

# RUMI'S DOCTRINE OF EVOLUTION

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I was prompted to reflect on “evolution” in Rumi’s thought by the enormous popularity of his poetry in North America and the widespread habit of misinterpreting his teachings. Rumi’s popularity has its roots in the scholarly translations of R. A. Nicholson and A. J. Arberry. But the “Rumi boom” itself is based on the talents of a number of American poets, who recognized a mine of gold when they saw it. They took the ore provided by the scholars and reworked it into contemporary English poetry, often without any knowledge of the Persian language or the intellectual and spiritual tradition that Rumi represents.

In my profession as a scholar of Islamic Studies, I am often asked about the quality of these translations. I reply that most of them are inaccurate and inept. The reason for this is simply that the translators fail to bring out both the literal meaning and the deeper implications of what Rumi is saying. It is true that the English versions often display sparks of Rumi’s fire, and that helps explain why they have become so popular. But, for those who understand the Persian language—and even more so for those who are familiar with the worldview that animates Rumi’s poetry—the translations are lame. One is reminded of Rumi’s famous line,

*The leg of the reasoners is wooden—*

*a wooden leg is awfully unsteady. (I: 2128)*

Well, the leg of the translators is even more unsteady than that of the reasoners. This is largely because the translators are unfamiliar with the universe of discourse that was articulated by the very same reasoners whose wooden leg Rumi criticizes. In order to illustrate what I mean, I want to bring in a contemporary of Rumi whose writings can help us understand the context and contents of Rumi’s teachings. This is the philosopher Afīal al-Dān Kāshānī, who is better known in Persian as Abū Afīal. He was one of the great reasoners of the Islamic tradition, even though he has hardly been studied in modern times. Among his seven or eight treatises, one is a masterly summa on logic. He is a rare example of an important philosopher

who wrote mainly in the Persian language. Nonetheless, he is not well known even in Iran. Those who have heard his name are more likely to know him as the author of quatrains, something in the style of ‘Umar Khayy m.<sup>55</sup>

The best guess at the date of B b  Afial’s death is 1213, which is six years after Rumi’s birth. We know almost nothing about his life, except that he taught and died in the village of Mara  outside of K sh n in central Iran.

As a philosopher, B b  Afial has several exceptional qualities, some of them related to the fact that he wrote in Persian. As is well known, most of the Muslim philosophers were Persian by birth, but they wrote their important books in Arabic. By doing so, they guaranteed that their writings would be read throughout the Islamic world. When B b  Afial broke with this pattern, he effectively excluded his treatises from the philosophical canon.

Lest anyone think that he wrote in Persian because he had not mastered Arabic, I should also mention that he produced some of the most faithful Persian translations of Arabic philosophical texts ever accomplished, even if we judge him by contemporary standards. And, no translator of philosophical texts into Persian has been able to match the beauty of his prose. Moreover, he wrote the original versions of at least two of his own treatises in Arabic. Then, however, he translated them into Persian at the request of his students.

If B b  Afial wrote primarily in Persian, he did so because he was not writing for professional philosophers. Rather, he wrote for a group of highly motivated seekers of wisdom who did not have much training in the Islamic sciences. Any philosopher taking a quick look at his writings might think that they are too elementary and straightforward to merit much attention. However, a closer examination would show that they have something of the quality of Sa’d ’s prose, which is famous for being *sabl u mumtani*, “simple

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<sup>55</sup> A fine edition of most of his works was published forty-five years ago by Mujtab  M nov  and Ya y  Mahd v . *Mu annafat-i Afial al-D n Mu ammad Mara  K sh n * (2 volumes, Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1331-1337/1952-58; reprinted in one volume, Tehran: Khw razm , 1366/1987). For a study of his life and works along with a translation of many of his writings, see W. C. Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afial al-Din Kashani* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

and impossible.” In other words, the language looks easy, but it cannot be duplicated. The truth is that B«b« Afial’s Persian treatises are written in a simple and beautiful prose and, at the same time, they are extraordinarily sophisticated presentations of the main teachings of the philosophical tradition. This helps explain why Mull« Âadr«, the great Safavid philosopher, could take the trouble, four hundred years after B«b« Afial’s death, to translate one of his works into Arabic.<sup>56</sup>

Precisely because B«b« Afial was a brilliant philosopher who wrote in Persian for beginners, his works are remarkably clear. He sets down the purpose and goal of philosophy with a directness that is unparalleled in the philosophical canon. This same clarity and explicitness make his prose writings a great help in interpreting Rumi, who often leaves much unsaid.

When Rumi tells us that the leg of the reasoners is wooden, notice that he is talking about their “leg.” He is not saying that rational thought is useless. He is not objecting to the organized and even organic vision of reality that was expressed in Islamic philosophy, the home of logic and systematic rational discourse. Rather, he is criticizing those who think that analysis, investigation, rational argumentation, and scientific proofs provide a leg strong enough to reach the goal of human life.

The key issue for Rumi is “reaching the goal of human life.” Here we need to remember that he was speaking within the context of the Islamic tradition, for which that goal was clear, even though the language in which it was expressed could be quite diverse according to the school of thought. The Hellenizing philosophers, who are the great logicians and reasoners, had no basic disagreement with Rumi on the goal of life. B«b« Afial articulated the philosophical vision in a language that has little resemblance to any of the schools of Sufism, but he also agreed with Rumi, though he would have pointed out that poets have a right to a certain rhetorical excess. Indeed, a bit of that excess can be seen in some of B«b« Afial’s own quatrains.

