

The Neoplatonist Roots of Sufi Philosophy

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ABSTRACT:

Neoplatonism strongly influenced the development of Sufism. Neoplatonism, as developed by Plotinus conceives God to be the source and goal of everything. Islam qua institution is closed to all critical and philosophical thought, but Sufism enjoys a more liberal and critical approach. It is probable that the translations of Plotinus have provided the necessary philosophical ground for Sufism. An examination of both Sufism and Neoplatonism reveals close similarities with regard to the nature of God, the soul, the body, concepts such as goodness, evil and beauty, death and life, and creation.

Islamic thought was influenced by Greek philosophy, especially the ideas of Aristotle and Plato. Sufism is a sect of Islam which has rather a different way of thought. "Sufi" is applied to Muslim mystics who, as a means of achieving union with Allah, adopted ascetic practices including wearing a garment made of coarse wool called "sf". The term "sufism" comes from "sf" meaning the person, who wears "sf". But in the course of time, sufi has come to designate all Muslim believers in mystic union.

In the roots of sufi philosophy there are influences other than neoplatonist philosophy. Ascetic practices within the sufi philosophy are associated with Buddhism. The notion of purification (cleaning one's soul from all evil things and trying to reach Nirvana and to become immortal in Nirvana) plays an important role in Buddhism. The same idea shows itself in the belief of "vuslat" (communion with God) in Sufi philosophy.

Sufism was also influenced by Orpheus and related beliefs, and consequently by Pythagoras and his teachings, because Pythagoras was closely interested in Orpheus beliefs. Orpheus was a poet who lived in Anatolia in the 6th and 7th centuries BC. He was believed to have divine characteristics such as being able to influence wild animals with his music. He believed that the human soul can reach the highest level only by refining itself from all passions and worldly possessions. Soul travels from body to body in order to purify itself from its sins, disabilities, and guilts, and only after passing all these levels can it reach to its highest level, to its exalted spot. Pythagoras adopted Orpheus beliefs about soul, and integrated it with his own ideas. Later, the Neopythagoreans regarded Pythagoras as the source of divinely revealed knowledge. They accepted as truth whatever appealed to them in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics

The attempts to construct a religious philosophy on the basis of Greek thought and especially the theories of Pythagoras culminated in Neoplatonism. Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, took Plato's theory of ideas and reinterpreted them from Protagoras' point of view. According to neoplatonism, God is conceived as the source and goal of everything; from him everything comes, to him all things return; he is the alpha and omega, the beginning, middle and end. Communion with God or absorption in God, therefore, is the real purpose of all our strivings, and religion the heart-beat of the universe. The principal doctrine of Plotinus stated that there is just one exalted God, that is a supreme power, the final cause, the cosmic force. God is the highest spiritual, and creative Being.

Although the world proceeds from God, he did not create it; the universe is an emanation from God, an inevitable overflow of his infinite power or actuality. Plotinus employs several metaphors to suggest the meaning of emanation. God is a spring from which the spring flows without exhausting its infinite source; or, God is the sun from which the light radiates without loss to the sun. The absolute being (God) is higher than beauty, truth, goodness, consciousness, and will, for all these depend on him. The farther we are from the sun, the source of light, the nearer we are to darkness (matter). Beauty is in the structure of divine existence. Other types of existence such as matter and body are not beautiful in themselves, but rather they are beautiful as a reflection of God's beauty. Among all beings in the universe human beings are the closest to the divine essence because they have souls that strive to turn in the direction of pure thought. The truthfulness, beauty or goodness of a human being depend on its soul's actions within its body; the closer the soul of a human being gets to the source of light, the more it acquires the qualities such as truth, goodness, and beauty. Human beings reflect the appearance of God in themselves more than other life forms, and consequently they are the highest in the scale of being.

There is no aspect of Sufi philosophy that is not influenced by neoplatonism. According to Sufi philosophy, Absolute being is also Absolute beauty, and since beauty tends toward manifestation Absolute being developed the phenomenal world. Human beings in this phenomenal world are the only ones that share a unity of essence with God, because they have souls. After a human being dies, his/her soul goes back to its source, to the Absolute being, while his/her body dissolves and decays. Since the soul makes a human being a person, one should practice the quiestic virtues such as poverty, austerity, humility, fortitude, and discipline; devote oneself to the ways of inwardness such as withdrawal, silence, solitariness, and self-examination; and keep in mind a constant awareness of God with faith and desire. This way, one can achieve a sense of direct communion with God which is the Absolute being behind the phenomenal world. If one follows these directions with sufficient perseverance, one will advance through the standard mystic stages of concentration, appreciation of the oneness of everything,

epiphanies, i.e., sudden and unpredictable illumination, blissful ecstasy, sense of union with the Deity, sense of one's own nothingness, and sense of the nothingness beyond nothingness.

Neoplatonism is the closest doctrine of thought to Sufi philosophy in terms of their system of belief. Now, let's compare these two doctrines more closely and describe the similarities between them in detail.

In Sufism, the universe is just an appearance of God, and does not have an independent existence. To think of the universe and the God as being separate is to deny the "Oneness" and to suggest a "duality" between God and the universe. But in reality, the God and the universe are the "One" and the same thing such that God reflects himself as the universe. It is not possible to think of God and the universe as separate entities because God is not something outside the universe as Islam favors, but rather something within the universe. As seen above, this belief was initially suggested by neoplatonism. They both see the existence of the universe as an emanation from God.

Sufism assumes that there is a union of God, universe and humans, and that human beings are an appearance of God; but God's appearance in the shape of a human being cannot be thought of any further than just an appearance. The reality is not a duality between God and humans, but rather a sameness, oneness between them. A person is a talking, thinking, acting God. This idea is beautifully expressed in Yunus Emre's following verse:

I didn't know you were the eye inside of me
You were a secret essence both in body and soul
I asked you show me a symbol of you in this world
Suddenly I realized you were the whole universe.

