

Rumi's Theory of Evolution

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Introduction

Whenever we hear the word evolution, almost immediately our mind rushes to a very outstanding British naturalist, Charles Darwin (d. 1882), as though this name, Darwin, is identical with word evolution. However, the theory of evolution has been initiated—at least according to Sir Muhammad Iqbal—in the ninth century by a Muslim scholar, al-Jahiz (d.890).¹ This theory was substantiated in the following century by a Muslim philosopher and historian, Miskawayh (d. 1010), who in his *Fawz al-Asghar*, discusses in a very significant way the theory of evolution. In this work, he points out that in the vegetable world it is date tree which has reached the highest level of evolution, for it has the capability of self-procreation.

Even so, the most outstanding theorist of evolution in the Muslim world was, beyond any doubt, a famous Persian mystic and poet, Muhammad Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose birthday we are celebrating today. In this very precious moment, I would like to present to you, Mawlana's mystical and philosophical views on evolution as follows:

Biographical Sketch of Rumi

Muhammad Jalal al-Din Rumi, known to his followers as "Mawlana" (Our Master), was born in 1207 AD at Balkh, north of Kabul, Afghanistan. Balkh at that time was under the reign of Khwarizmshah. After having heard some information on the Mongol invasion into the Muslim world, Rumi's father, Baha' al-Din Walad, a great 'alim, known as "Sultan al-'Ulama'," left Balkh secretly for several safer cities, such as Nishapur, in which he was reported to have met with Farid al-Din 'Attar.² It was said that in 1219 Rumi's family had reached Baghdad, whereupon they heard about the destruction of Balkh. Of course we knew that in turn Baghdad was destroyed by Hulagu Khan in 1258. But at that time Rumi's family was already in Konya, Turkey, and lived in the palace of Seljuk Sultan Kayqubad. It is from here that Rumi obtained the name Rumi, which means "of Turkey."

From Baghdad the family went to Mecca for pilgrimage (*hajj*). Afterward, Baha' al-Din, with his family traveled to Damascus, the Malatya and Zaranda, where Rumi married with Jawhar Khatun, a daughter of one of great local scholars, Lala Syaraf al-Din al-Samarqandi. Only after that, Rumi's family went to Konya and lived there on the invitation of Sultan Kayqubad.

In the milieu of royal palace of Western Sejukid dynasty, the Sultan built a college for Rumi's father called madrasa Khudavangar, wherein he became a professor. So the story

¹ Sir Muhamamd Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* (London: Lozac & Co. Ltd., 19080, H. 112.

² 'Attar was a great mystic, famouf for his great work, *The Conference of the Birds*, who influenced Rumi quite substantially.

tells us that young Rumi lived in the royal palace and received the best education and instruction from the best teachers and scholars. Soon Rumi became a very outstanding religious scholar mastering various scientific disciplines, both religious and rational, such as religious law (*shari'a*), theology, philosophy and mysticism. After his father's demise, Rumi replaced his father's position, both as the head of the *madrassa* and as a professor and advisor for the students. When he reached the age of thirty, Rumi was at the peak of his intellectual career as the most respected religious scholar, having thousands of students from different parts of Islamic world, 400 among them were religious scholars ('*ulama*') of the middle East.

However, the fame and the peak of his intellectual career that he had enjoyed did not satisfy him. He did not find in these scientific disciplines that he mastered one that could transform himself into a perfect man (*al-insan al-kamil*). According to him both *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *kalam* (theology) failed to transform oneself for their tendency towards formalism. Fortunately, in this very critical moment, Rumi met a very mysterious figure, who was then known as Shams al-Din al-Tabrizi. As a matter of fact, Shams al-Din al-Tabrizi had a profound and formative influence on Rumi's life, for it was him who had transformed the Mawlana from a theologian into a mystic and from a systematic rationalist into a spirited poet.