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<sup>56</sup> This is B«b« Afial’s treatise *J«vid«n-n«ma* (translated in Chittick, *Heart of Islamic Philosophy*). Mull« Âadr« called the Arabic version *Iksâr al-‘arifân*. For a discussion of the manner in which Sadr« modified and added to the text, see the introduction to my translation of *Iksâr al-‘arifân* in the Islamic Translation Series (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, forthcoming).

So, what is this “goal of human life”? All the Muslim philosophers—Bakr Afial perhaps most explicitly—held that it is to reach the perfection of what is humanly possible, a perfection that stands beyond ordinary experience and awareness just as the sun stands beyond the moon. If Rumi objects to the philosophical expression of this goal, it is simply because, in his view, rational thought and careful logic cannot provide the energizing power to achieve it. Rational thinkers tend to get bogged down in honing their methodologies. Too often they maintain that human perfection cannot be achieved without the specific, rationalistic tools that they themselves have developed. Rumi replies that their methodology is no leg with which to climb mountains. He calls Ibn Sâna, the greatest of the early philosophers, “a donkey on ice.”<sup>57</sup> The only leg that can take the seeker to the top of the icy mountain of transcendence is the transforming fire of love.

What I want to stress here is that to say that the “leg” is unsteady is not to deny the truth of the worldview articulated and systematized by the philosophical tradition. The proof of this is that Rumi himself speaks for this worldview, though in a language transfigured by poetical imagery.

My foremost guide in the study of Rumi, Annemarie Schimmel, would criticize me here—as she has done in print and in friendly banter—for suggesting that Rumi considers intellect (*‘aql*) not only an important tool but even a necessary asset on the path to God. I reply that the proof lies in the numerous verses that Rumi devotes to achieving the fullness of intelligence. We cannot pretend that these verses become dead letters when other verses tell us to throw away our rational thinking. Moreover, the very fact that Rumi devotes many verses to playing down reason and playing up love indicates that intellectual understanding was a primary focus among his contemporaries and his own disciples. Rumi was no exception to the rule that Franz Rosenthal has enunciated in his fine study of the role of knowledge and rationality in Islamic civilization, *Knowledge Triumphant*. Rumi had no opposition to rational thought per se, as he tells us repeatedly. He simply wanted to insist that reason and intelligence cannot supply the energy needed to traverse the path to God.

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<sup>57</sup> *Dâwn* (Furüzünfar edition), verse 35277.

Rumi clarifies the necessary role of rationality in several passages in which he compares intellect to the angel Gabriel, who guided the Prophet on the *mi'raj*. The Prophet could not have travelled up through the celestial spheres without Gabriel to show him the way. In Rumi's depiction, Gabriel in the outside world plays the same role as intellect in the inside world. Muhammad himself, the greatest of the prophets, needed Gabriel to guide him on the ascent to God. At the very least, this shows that everyone else need to have some understanding of the nature of things if they are to escape from egocentricity and short-sightedness.

I do not want to deny that Rumi considers love the most important factor in the path to God. Love alone is able to provide the energy that allows one to put the correct understanding of things into practice. Moreover, a point may be reached when love takes over completely. When Gabriel took Muhammad as far as the Lote Tree of the Far Boundary (*sidrat al-muntabiq*), he told him that he would have to ascend the rest of the way to God on his own. If Gabriel tried to accompany him, his wings would burn off.

In short, intellect and correct understanding of things can take the traveller only so far. However, the Lote Tree of the Far Boundary is very far indeed, because it marks the furthest reaches of creation, of understanding, and of everything that can be grasped by human awareness.

If Gabriel is needed for the Prophet to reach the Lote Tree, this means that intelligence and correct understanding are needed for seekers to reach the borderline between time and eternity. Only intellect, which is the divine light innate within each human being, makes possible the understanding that Ultimate Reality is one, and that everything other than God is a veil and an illusion. Nonetheless, the final steps into the unknowable depths of the Godhead can only take place on the leg of love. Not even intellectual vision, the highest sort of vision in the universe, can take the seeker into God's own presence.

One more point needs to be remembered in any discussion of intellect in Islamic texts. This is the distinction between what Rumi frequently calls *'aql-i juzwâ* and *'aql-i kullâ*, "partial intellect" and "universal intellect." Intellect, Rumi tells us, was created from the same light as the angels, but our own intellects are only partial, because they have become dimmed and obscured. Partial intellect is blind, because of the pride and self-interest of the human

ego, the *nafs*. It relies upon its own cleverness, not upon God. In this it takes after its mentor, who is Iblis. As his story in the Qur'an makes clear, Iblis is very much the self-reliant sort who thinks that he does not need help from anyone.

If seekers of God are to escape ignorance, delusion, and egocentricity, they must find the light of the universal intellect, which becomes embodied in the outside world as the angel Gabriel. It is Gabriel who brings God's revelations to the prophets in the first place, and it is he who guides them and their followers on the path that leads back to God. In the Islamic universe, Gabriel plays a central role both in revelation and in the spiritual journey, that is, both in the descent of wisdom from God and in the ascent of the human soul to God. Like other Muslims, Rumi understands this to mean that there is no way to God except by means of the prophets. There is no individualistic, do-it-yourself spirituality in Rumi's universe.

