

Editorial: The Black Mole on the Cheek of the Beloved: The Problem of Metaphysical Ambiguity

By M. Ali Lakhani

For the Black Mole on the Cheek of my Beloved
I would give the cities of Bokhara and Samarkand.

Shams ud-Din Mubammad Hafiz

In these well-known lines from Hafiz, the poet expresses his willingness to barter away all the splendors of the material world (symbolized here by the cities of Bokhara and Samarkand, the jewels of Tamerlane's empire) for the heart of his Beloved (symbolized here by the "Black Mole" on the Beloved's cheek). The quoted verse was the occasion of a legendary encounter between Tamerlane and the poet, who, having declared his indigence to the emperor's tax-collector, was summoned before the mighty emperor to answer for his default. The emperor, who was less concerned with the defaulting taxpayer than with the poet's insolence at valuing the jewels of his empire as mere trifles—worth less than an insignificant mole on his mistress' cheek—, furiously demanded an explanation. Hafiz is said to have disarmed the emperor, mollifying his rage by responding, "It is because I am so prone to this kind of prodigality that I am unable to pay your taxes!" The story is perhaps apocryphal, but it highlights the kind of spiritual prodigality and indigence that typify the dervish-lover—a transvaluation of values that has to be kept in mind when considering the ambiguity of the "desire for desirelessness" that is involved in the spiritual quest.

From a certain perspective, there can be no love without desire, yet for the true lover, the love that is desired transcends all desire. On the

surface, there is an ambiguity in the desire underlying the exchange proposed by Hafiz. Is his motive selfish, to secure the charms of his lover—or is it pure—to barter away everything for love? Though the image evoked in the poem is transactional, the desire prompting it is not venal. In the preceding line (“If that Shirazi Turk would take my heart in her hand”), the poet makes it clear that he is offering his own “heart” in exchange for that of his lover. The bargain evinces not only the poet’s disdain for the merely material in favor of the spiritual, but also the poet’s willingness to offer up everything he possesses in exchange for everything he prizes. For what he prizes is not the outwardly worthless mole that provoked the emperor’s outrage but the inwardly-discerned, transcendent Heart, on whose pyre all transient things and desire itself are immolated. From this perspective, love is the quenching of desire in the contentment of the Heart. By giving all, one gains all. In the words of another celebrated Sufi poet, Rumi: “Look! Here’s a bargain: Give one life, and take a hundred!”

The two perspectives involved in this story—the first being the mundane and “opaque” perspective of the all-powerful emperor, who perceives only the outwardly insignificant mole; and the second being the spiritual and “translucent” perspective of the dervish-lover, who discerns the symbol’s inward significance as the loving Heart—illustrate a metaphysical ambiguity that lies at the center of existential reality. It is this very ambiguity that marks human nature and therefore colors our understanding, our orientation, and our experience. Before we return to Hafiz’ trope regarding the barter, let us pause to consider in more detail the two perspectives that inform this metaphysical ambiguity.



According to the traditional outlook, existence is contingent (material reality is ‘accidental’ in the Aristotelian sense) and privative (all creaturely attributes are attenuations of their divine archetypes). To exist is to stand outside the Center, to be in exile from one’s Origin. From this perspective, ‘man is nothing, God is all’. Conversely, creation, viewed as a translucent theophany, is the expression of the Divine Word, being “charged with the grandeur of God”, who is its font and the source of its meaning, purpose, and value.