The disappearance of this very mysterious figure had really made Rumi the greatest Muslim mystical poet at all times. Rumi passed away in 1273 AD leaving some extremely beautiful and profound works, such as *Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz* and of course his masterpiece the *Mathnavi* which had been named by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jami' as the Qur'an in Persian language.³

The Universe's Ability to Love

Before we deal directly with his theory of evolution, it is probably important for us to understand Mawlana's world view, as the foundation for his theory. What might surprise us, who live in a modern secular world, is his statement that "the universe is alive, not dead. It is able to love and to be loved." The statement "even the universe can love," reveals to us the essence of his world-view. Different from what we usually think, the universe, according to Rumi, is an organic creature endowed with life and even intelligence. God, for the Sufis, is the most fascinating object, the most lovable and beautiful. According to them, based on a sacred (*Qudsi*) hadith, God's motive to create the universe is love. The universe was created through divine love, or more correctly the breath of the merciful (*nafs al-rahmani*), that penetrates all the parts of the universe, and moved it afterwards. Therefore, love ('*ishq*, as he calls it), became the most fundamental and creative force of the universe. It is love, according to him, that has enlivened and activated the universe, and endowed it with life and intelligence. In one of his poem, Rumi says,

³ J.S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 61.

*In (the view of) the intellect, heaven is man and earth woman
 Whatever (that) heaven casts forth, this (earth) fosters.
 When it (earth) hath no heat remaining, it (heaven) sends it;
 When no freshness and moisture remains, it bestows it.
 Heaven is turning giddily (in the world) of time, like man (prowling) around (in the
 search of) gain for the wife's sake.
 And this earth practices housewiferies: it attends to births and suckling that
 (which it bears).
 Therefore, regard earth and heaven as endowed with intelligence, since they do
 the works of intelligent being'
 Unless this two sweethearts are tasting (delight) from one another, then why are
 they creeping together like a mate?⁴*

Not only are these verses beautiful but also make us realize of a world view different from ours. The lifeless universe has made alive and intelligent by love: God's love for it. Rumi once says, "Know that wheeling heavens are turned by the waves of love. Were not for love, the world would be frozen."⁵ Therefore, love is considered by Rumi as the most fundamental force of the universe, and was responsible for its dynamic movement.

The Relation of Love to Evolution

When he calls this fundamental force love (*'ishq*), of course Rumi does it by purpose. By calling this force love, he wants to give it a certain direction (orientation), and not render it blind. Rumi says, "whether love be from this (earthly) side or from that (heavenly) side, in the end it leads us yonder."⁶ Therefore, the power of love is not random or blind, but purposeful and leading the lover toward its goal, the Beloved God. The universe, thus, fell in love with God, the Beloved. Rumi says, "Thou didst show the delightness (beauty) of Being thou hadst caused not-being to fall in love with thee."⁷ After since, the universe has always tried to get closer and closer to God. "Each one of them would be (as) stiff and immovable like ice, (if it is not for love), how should they be flying and seeking like locusts?"⁸

Why does the universe want to be close with God, the Beloved? It has been natural for any lovers to want to be close to their beloved. The farther a lover is from his beloved, the more intense his longing for union and the more ardent his love for the Beloved. Rumi has deliberately chosen the term *'ishq* to describe this love, and not *mahabbah*, which also means love, for while *mahabbah* indicates the close relation between the lover and his Beloved, *'ishq* indicates a sad and long separation between them.⁹

⁴ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalal al-Din Rumi*, translated by R.A. Nicholson (London: Luzac & Co Ltd. 1977), vol. III, pp. 245-246.

⁵ Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. V., p. 231.

⁶ Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. I, p. 10.

⁷ Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. I, p. 35.

⁸ Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. V, p. 231.

⁹ See Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Extacy in Sufism* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 98.

Therefore, it is probably more appropriate to translate word 'ishq, with "ardent love" than simply "love."