In short, Rumi holds that the search for knowledge and understanding plays a fundamental role in any search for God. However, we need to distinguish between two sorts of knowledge. For purposes of this discussion, I can label one of them "visionary" and the other "rational." Visionary knowledge is the illumination that comes directly from the universal intellect. Rational knowledge is the obscured light known as "partial intellect." There can be no ascent to God without visionary knowledge, and this is because such knowledge is identical with the divine light that is embodied in Gabriel, a light that is the source of wisdom and guidance on the path. As Rumi says,

*Not every wing can fly across the ocean—*

*only knowledge directly from Him takes you to Him.<sup>58</sup>*

As for rational knowledge, it derives from the obscured light of the partial intellect. It acts more as a hindrance than as a help, because it is too deeply mired in the shortcomings of the individual ego. This is why Rumi constantly

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<sup>58</sup> *Mathnawá* (Nicholson edition), book III, verse 125.

tells his readers to give up their individual attempts to understand things and to submit to the wisdom of the prophets and the saints.<sup>59</sup>

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Having suggested why, in Rumi's view, a proper understanding of things is utterly essential, let me focus on how proper understanding comes to be articulated. Each of the schools of Islamic thought has its own methodologies and concerns. A school like jurisprudence saw its task as delineating right activity, and a school like Kalam set out to defend Islamic dogma with rational arguments. I want to look, however, at the specific approaches to knowledge that were employed in the philosophical tradition, partly because it is only this discipline that dealt with issues that we nowadays recognize as "scientific," such as mathematics and astronomy. However, such sciences were always secondary concerns. The primary focus was to describe and explain the three fundamental domains of reality. These three domains are God, the universe, and the human soul. The discussion of these domains goes on in three sub-disciplines of philosophy, which we can call "metaphysics," "cosmology," and "psychology." Metaphysics deals with ultimate Reality, cosmology addresses the status of the universe from its beginning to its end, and psychology explains the origin and destiny of the human soul.

Here it needs to be remembered that all three of these disciplines have largely been abandoned in modern times. I do not mean that the words are not used, I mean that what goes by these names nowadays has little if anything to do with what was being discussed in Rumi's time, whether in the Islamic world or in the West (not to mention other civilizations). Modern philosophers, after all, have long been telling us that metaphysics is dead — along with God, of course. And, long before metaphysics disappeared as a serious concern of mainstream Western philosophy, most philosophers had

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<sup>59</sup> Lest I be misunderstood, perhaps I need to repeat that, despite the necessity of visionary knowledge on the path to God, Rumi holds that love alone can deliver the prophets and saints not only from their rational and individual limitations, but also from the light of the universal intellect. The universal intellect may be the very radiance of God, but it is not identical with God.

abandoned traditional cosmology and psychology. Instead, they embraced the findings of various scientific disciplines.

So much is it true that traditional ideas on the cosmos and the soul have been abandoned that it has come to be part of popular wisdom that the current “scientific” status of cosmology and psychology has shown the falsity of the speculations of the pre-moderns. Nonetheless, these so-called “speculations” inform the intellectual vision that lies behind Rumi’s depiction of God, the universe, and the human soul.

Even in the best of contemporary scholarship on Rumi, there is often an assumption that his teachings about the universe and its intimate interrelationship with the human soul are window-dressing. The general picture drawn in the secondary literature and taken for granted in the many poetical translations is that we can ignore all the medieval ideas. After all, it is implied, not only have they been proven false by modern science, but also Rumi is speaking about love, not about systematic, rationalistic knowledge.

The net result of this attitude is that many if not most interpreters of Rumi have used his criticisms of rational knowledge to reject the whole body of metaphysical, cosmological, and psychological teachings that inform his vision of things. This might have had some justification if the interpreters were not themselves deeply rooted in a different view of the world, a view that is itself systematic and rationalistic and, at the same time, profoundly antagonistic to everything that Rumi held as self-evidently true. This alternative view of the world has been provided by the scientific learning and the scientific beliefs that inform modern culture. And, it just so happens that the modern world view is far less qualified than the medieval world view to prepare the ground for the transforming power of love.

One result of ignoring Rumi’s worldview is that many of his modern interpreters think that there is no contradiction between being a rational, scientific person in the modern sense and being “spiritual” in the sense that Rumi seems to mean. I think Rumi would reply that you cannot have one mental compartment for scientific knowledge, and another for love of God. The human spirit—also called the “human heart”—is a single reality, with no partitions. In order for the heart to open itself up to God, it must have a proper knowledge of what it is opening itself up to. You cannot love what

you do not know, and every knowledge of God is built on knowledge of the world and oneself. If we do not understand the world and ourselves as they are, we will not be able to know God. Without knowing God, we cannot love him. Modern, scientific knowledge cannot provide us with an understanding of things as they truly are, because it is rooted not in the universal intellect, but in the partial, obscured intellect.