From this perspective, Earth must be shaped by Heaven, and human endeavor by the divine prototype. The criterion for this prototype is the divine spark within man, which constitutes his intellectual and ontological Center—referred to traditionally as the ‘Heart’. Man has the innate spiritual predisposition and intellectual capacity to apprehend the core of reality—or Truth—directly, sympathetically and unitively, to recognize his selfsame substance as its image, and to thereby perceive reality as a transcendent process of Self-disclosure, as an ever-replenishing theophany. It is this perception—of the intrinsic radial connection of all creatures to the same Center—that informs the spiritually enlightened man of his place in the universe and of his *raison d’être*. To know oneself is to appreciate one’s intrinsic nature—of nobility (for man is made in the divine image, and so is God’s trustee and vicegerent) and, at the same time, of poverty (for man is nothing outside the Grace and Mercy of God, upon whom he is utterly dependent). To know creation is to appreciate its hierarchical structure (its transcendent Origin) and its sacredness (its immanent and all-pervading Center). The implications of this sacred epistemology are clear: to see things in terms of their common Origin and Center requires us to ‘realize’ who we are by returning to our Origin and reuniting with our Center. Man owes fiduciary obligations to God and thereby to His creatures. These are: firstly, to worship God by contemplative invocation, and by conscious remembrance and awareness of His Presence (through prayer), and, secondly, to seek harmony in one’s existence, both inwardly (through virtue) and outwardly (through beauty). For traditional man, horizontal creaturely relations are based on vertical or divine norms: to be among God’s creatures is to be with them in God, to be Heart-Centered and thereby in harmony with all of creation. Harmony is to be attained inwardly before it is pursued outwardly, and order is to be achieved not through the attempted imposition of homogeneity on diversity but through inward graces of virtue and beauty—‘virtue’ here denoting an ethical sensibility marked by qualities such as compassionate understanding and kindness, and the gentle but ‘tough love’ of merciful justice; and ‘beauty’ denoting an aesthetic sensibility marked by a sense of the sacred. In the cases of both virtue and beauty, the criterion is the Heart-Centered Spirit which apprehends Truth both intellectually and affectively—that is, both as a sacramentally envisioned theophany and as a sympathetically ‘kardial’ reality.

The 'telos' of traditional man is his longing for return to the Origin and Center. At the same time, there is the awareness of the need for detachment, self-naughting, and purification inherent in this process of return. The soul must journey towards heaven free of the attachments of the world and of the egoic self, free of the taint of mortality. It is only the 'virginal' and 'enlightened' Spirit that can re-enter the sanctum of its spiritual Heart-Center. This is an act of grace, the transcendent realization and core awareness of one's essential spiritual reality.

Contrast these views with those of the ideological worldview of modernism, which would devalue, if not outright deny, any existential dependence on a transcendent reality or the perception of creation as a sacred theophany. Its starting point is not God but man: existential reality is rooted in, on the one hand, the subjectivism of individual experience and, on the other, the material objectivism of the psychophysical world it perceives. In modernist terms, the universe—viewed opaquely as the mechanisms of matter and mind—is self-contained, its mysteries potentially capable of rational human explanation, and within the grasp of modern science and the human ken. From this perspective, man has no need to import the hypothesis of God in order to understand existence. Reason alone can apprehend its mechanisms and thereby comprehend its meaning, purpose, and value.

From a purely quantitative perspective, knowledge that is horizontally reductive has no need for verticality: epistemology is reduced to discursive reasoning and materialist psychologies, without proper ontological and metaphysical underpinnings, objectivity to pragmatism, ethics to consensus, rationalization or mere preference, and beauty to subjectivist eccentricities and tawdry sentimentalism. Lacking true roots and wings, modern man is compelled to seek substitutes for reality in the superficial and the illusory, mistaking the outer for the inner. The Inner Man, who in traditional terms is considered as a spiritual being, endowed with mind and body, is thus reduced to the Outer Man. Principle, which in traditional terms is transcendent, is reduced to rational process and individual preference. And the theophany, which in traditional terms is imbued with sacredness, the criterion of Quality, is reduced to a universe of matter and mechanism, whose dominion has been termed (in René Guénon's celebrated phrase) the "Reign of Quantity". In this spiritually impoverished environment, the *jnanic* tendency shifts toward

rationalism and pseudo-spiritualism instead of gnosis, the *bbaktic* toward sentimentalism and adulation instead of spiritual love, and the *karmic* toward worldly ambitions instead of contemplative action. The world comes to be seen as an end in itself and man is the measure of all things. Life has no meaning beyond this world, unless it is in terms of the false eschatologies of the occult that conflate the psyche and the spirit.