It was the desire of the universe, the lover ('*ashiq*), to be close and unite with God, the beloved (*ma'shuq*), that first brought about the evolutionary movement in the universe in its different levels: cosmic, geological, and biological, even mental and spiritual. Why does the universe long for God? This is because there was a desire or love in everything to be perfect. Mawlana says, "Everything is in love with the Perfection and hastens upwards like a sapling." Since this Perfection is but God himself, then everything in this world struggles to approach Him, the perfect One. Therefore, it was the desire to be perfect (like God) that was responsible for the evolutionary movement in the universe. The above verse "Everything is in love with the Perfection and hastens upwards like a sapling" probably has already alluded to a creative-vertical movement of evolution, and not horizontal-linear one. This vertical movement of the universe is beautifully described by Rumi as that of 'flying and searching locusts' for lights. "If it is for love, how should they be flying and seeking like locusts?" Rumi describes the wonder work of love in the following verses:

Love is infinite ocean, on which heavens are but a flake of foam: (they are distraught) like Zulaykha in desire of a Joseph.

Know that the wheeling heavens are turned by waves of love: were it not for love, the world would be frozen (inanimate).

How would an organic thing disappear (by change) into a plant? How would vegetative things sacrifice themselves to become (endowed with) spirit?

How would the spirit sacrifice itself for the sake of the Breath by the waft whereof a Mary was made pregnant?

Each one (of them) would be as stiff and immovable as ice; how should they be flying and seeking like locusts?¹⁰

How did the universe evolve from lower level to the higher one can be clearly seen from these following verses:

First he (man) came into the clime (world) of inorganic things, and from the state of inorganic things he passed into vegetable state.

(Many) years he lived in the vegetable state, and did not remember the inorganic state because of the opposition (between them).

And when he passed from the vegetable state to the animal state, the vegetable state was not remembered by him at all.

Save only for the inclination which he has towards that (state) especially in the season of spring and sweet herb—

Like the inclination of babes towards their mother; it (the babe) does not know the secret of its desire for being suckled;

Again the Creator, whom thou knowst, was leading him (man) from the animal (state) towards humanity.

Thus did he advance from clime to clime (from one world of being to another), till he has now become intelligent, wise and mighty.¹¹

¹⁰ Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. 5, 231

Rumi and Mulla Sadra

The above verses reveal to us an unusual world-view of Mawlana. Does not he say that when mineral beings died, it will gradually transform into vegetable, and vegetable into animal, and animal into human beings and so on. But Rumi did not elaborate it philosophically as to how this transformation really taken place. It seems that we have to wait several centuries later to find its philosophical explanation in Mulla Sadra's teaching of trans-substantial motion (*al-haraka al-jawhariyya*). According to this teaching any change or motion requires substantial motion. When Ibn Sina says that change can only take place at accidental categories (quality, quantity, situation and place) and allows no change at substantial category, Mulla Sadra says, "any change in the accidents of an object requires in fact a change in its substance, since accidents have no existence independent of substance."¹²

This trans-substantial change or movement, according to Sadra, is universal phenomenon and permeates every thing there is. The whole of the physical and even psychic or imaginal universes which extend up to the Immutable or luminous Archetypes are in constant motion or becoming. Therefore, the trans-substantial movement has taken place at every level of existence: cosmic, geological and biological levels, and even at psychic and imaginal. There is no doubt that this view is in accordance with Mawlana's theory that the universe has undergone a long evolutionary process and does not cease after man dies. Like Rumi, Mulla Sadra also believes that this evolutionary movement does not end at human level, but will continue at psychic, imaginal, and even archetypal levels until it reaches Divine Presence. Describing this evolution, Sadra says, "All beings in this world are moving vertically as result of trans-substantial motion until they reach the plenum of their archetypal reality. The sperm becomes a foetus and grows to the form of a baby who is then born and continues to grow from one form to another until he or she reaches full maturity and the body becomes weaker as the soul grows stronger until one dies and reaches the "imaginal world" and finally the Divine Presence."¹³

With this trans-substantial motion theory, Mulla Sadra actually tells us that when this movement takes place in certain object, the previous elements or qualities were not left behind. Instead, this movement adds to it new elements or qualities, so that it will bring about the accumulation of qualities. In turn this accumulation of qualities will cause the transmutation of genus and species and tells us why and how a mineral being can transmute itself into vegetable and vegetable into animal and so on. But this massive movement in the universe, according to both Rumi and Sadra, has been brought about by a fundamental and creative force, which Mawlana calls love (*'ishq*) but no name for it offered by Sadra.