In short, the heart needs to see things as they are, and this means that it must see things as Gabriel, the universal intellect, calls it to see them. Seeing things in terms of the cleverness of the partial intellect blocks the road of love. As Rumi puts it,

*The partial intellect is a vulture, you poor wretch.*

*Its wings are tied up with carrion eating.*

*The intellect of the saints is like Gabriel's wing,*

*it flies, mile by mile, to the shadow of the Lote Tree.<sup>60</sup>*

In Rumi's view, and in the view of the Islamic wisdom tradition in general, the one light of intelligence cannot be divided. It can only be dimmed and obscured. The spiritual quest involves successive stages of climbing the ladder to God, an ascent that is prefigured in the Prophet's *mi'raj*. At each step on the ascending ladder, the light of the universal intellect, which is innate in every human being, is intensified. At the earliest stages, which are infancy and childhood, the intellectual light is hardly more than a potentiality. Rumi tells us that in actualising the innate light, one person is like a spark, another like a candle, another like a lamp, another like a star, another like the moon, and still another like the midday sun. Only the human selfhood that has actualised the blazing sun of noon can be said to be an "intellect" in the full and proper sense of the word. This noonday sun is embodied in Gabriel, and it has been fully actualised on the human level only by the prophets and some of the saints.

In Rumi's way of looking at things, intellect and angel are the internal and external manifestations of a single, unified reality. This single reality is God's

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<sup>60</sup> *Mathnawá* VI 4138-39.

radiance, or God's spirit. In contrast, the ego—which is our normal, everyday self-awareness—partakes of the darkness that dominates over animal nature; or, even worse, it may be controlled by the rebellious fire that is embodied in Iblis. Our human situation represents the marriage of angelic light and animal darkness, or angel and devil. The purpose of life is to allow the angel to overcome the devil. In *Fâhi m« fâhi*, Rumi makes this point as follows:<sup>61</sup>

**THE STATES OF HUMAN BEINGS ARE AS IF AN ANGEL'S WING WERE BROUGHT AND STUCK ON A DONKEY'S TAIL SO THAT PERHAPS THE DONKEY, THROUGH THE RADIANCE AND COMPANIONSHIP OF THE ANGEL, MAY ITSELF BECOME AN ANGEL. IT IS POSSIBLE FOR THE DONKEY TO BECOME THE SAME COLOR AS THE ANGEL.**

So, here we have a cosmic game of “pin the tail on the donkey.” We are the donkeys. The human task is to see beyond asininity and find the angel's wing, and then to keep the wing firmly attached to the donkey. Gradually, with the help of the wing, human beings can be transformed into something like angels. Only then can they fly, stage by stage, to the heavens. When they become the same colour as the angel itself, they will have reached the top of the created realm. Then and then alone can love work its full miracle.

In this perspective—which is common to the Islamic wisdom tradition—spiritual transformation builds on the innate light of intelligence. Given that this vision of human psychology has long been ridiculed and rejected in the West, it is especially difficult to keep in mind that it underlies everything Rumi is saying. According to him, our only means to happiness and salvation lies in Gabriel's wing. As long as we insist on being asses, we will have no leg with which to climb the icy mountain of transcendence. We will never be able to reach the Lote Tree of the Far Boundary, much less move on further through the transformative fire of true love and encounter God himself.

As soon as we acknowledge that this is Rumi's view of human nature, it should not be difficult to guess how Rumi would react to the whole edifice of modern science and learning. He would see it as a grand monument to the donkey. It can be nothing else, because it is built on the accumulated light of a myriad partial intellects. No matter how many sparks you may gather together, you cannot reconstruct the blazing sun of noon.

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<sup>61</sup> *Fâhi mâ fîhi* (Furëz«nfar edition), p. 107.

The very fact that modern science and learning are constantly being partitioned into ever narrower specialties should be enough to alert us to the fact that it has little if anything to do with the unifying light of the universal intellect. Moreover, what are we to make of the unintelligibility of science as a whole? I do not mean simply that science is unintelligible to the general public. I mean that the vast majority of scientists and scholars have no real idea what is going on in other than their own narrow specialties. Even the best of scholars cannot have a genuine overview of the total situation. Those who try to do so have no authority to speak as scientists, because they have given up all the exact and precise knowledge that bestows upon modern learning its specificity and particularity.

In contrast, the metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology of the ancients and the medievals were in fact three subdivisions of one, unitary knowledge. The more one understood any of these disciplines, the more one understood the others as well. Each of them fed into a synthetic vision. If we can take the texts at their word, then we have to acknowledge that the synthetic vision of reality that needs to be achieved is simply the awareness of the nature of things, and that this awareness is innate to human intelligence.

One of the many theological arguments for the unitary consciousness found in the innermost depths of every human being is the Qur'anic idea that God taught Adam all the names (2:31). As Rumi puts it,

*The father of mankind, who is the lord of "He taught the names"  
has hundreds of thousands of sciences in every vein.  
The name of each thing, just as it is until its end,  
was given to his spirit. . . .  
Since Adam's eye saw with the pure light,  
the spirit and mystery of each name was clear to him.*<sup>62</sup>

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Having suggested some of the difficulties connected with trying to understand Rumi in terms of modern learning, let me turn to the issue of understanding him in terms of the sciences of his own day. We know that Rumi considered the leg of reasoners to be wooden. Does this mean that in his view, the science and learning of the reasoners was invalid, illegitimate, and, in one word, "untrue"? I do not think so. From the many passages that

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<sup>62</sup> *Mathnawá*, I 1234-35, 1246.