This poem expresses the idea of the oneness of God-universe-human beings. It is possible that the belief of oneness of humans and God in sufism is carried from neoplatonism. In the trilogy of God- Universe-Humans, God has the highest position, second is the universe, and third is human beings. Even though humans rank last in the trilogy, they are very close to the God, and almost identical to him because of the soul they have.

Sufism and neoplatonism share the same beliefs about the soul. According to neoplatonism, the soul is a divine essence, a substance, the source of all existence. The soul is the effect, image, or copy of pure thought, namely God. It is immortal, infinite, and separate from the body. The body is a cage where the soul is trapped, and it can be freed when the body dies. The soul, by its nature, always tends

toward perfection, beauty, goodness and exaltation. In sufism the soul is treated similarly, and expressed as a divine essence in humans.

The body, like soul, is also treated similarly in both sufism and neoplatonism. According to neoplatonism, the body is mortal, temporary, and not divine. The body tends not towards beauty and goodness, but towards ugliness and evil. What is beautiful, good, valuable and divine is not body, but the soul. The body tends towards temporary desires and wishes. The task of the soul is to purify the body from evil tendencies, and its deficiencies. The body is a cage for the soul. Sufism shares the same belief. The body is created from the earth, and will go back to the earth, and decay there. For this reason, the body is not important, and a person should not follow the desires of his/her body, but rather should turn from senuous life to thought, and through it, to God.

For neoplatonism beauty means much more than mere symmetry. It involves a close relationship to the ideal reality; it is an appearance of God over the objects of the universe. Whatever the divine light shines on becomes beautiful. Sufism thinks exactly the same about beauty. In sufism, beauty is expressed with "cema" meaning human face, the beauty of human face. What is really expressed in "cema" (human face) is the appearance of divine light in the face of a human. Neoplatonism identified beauty with divine essence, and sufism adopted the same idea. This is beautifully expressed in the following verse from Husrev:

Want to understand an example of the real essence of God
Look at the face of a beautiful woman and there see the face of God.

Realizing divine characteristics in human beauty might be an influence of neoplatonism in sufi philosophy.

Both neoplatonism and sufism believe that, just as beauty, goodness is also a divine virtue. Goodness is the most important among the characteristics that exalt a human being to the highest stage of being. Both in Islam, and in sufism, goodness as a divine virtue is associated with God's will. The belief that God will recompense good deeds in blessing to human beings is not something new or original in Islamic philosophy. Goodness was first formulated systematically as a philosophical problem in Plato. Goodness, honesty, bravery, wisdom, and virtue are the main topics of Etik in Plato's philosophy. Later Plotinos reconciled Plato's philosophy with religion under the teachings of neoplatonism. Thus, the idea of goodness as a divine virtue in sufism is probably carried over from neoplatonism. In both of these doctrines, the more the soul purifies itself from temporary passions, wishes and desires, the more harmonious it becomes with goodness.

Both neoplatonism and sufism believe that death is a separation of body and soul. When a person dies, the soul as a divine essence does not die, and travels to another body while the body decomposes, decays and becomes earth again. Death is a dissociation of two entities, the soul and the body.

Sufism sees the creation as an emanation from God, as an "appearance" of God. This notion of creation is quite different from Orthodox Islamic belief of creation as coming to existence from nothing. According to this belief God created the universe, mankind, and all other living creatures from nothing but out of self-love. This belief is adopted by all monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam which assume the existence of only one God, and it probably first originated in the Old Testament. Sufism, like neoplatonism, explains creation in a pantheistic fashion.

Both sufism and neoplatonism claim that the soul can reach exaltation by passing through certain stages. First of all, the exaltation of the soul depends on purifying itself from passions, sensual desires and wishes. Secondly, the soul, because of its divine nature, is immortal and its tendency towards temporary beings can cause it to degenerate and deteriorate. In order to prevent this, the soul must turn to itself, and try to understand its meaning. Thirdly, the soul can reach exaltation by knowing itself. The way to know thyself is through love. Love is the appearance of God, and by love one can achieve a special knowledge, knowledge of one's own self. Self-knowledge can be achieved through introspection. At the last stage, as a person knows oneself, and understands the essence of the soul, one realizes that one is identical with the universe and all other creatures, and that God is the only being showing itself in all creation. Hence, one frees oneself from dualism. This is the stage of unification of God, humans and the universe. At this stage, words, such as you, and I, which imply separation and differentiation, lose their meaning; there is only "One", and this "One" is a unification in the essence of God. This is the highest stage of exaltation for a person, and once one reaches this stage, one sees God in one's own self, and understand that God is the only being in the universe, and that one's self is nothing but God.

As seen above, there are close similarities between sufism and neoplatonism. How they came to interact is really a question of the social and cultural environment in which sufism flourished. As is well known, Islamic philosophy has its roots mostly in the works of Aristotle which were all translated into Arabic. Islamic philosophers interpreted Aristotle from an Islamic point of view, and established their theories on the basis of Aristotle's philosophy. Through the translations of the writings of Plato and Plotinus, they also were introduced into the Anatolian culture and mingled with different ancient Anatolian beliefs, such as Orpheus. The mystic elements within neoplatonism, woven together with ancient Anatolian beliefs (eg, the sacredness of natural events such as the sun which is incorporated in sufism in

the belief of God's resemblance to the sun), prepared the way for liberal interpretations of Islamic principles in sufi philosophy. Neoplatonism seems to be the most probable underlying philosophical system of thought for sufi philosophy.