheism and panentheism coincide?

- The human thinking: "I think (I am a thinking thing)". From this, we shift to the object of thinking, which is expressed as the following: "Then, there is the thought that I think". Now, all this formulation says that there is thinking that is ascribed to the subject 'I'. This statement is expressed in subject/predicate form.
- The divine thinking: "I [God] think (God is a thinking thing)", followed by "Then there is the thought that I [God] think." for the sake of the shift to the object of thinking. Again, what this formulation emphasizes is that there is the act of thinking by the subject that the formulation is uttered by. This statement is expressed in subject/predicate form as well.
- As a result of such formulations,
 - at the ontic level: we can renounce the subject/predicate duality and commit ourselves to a naturalistic position: there is only thinking for granted. According to this view, the duality between the subject and the predicate vanishes, that is, thinking is the one and the same thing as the subject. This is the pantheistic aspect of the idea of God as a single infinite mind.

- at the epistemic level: the thinking/thought structure persists. This is the pantheistic aspect of the idea of God as a single infinite mind.
- “God’s intellect constitutes God” reveals a similar type of identity: The thinker and the thinking are one and the same thing. If the infinite attributes of the substance constitute God’s intellect, then *all there is* is the divine thinking with infinitely many thought-patterns. Namely, all is both one and expressed in one, as the thought-patterns are both constituting the divine thinking and expressed within the divine thinking. God as a single infinite mind, therefore, is a pantheistic system that subsumes a pantheistic assumption.

e. How can we relate the metaphysical assumptions in *The Conference of the Birds* to this framework?

- Unity of the visible and the invisible worlds → the pantheistic aspect: The unity of existence (of the worlds visible and invisible) is provided through God’s very thinking that serves as the substrate for infinite number of divine thought patterns.
- Duality in unity that springs from the different scopes of knowability → the pantheistic aspect: While the scope of human knowledge provides an understanding of God in a binary opposition as God and God’s thinking, at the ontic level, there exists one divine mind that is God’s thinking.

F. Conclusion: The possibility of there being a different metaphysical reading of at least one Sufi text leads us to think that the traditional approach is not the only recipe for understanding Sufi metaphysics and that the generalizations on Sufi metaphysics are not justified.

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	DIRECTION OF THE REFERENCE		
	TRADITIONAL VIEW RELATED ¹	PLATONIC ²	SPINOZISTIC ³
God	(N) Page 4, paragraph 2	(D) Page 35, couplets: 1-3	See the category “God & Universe”
	(D) Page 33, couplets: 15, 17, 18	(D) Page 54, couplets: 2-5, 8	
	(D) Page 45, couplets: 13, 14	(D) Page 157, couplet: 1	
	(N) Page 26, lines: 1-3	(D) Page 102, couplets: 3-6	
Man	(N) Page 2, paragraph 6	-	-
Universe	(N) Page 2, paragraph 11	(D) Page 36, couplets: 12, 13	See the category “God & Universe”
God & Man	(D) Page 92, couplets: 6, 7	-	-
	(D) Page 162, couplet: 16	-	-
	(D) Page 163, couplets: 1-3	-	-
God & Universe	(D) Page 36, couplets: 12, 13	(D) Page 52, couplets: 11-13, 16-18	(N) Page 3, paragraph 11
	(D) Page 123, couplets: 11-17		(N) Page 4, paragraph 1, 2,4
	(D) Page 124, couplets: 1-3		(N) Page 6, paragraph 1
			(D) Page 35, couplet: 5
			(D) Page 40, couplets: 2-6
			(N) Page 29, paragraph 3
			(D) Page 102, couplets: 3-6
			(D) Page 114, couplet: 5
			(D) Page 123, couplets: 11-17
			(D) Page 124, couplets: 1-3
			(D) Page 191, couplet: 15
			(D) Page 192, couplets: 1-3, 6
			(N) Page 116, paragraph 5
			(D) Page 219, couplets: 1-11
			(D) Page 191, all couplets in “The Valley of Unity”
			(D) Page 220, all couplets in “The ashes of Hallaj”
TOTAL	29	21	56

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the references in *The Conference of the Birds*.⁴

¹ The relevance is determined according to ideas in traditional approach in Sufism on the concept of God, human being’s place in metaphysical hierarchy and the creation.

² The relevance is determined according to Platonic ideas on God in the form of the good (as the source of knowledge, its oneness) and the form-copy analogy for material objects.

³ The relevance is determined according to Spinozistic ideas on God, oneness of the substance, modes of being and attributes.

⁴ Line, couplet and paragraph numbers are from both Davis’ (D) and Nott’s (N) translations. The part invocation and some other pieces of narratives, which are not included in Davis’ translation, are referred from Nott’s version.