Rumi devotes to the sciences, we can conclude that he accepted the learning of his day as a valid mode of seeing. However, he maintained that science and knowledge have a clear purpose, and that purpose is certainly *not* to keep us comfortable in our everyday life. Rather, the purpose of learning is to act as a support for the real business. The real business is love, and love is total dedication to God and nothing else. The sciences were true, because they provided an adequate picture of the world and the human soul. With that picture as guide, seekers can grasp the nature of the true object of love and devote one's energy to him.

In support of this reading, let me cite a passage from *Fâhi m« fâhi*. In it Rumi answers the concerns of certain people who are hesitating about entering the path to God, because they fear that all of their learning will come to nothing. He says,<sup>63</sup>

These people who have studied or who are now studying imagine that if they keep on attending here, they will forget knowledge and abandon it. On the contrary, when they come here, all their sciences come to life. The sciences are all paintings. When they come to life, it is as if a lifeless body has come to life. The root of all these sciences is Up Yonder, but they have been transferred from the world without sounds and letters to the world of sounds and letters.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Fâhi m« fâhi*, p. 156. Those familiar with the history of Islamic thought will recognize in this passage a theme that is captured by the title of Ghazâlâ's most famous work, *Lâ'ay«' 'ulêm al-dân*, "Bringing to life the sciences of the religion." The *Lâ'ay«'*, however, deals only with the ritual and ethical teachings of Islam, not with the philosophical sciences such as metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology. Ghazâlâ tells us at the beginning of the work that it is concerned only with *mu'«makat* or "interactions," not *muk«shafat* or "unveilings," the realm of the philosophical sciences. The distinction between these two sorts of learning corresponds roughly with the distinction that is often made between the "intellectual" (*'uqlâ*) and the "transmitted" (*naqlâ*) sciences. For his part, Rëmâ breathes life into both sorts of learning.

<sup>64</sup> *Fâhi m« fâhi*, p. 156. Those familiar with the history of Islamic thought will recognize in this passage a theme that is captured by the title of Ghazâlâ's most famous work, *Lâ'ay«' 'ulêm al-dân*, "Bringing to life the sciences of the religion." The *Lâ'ay«'*, however, deals only with the ritual and ethical teachings of Islam, not with the philosophical sciences such as metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology. Ghazâlâ tells us at the beginning of the work that it is concerned only with *mu'«makat* or "interactions," not *muk«shafat* or "unveilings," the realm of the philosophical sciences. The distinction between these two sorts of learning corresponds

In this passage the word “knowledge” renders the Arabic *‘ilm*, and “sciences” renders *‘ilm-ha*, its Persian plural. A modern reader of this passage would typically assume that in Rumi’s view, there is no contradiction between love for God and science, because love gives spiritual life to all knowledge, and science is certainly knowledge. It would follow that the science and learning that we pick up from our schools, our universities, and the Sunday supplement can all be given spiritual life.

However, such a reading would be superficial, because it fails to take into account what Rumi means by *‘ilm*. I think I have said enough already to suggest that in Rumi’s view, our type of knowledge, which is based exclusively on the ingenuity and pretensions of the partial intellect, would not qualify as real knowledge. Rumi would consider the world that we have carved out for ourselves in our scientific and academic disciplines to be just like the apple that he describes in the *Mathnawâ*. That makes us the worms, happy in our belief that we know ever so much more than our poor benighted ancestors.

It might be replied that our universe is no apple, because it embraces a vastness undreamed of by the ancients or the medievals. But, no matter how big we think the apple is, its very divisibility and physicality make it tiny in comparison to the tree of the total universe and the gardener who planted and takes care of the tree. Moreover, our apple is even smaller than the partial intellect that sees it. After all, it is our own intelligence that has come up with this picture of the universe. We discovered the picture in ourselves, in precisely the place where we understood it. Our scientific cosmology is a painting that we draw in our own minds. What we are depicting is not the real universe, which, in Islamic terms, is “everything other than God,” but rather, something of our own immensity. It is myopic to think that the mathematical theories of modern cosmology have proven anything more than that human reasoning and mental ingenuity have enormous scope on the physical plane.

From Rumi’s point of view, no matter what the scope of the partial intellect, it cannot begin to understand the reality of the conscious,

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intelligent, and intelligible light that is shining in its own depths. It is this light, which knows and understands the names of all things, that gives scientists the rational power to cook up a picture of an infinitely vast universe. Rumi has many passages in which he reminds us of a basic point of the Islamic perspective: Intelligence and thought are not derivative of the body. On the contrary, the bodily realm and indeed the whole universe are epiphenomena of the universal intellect. Take, for example, these verses from the *Mathnawâ*:<sup>65</sup>

*When a single thought comes into the open,  
a hundred worlds are turned at once on their heads.*

*The sultan's body is one in form,  
yet a hundred thousand soldiers run after it.*

*The shape and form of that pure king  
are ruled by one hidden thought.*

***LOOK—ONE THOUGHT HAS SET CREATURES WITHOUT END  
RUNNING ON THE LAND LIKE A FLOOD.***

*People see that thought as small,  
but like a flood it swallowed the world and took it away.*

*You see that thought gives substance  
to every activity in the world—*

*The houses, the castles, the cities,  
the mountains, the plains, and the rivers.*

*The land and the sea, the sun and the spheres,  
all live in thought like fish in the sea—*

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<sup>65</sup> *Mathnawâ* II 1030-45.