¹¹ Rumi, *The Mathanwi*, vol. IV, p. 472.

¹² See Nasr "Mulla Sadra: His Teachings" in Nasr & Leaman, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, vol. I (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), p. 649.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Rumi and Darwin

After comparing Rumi with Mulla Sadra, it would not be complete if we do not compare him with Charles Darwin (d. 1882). Darwin was of course well-known to the world for his theory of evolution. He was often mistakenly considered as the pioneer of the theory, in spite of the fact that Lamarck and surely Rumi have anteceded him. While Mulla Sadra has given the philosophical explanation to Rumi's theory of evolution, Darwin, to my mind, has substantially supplied it with empirical evidence, supporting greatly Rumi's theory which was based only on mystical perception. Rumi says,

*“And when he passed from the vegetable state to the animal state, the vegetable state was not remembered by him at all.
Save only for the inclination which he has towards that (state) especially in the season of spring and sweet herb—
Like the inclination of babes towards their mother; it (the babe) does not know the secret of its desire for being suckled;”¹⁴*

With these empirical evidences supplied by Darwin, the truth of evolution as envisaged by Rumi became more evident, and what was in the past based only on mystical perception, now it can be proven empirically and scientifically. Therefore, both Rumi and Darwin have revealed to us the reality of evolution.

In spite of this positive correlation between Rumi and Darwin, their views on certain aspects of this evolution are fundamentally different. There are at least 4 points where we can find these differences. First, Darwin discusses the evolution only in biological level, while Rumi discusses it also in cosmic, geological, even psychic and imaginal levels. Therefore, the range of Rumi's evolution is wider than Darwin's, since it talks about this evolution not only in physical level but also in non-physical level.

Second, Darwin believes that it is the law of “natural selection” that was responsible for the biological evolution. This natural selection, considered as a dominant mechanical law, has brought about gradual changes in the biological world, and was especially responsible for the creation or origin of the species. It is, however, not really clear to me, whether this natural selection is actually “the power” that brought about this biological evolution or it is simply a “mechanism” through which evolution took place, while the real power behind this evolution is something else, for example, the will of the organic entities to survive, or in other word “the struggle for survival.” As for Rumi, the fundamental power that was responsible for the evolution in the world is love (*‘ishq*). It is love, according to him, that has caused the universe evolve in its various levels (cosmic, geological, biological, mental and even spiritual). Rumi says, “Love is the cause of the movement in the world of matter, earth and heavens revolve by virtue of love. It is growth in vegetable and motion in sentient beings. It is also love that gives

¹⁴ Lihat Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. IV, h. 472.

union to the particles of matter. Love makes vegetation grow, and also love that makes animal move and multiply.¹⁵

Third, in Darwin's theory, this fundamental power is blind and random. In his view, all organic beings, including man--who surely has higher forms of life,--are the product of a blind chance. In Rumi's theory, however, evolution has a clear destination and will not cease to evolve in human level, for if it so it will mean "stop" on the way. No, this universal evolution, according to Rumi, will continue to move, far beyond human kingdom, until its goal--that is to unite with the Beloved God, is reached.

The last (fourth), according to Darwin, the evolution takes place only in physical level. He even deliberately cuts it off from any relation with transcendent powers or realities (such as God and angels). For him it is not God, who has caused the organic beings to transmute from lower forms into higher and better ones, but the natural selection. In other words, it is not God who has created the species but natural forces. But according to Rumi this evolution requires the existence of God, as the main condition for evolution in this world, without whom, no evolution can be conceived. For if evolution was caused by love, love needs the beloved one, that is, God, without whom love would never have existed. God is, according to him, the efficient and also the final cause of it, He is the origin and also the returning place for everything exists in the universe. Therefore, compared to Darwin's theory, Rumi's theory of evolution is more suitable to religious doctrines or principles.