If one can speak of the ‘telos’ of modern man, it is the ideology of material ‘progress’—the illusion that Quality can be a function of Quantity. There is no doubt value in improving the material conditions of the world, to alleviate poverty, disease, ignorance, and injustice, but these outer conditions derive meaning from inner criteria. Material progress is quantitative and does not necessarily yield qualitative value. Quality, unlike Quantity, is incommensurable. If there is value in improving our material circumstances, it derives from the sacredness of life, which is the true criterion of Quality. There are many materially ‘underprivileged’ people who have a sense of the sacred and build for themselves dignified and relatively content lives, just as there are many materially ‘privileged’ people who suffer from an inner malaise that derives from their profane lives. The modernist mentality that mistakes pleasure for joy, and comfort for serenity, seeks contentment in the wrong places. Its true criterion is inward and is based on a sense of the sacred. In vedantic terminology, inner harmony and bliss (*ananda*) is a function of being true to one’s innermost nature (*sat*) and being graced by a sacred consciousness (*chit*) of its Presence. It is not a function of material comforts or outward conditions.



Metaphysical ambiguity—in vedantic terminology, *maya*—is an inherent condition of existence. It is the veil over reality—or, more accurately, over the self. Existence is by definition a condition of being decentered so that ‘nothing in existence is God’, but from another perspective ‘God alone is real’. Both these aspects of reality are encompassed in the first part of the Muslim testimony, *la ilaha illa’Llah* (“there is no reality if not *the* Reality”). The veil of existence is diaphanous: it permits us to see the world as metaphysically opaque (*maya* as illusion) or as metaphysically transparent (*maya* as

the manifestation of *Atma*). In choosing how we see the world, the consequences for us cannot be underrated: they relate to the very meaning of life.

The English poet and mystic, William Blake, has written, “The fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees”. In the tale of Hafiz’ encounter with Tamerlane, each perceived the Black Mole differently—the emperor focusing on the outer, literal meaning, the dervish-sage on its inner, spiritual significance. The story illustrates how those who perceive with the Inner Eye are at risk of being misunderstood by those who view the world with the ordinary perception of outer vision. Though the Face of God is everywhere, it is not visible to the spiritually blind. Hafiz’ witty response to the emperor belies a deeper meaning about his outward poverty and apparent profligacy, and about the true nature of his proposed barter, than is at first evident.

The lines from Hafiz point to the metaphysical ambiguity inherent in our perception of the world, but they also suggest an inversion of values between the outer and inner worlds—between material wealth and spiritual poverty. Jesus too, we recall, preached of the inversion of values: for example, in the Beatitudes during the Sermon on the Mount, in which he preached, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. Hafiz’ tale and Jesus’ sermon point to a kind of holy poverty that recognizes man’s nothingness before God’s reality. This nothingness (signified by the Sufi term, *fana’*) is a way of understanding the blackness of the Black Mole. The blackness denotes the deep void of spiritual plenitude (signified by the Sufi term, *baqa’*), which is both emptiness (*sbunyata*, in Mahayana Buddhist terminology) and effulgent beauty (the beauty of the Beloved in the Song of Songs: “nigra sum sed formosa” — “I am black but beautiful”). In Hafiz’ ode, the Black Mole is to be understood symbolically (in an ontologically participative sense) not literally. The Beloved is to be perceived in an iconic sense (in her inward depth, as Presence), not outwardly as an idol. Hafiz is effectively rejecting—as did Jesus in his rejection of the “kingdoms of the world” when satan tried to tempt him in the wilderness—the ephemeral wealth of the material world for the “Hidden Treasure” of the kingdom of heaven. The Black Mole in this sense represents the “Hidden Treasure”, the transcendent Heart of the Beloved, which is the locus of Self-aware and abiding Presence. The nature of its metaphysical ambiguity lies not

only in its ambiguous reality (is it a trifle or a treasure?) but also in its capacity to satisfy one's desire (can it sate one's desire or merely arouse it?). What the poet sees, but the emperor does not, is the sacred abode of the Heart's contentment—the sustaining plenitude of the extinction of desire. In view of the pleromic union of the lover and the Beloved, there is no real loss entailed by the poet's bargain. The Beloved has taken the poet's heart in exchange for her own. Implied in this exchange and union is the relinquishment of the outer world and the illusory self in favor of the kingdom of heaven and the spiritual Self. This is the fundamental bargain that we are each called to make in our own lives.