*Why then, O blind fool, do you see  
your body like Solomon and your thought like an ant?  
To you, a mountain seems large—  
thought is a mouse, the mountain's a wolf.  
In your eyes the world is frightful and mighty—  
you fear and tremble at clouds, thunder, and sky.  
You stay secure and heedless from the world of thought.  
Less than an donkey, you're an unaware stone.  
Merely a painted picture, you have no share of intelligence  
Without human traits, you're a young ass.  
In ignorance you see the shadow as the object;  
in your eyes, the object is a game and a trifle.  
Wait—until the day when thought and imagination  
spread their feathers and wings without veil!  
You will see mountains become soft wool,  
and this hot and cold earth will cease to exist.  
You will see neither heaven, nor the stars, nor existence—  
only the Living, Loving, One God.*

What then is Rumi talking about when he speaks of knowledge, and when he says that the sciences are paintings of what exists “Up Yonder”? By knowledge, he means the whole tradition of transmitted and intellectual learning that was studied among the Muslims. The transmitted learning goes back to the Qur’an and the sayings of Muhammad. The intellectual learning goes back to the same sources, but it also builds on the philosophy and

science of several other traditions, most prominently the Greek. Both the intellectual and transmitted learning are rooted in Gabriel's wing. Remember that in the Qur'anic view of things, God sent revelation to all peoples, which is to say Gabriel appeared among the ancients just as he appeared to Muhammad.

For Rumi, the worldview articulated by Islamic philosophy is true in its broad sweeps, even if he would surely object to some of its tenets. To say that a worldview is true is to say the picture it draws is an adequate representation of the objects that are found Up Yonder. "Up Yonder" is the world of the universal intellect, or the world of God's own omniscience. When Rumi speaks of bringing knowledge to life by awakening the spirit within, he means to say that, once the partial intellect is shaped by an adequate understanding of things, then and only then can the angel's wing lift the donkey beyond asininity. The donkey can itself be transmuted into angelic light and then carried into the infinite expanse of the true universe, which is the realm of luminosity, awareness, consciousness, and love.

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One of the most common misinterpretations of Rumi's poetry is the claim that he believed in "evolution." As should be implicit in what I have already said, this is a misrepresentation both of evolution and of Rumi. However, let me make the reasons for this more explicit. In the process, I will call as witness the "wooden leg" of Báb Afial, Rumi's older contemporary.

First, I need to make completely clear that I am not saying that the word "evolution" is totally inappropriate to describe what Rumi is talking about. The concept of a growing, changing, and evolving soul infuses Rumi's writings and more generally the Qur'an, Islamic philosophy, and the Sufi tradition. However, if we want to understand the significance of this "evolution," we need to grasp what the representatives of the tradition were talking about, and we cannot do so without studying their teachings on the relevant issues. We cannot isolate a few passages from the large picture and then say that Rumi believed in evolution in some sort of Darwinian sense.

Once we look at the large picture, we quickly learn that the Islamic worldview sees evolution in the modern, scientific meanings as an absurdity.<sup>66</sup> Scientific evolutionism precludes the possibility of design. In

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<sup>66</sup> The first objection that Muslim believers in evolution make to such a statement is typically of this sort: “God is all-powerful, so He could have used biological evolution to ‘knead Adam’s clay.’” First of all, this is an argument that assumes teleology and design, and these are anathema to all scientific theories of biological evolution. Even if we suppose that we can have design and still talk about “evolution,” we are left with serious theological difficulties. For example, the appeal to omnipotence neglects the fact that God has many other attributes as well, and these condition his omnipotence. God is not only omnipotent, he is also, for example, wise, which is to say that he exercises his power in an orderly, systematic, and intelligent way. Even though he is omnipotent, he does not have the power to do things in a stupid way (which is not to claim that we necessarily understand the wisdom of his acts). God never exercises his omnipotence like a capricious king, doing things for no reason other than to show his power. His way happens to be what has appeared in the universe. The universe, in Islamic thinking, includes the whole of creation, not just the physical realm. The whole of creation includes both the more real and the less real. The more real is the spiritual or the intelligible, and the less real is the sensory or the bodily (these are the two worlds that the Koran calls “heaven and earth” or “unseen and visible”).

Given that God does things in an orderly and wise fashion, he does not break his own laws (“miracles” break the laws of nature, not the laws of God). In the Islamic tradition, in which this sort of thinking was commonplace, it was self-evident that body is not independent of spirit, nor, with even greater reason, of God. The modern *Zeitgeist* has taught us to think that the body is the foundation, and that everything else is an epiphenomenon of the body. In this view, what primitive peoples and unscientific thinkers call “soul” and “spirit” can be explained by biology and neurochemistry. This “scientific” view of things is in fact a “scientistic” view, which is to say that it is simply a belief, because it cannot be proven empirically. The belief is reductionist, and it leaves us with the body as subsisting without “spirit,” which is like saying, in Islamic terms, that earth subsists without heaven. No, God created heaven and earth together, though they are not equal and they do not possess the same attributes and powers, nor do they perform the same functions. So also, when there is body, there is always spirit, even though, before the human spirit is blown into Adam’s clay, the spirits that govern the clay are called “angels.” Remember that it is the angels who brought the clay so that God could knead it, shape it, and employ it in creating Adam’s body. But there is no “human being” until the spirit is blown into the clay. Moreover, what are God’s “two hands” with which he created Adam? God does not have parts. His hands have often been taken as allusions to the spiritual and angelic forces that God uses as his intermediaries.