Rumi and Bergson

Other figure who could appropriately be compared to Rumi was Henri Bergson (d. 1939), the philosopher of life from French. Compared to Darwin, Bergson's theory of evolution has many similarities with Rumi's. Both Rumi and Bergson firmly believe in the existence of this fundamental force in the universe. Rumi names it love (*'ishq*), while Bergson calls it "élan vital" (vital impetus). This impetus is described by Bergson as "a current consciousness that had penetrated matter, given rise to living bodies and determined the course of their evolution."¹⁶ It is this impetus, according to Bergson, that was responsible for the evolution in the universe.

This evolution, according to Bergson, works creatively, and not mechanistically, as thought of by Darwin. There are many things in the biological world--such as reproductive phenomenon--which cannot be explained sufficiently in a mechanical way. The emergence of many truly new things in this world strongly indicates that the evolution has been controlled or directed by a creative force, which cannot be explained mechanically. The evolution, must have been creative in nature, in the sense producing truly new things, and therefore cannot be explained by both mechanics and teleology for they allow no novelty whatsoever in this universe.

¹⁵ Khalifah 'Abd al-Hakim, "Rumi, Nietzsche and Iqbal," in *Iqbal as the Thinker*, (Lahore: S.M Sharif, 1952), P. 144.

¹⁶ See Goudge, "Bergson," in Paul Edward (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co.. Inc., 1974), p. 293.

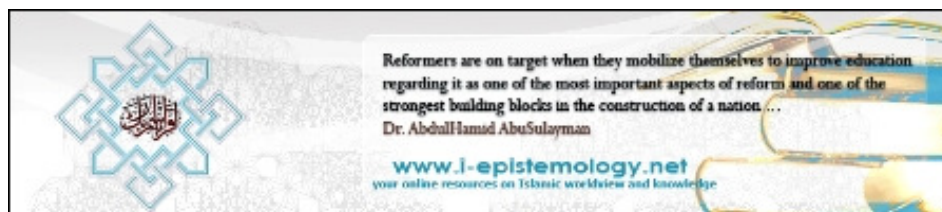
Bergson in one of his work criticizes Darwin’s doctrine on the purpose of evolution. According to him Darwin failed to explain why living things have evolved in the direction of greater and greater complexity. The earliest living things were simple and well adapted to their environment. He then asks Darwin, “Why did the evolutionary process not stop at this stage? Why did life continue to complicate itself “more and more dangerously?¹⁷ This reveals to us that the purpose of evolution is not simply to adapt to the environment, but, as mentioned above, to penetrate the matter creatively. However, in order for the evolution to be creative, Bergson rejects mechanistic and teleological explanation. Both mechanism and teleology will never allow any notions of novelty in the biological world, hence their failure to explain biological phenomena.

But if there is no “law” to determine the course of evolution, I am afraid that this élan vital will become a blind force as conceptualized once by Schopenhaur. It is, in this context, that I see Rumi’s theory better than that of Bergson. As a religious thinker, Rumi believes that evolution is not random, but moves towards a clear purpose or destination. Describing this universal evolution, Rumi says:

*I died to the inorganic state and became endowed with growth, and (then) I died to (vegetable) growth and attained to the animal.
I died from animality and became Adam (man), why then I should fear, when have I become less by dying?
At next remove I shall die to man, that I may soar and lift up my head amongst the angels;
And I must escape even from (the state of) the angels: “Everything is perishing except His face.”
Once more I shall be sacrificed and died to angel: I shall become that which enter not to imagination.
Then I shall become non-existence: non-existent saith to me, (in tone loud) as an organ: “Verily unto Him shall we return.”¹⁸*

Rumi’s evolution is not random or blind, but it is directed to God, the absolute Perfection. Does Rumi not say, that ‘everything is in love with that Perfection, and hastening upward like a sapling.’

Thank you. God bless you all.



<http://www.i-epistemology.net/mulyadhi-kartanegara.html>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 292

¹⁸ Rumi, *The Mathnawi*, vol. III. P. 219