The flattened universe of modern science, which, at best, allows believing scientists to posit a God beyond the world, could never appeal to traditional Islamic thought. The reason for this is simply that such a universe ignores the intermediary realms that are always

contrast, the first principle of Islamic thought, *tawh ad*, or the assertion of God’s unity, demands design from beginning to end.

The principle of *tawh ad* has three interlocking implications. First, it means that everything comes from the One God, who is the omniscient and omnipotent source of the whole universe. Second, it means that everything is constantly, moment by moment and without cease, sustained, supported, guided, and controlled by the One God (as for the role of “free will” here, that is another discussion, and Rumi develops it in detail). Third, it means that every creature without exception is taken back to the One God. When Rumi and others talk about what has been labelled “evolution,” they are talking about the manner in which human beings return to God by making the best use of the gifts that they have been given.

This notion of the “return” to God (*ma‘ ad*), we need to remember, is the third principle of Islamic faith, after *tawh ad* and prophecy. The very concept of “return” demands that we begin by acknowledging that creation has come from God in the first place. In other words, every “evolution” demands a prior “devolution.” You cannot return somewhere unless you came from there in the first place.

For the Islamic worldview in general, understanding how we came into the world is just as important as understanding that we will soon be leaving. The Qur’an tells us repeatedly that God created all things and that he brings all things back to himself. Philosophers in particular have written elaborate treatises explaining how this coming and going works. This whole realm of

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present throughout time and space. Two of these intermediary realms played major roles in Islamic thinking—the world of spirits and the world of images, located between spirits and bodies. Our scientific worldview is not able to think of anything remotely worthy of the name “spirit” except as altogether outside the universe (e.g., a Deist God) or as a phenomenon that occurs *after* the body. But the whole point of discussing the Origin along with the Return is to show that the body can be nothing but a sedimentation of the spirit. The spirit, or the intelligence, or the angel, comes first. Intelligence, awareness, spirit, and life precede the body. The orderly structure of the body and of the biological and neurochemical worlds simply manifests the intelligence of the spirit, which works wisely in all things. As Rumi puts it, the body is the “shadow of the shadow of the shadow of the spirit.” The body derives from the spirit, not the other way around. B akr Afial among others devotes a good deal of space to showing how this works.

ideas can be called “cosmology and psychology.” The usual label in Arabic is *al-mabda‘ wa ‘l-ma‘ad*, “the origin and the return,” which is the title of books by Ibn Sâna and Mullâ Âadrâ, among others.

The basic principle in all Islamic discussions of “evolution” is that the human soul needs to undergo a synthetic and unifying growth by which it can go back in happiness and wholeness to the divine, unitary realm from which it appeared in the first place. In coming into the world, human beings followed a trajectory that has left them in separation and dispersion. The very concept of “creation” demands the appearance of multiplicity from unity. However we go about explaining this appearance of multiplicity, the fact remains that when human beings first find themselves—that is, when they first become aware that they are aware—they see that they dwell in dispersion, separation, and ignorance.

All of the Islamic theoretical and practical teachings, and especially the Sufi and philosophical teachings, aim at overcoming the dispersion of the human self and bringing about collectedness, integration, and unity. The goal is to awaken the intelligent and intelligible light of God that the Qur’an calls the “spirit.” This is the same spirit that God blew into the clay of Adam when he created him. It is the divine light whereby Adam was taught all the names. It is the human *fiṣṣrah* or “original disposition,” created by God in his own image. It is the angel’s wing of intelligence and awareness pinned on the donkey of our bodily dispersion and ignorance.

Neither the philosophers nor many of the Sufis—certainly not Rumi—were content to speak of the growth, development, and evolution of the soul without explaining how the human self came to be dispersed in the first place. The fact of Adam’s fall and human forgetfulness was plain to everyone, and it was simply a matter of illustrating how this came about in cosmological and psychological terms—that is, in “scientific” terms—rather than in moral and ethical terms. The issue, in other words, is not simply that Adam “sinned” and then fell. Rather, the issue is the very structure of the cosmos, a structure that determines the situation of human beings in relation to God. Once we understand where we are actually situated, not only “existentially” but also “ontologically,” then we can understand that the “fall” is not just a “symbol.” It is an adequate expression of what actually happened when awareness became embodied as a result of the divine creative

act. It follows that, in order to articulate with rational exactitude the human situation in relation to the cosmos, we need to have recourse to the three interrelated disciplines of metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology.

One of the many distinctions between the Islamic idea of evolution and modern evolutionary biology is precisely that the Islamic texts always focus on the human soul, not the physical and biological organism. I am not suggesting that the body is unimportant, nor am I denying that what might be called an “evolutionary development” occurs in the bodily realm. I am simply saying that in the Islamic world view, the body can only be understood in terms of the soul, and the soul in turn must be understood in terms of the divine spirit, also known as the “universal intellect,” which was breathed into Adam’s clay. If we pretend that there is no such thing as the spirit, then we have no way to understand the significance of bodily growth and development. If we ignore the angel’s, then we are left only with the donkey. The net result will be what we have today—a multitude of practical sciences, each of which examines a specific aspect of human and cosmic embodiment without any awareness of the whole. The goals of these sciences are defined and determined by the obscurity of the partial intellect, not the light of the universal intellect. In Rumi’s terms, these sciences can only be vultures, because they can see nothing that is not body, and they can do nothing but tear its flesh to pieces. As Allama Iqbal put it, “[T]he various natural sciences are like so many vultures falling on the dead body of Nature, and each running away with a piece of its flesh.”<sup>67</sup>

Let me now seek some help in interpreting Rumi’s evolutionary psychology from B«b« Afial. He devotes a good deal of space in some of his treatises to the elucidation of the Origin and the Return, that is, the manner in which the world appears from God and then goes back to God by the same route. His theoretical discussion of “devolution and evolution” clarifies several points that can easily be missed if Rumi is read out of context. Two of these are especially important.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1986), p. 34.

<sup>68</sup> I am not forgetting that long before Rēmâ and B«b« Afial, many philosophers, Greek and Muslim, had discussed the devolution and evolution of the human soul and had also remarked on the repercussions of these two trajectories in the bodily realm. But with B«b« Afial we have an earlier contemporary of Rumi who is completely explicit on these issues.

First is that the stages of evolution correspond with the stages of devolution. In other words, the return to God is a gradual ascent on a ladder whose steps mark the increasing unification and intensification of the spiritual and intellectual light. This can only happen because human beings came into this world in the first place by successive degrees of darkening and obscuration, and this was a descent from intelligence, into soulish or psychic reality, and then into the visible realm. The integrative movement of the Return to God is the reversal of the dispersive movement of creation. The detailed explanation of the descent into matter makes up the basic subject matter of what I have been calling “cosmology.” Rumi often alludes to this descent. In one verse, for example, he writes,<sup>69</sup>

*Attractions like this have pulled us from the city of the Spirit,  
one hundred thousand waystations to this perishing world.*

A second point that B«b« Afial makes completely explicit is that the “evolution” of the soul occurs within the lifetime of each individual human being. There is no question of an “evolution of species.” God creates the creatures in their places, but the human microcosm embraces within itself all the modalities of created being in the universe. This means that every human being embraces inanimate, plant, and animal qualities. Moreover, these qualities appear in stages, the earliest of which are found in the womb, where we are dealing with a substance that is, for all practical purposes, “inanimate.” Then vegetal qualities appear. Only after birth do animal characteristics gradually make themselves fully manifest.

Once human beings begin the process of actualizing qualities and characteristics that are specifically human and not animal, they are faced with the task of becoming fully human. Only by becoming human in the full sense of the word can they go back to God in total equilibrium and harmony, because only as full human beings do they actualize the universal intellect, which is the divine spirit blown into their clay. This means that people have many more stages of the journey to traverse. It also means that different individuals reach different degrees of spiritual “evolution” in the course of

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For his teachings on these issues, see “evolution” in the index of my *Heart of Islamic Philosophy*.

<sup>69</sup> *Dāwan* 2217. For many of the passages in which Rumi discusses the devolution and evolution of the soul, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 72-82.

their lives. The degree to which people become truly human depends on the degree to which their souls achieve perfection.

Once we understand this from B«b« Afial and other Muslim philosophers, then it becomes easy to grasp the meaning of the following passage from the *Mathnawá*, which is one of several well-known examples of Rumi's "evolutionary" teachings:<sup>70</sup>

*Why should it be surprising that the spirit's homes,  
which used to be its dwellings and its birthplaces,  
Are not remembered now? This world, like a dream,  
has hidden everything, like clouds concealing the stars.  
After all, the spirit has walked through so many cities  
and the dust has not yet cleared from its perception. . . .  
It came first into the realm of the minerals,  
and from there it fell in among the plants.  
For years it lived among the plants,  
remembering nothing of the mineral state because of strife.  
When it left the plants and fell in among the animals,  
it remembered nothing of the state of plants,  
Save only its inclination towards them,  
especially at the time of spring and fragrant herbs. . . .  
Then that Creator whom you know  
kept on pulling it from animality toward humanity.  
Thus did it pass from realm to realm,  
and now it is intelligent, knowing, and strong.  
It does not remember its first intellects,  
and it will also be transmuted from its present intellect.  
When it is freed from this intellect full of avarice and seeking  
then it will see hundreds of thousands of marvelous intellects. . . .  
Again it will be pulled from sleep to wakefulness  
and then it will laugh at its former state.  
"What was that grief that I suffered when asleep  
when I had forgotten the actual situation?  
"I did not know that all grief and affliction  
were the work of dreaming, deception, and imagination.*

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<sup>70</sup> *Mathnawá* IV 3632 ff.

To sum up B«b« Afial's significance for our understanding of Rumi, let me say that he offers a systematic cosmology and psychology, both rooted in a clearly articulated ontology and metaphysics. The picture he draws was more or less standard in the philosophical and Sufi traditions, but it was rarely spelled out with such simplicity and clarity. With B«b« Afial's theoretical teachings in the background, it is clear that Rumi offers a poetical and enticing version of a well-known teaching. At best, it has only a superficial resemblance to evolution in any modern sense.