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Rūmī's Asceticism Explored: A Comparative Glimpse into Meister Eckhart's Thought

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Abstract: This paper examines the nature of “asceticism” (*rīyādat*) in Sufism, revolving around the works of the 13th century Persian Sufi Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī Balkī and exploring two critical inquiries: Firstly, it seeks to determine whether Rūmī's mystical perspective on asceticism is world-rejecting or world-affirming. Secondly, it investigates potential parallels and divergences between Rūmī and Meister Eckhart's stances—specifically, through the Dominican's Sermons and Treatises—and assesses the implications for the two figures. In examining Rūmī's works, the current research primarily relies on secondary sources within the Persian intellectual tradition to provide an intracultural context. Utilizing horizontal and vertical interpretations, this study examines critical themes in Rūmī's works, such as *love*, *detachment (zuhd)*, *the world's deceptive nature*, and *seclusion*. The findings reveal that Rūmī's asceticism is not “monastic” (*ruhbānī*); instead, it balances moderate abstinence and worldly engagement, underpinned by the Quran and the *ḥadīth* teachings. Rūmī and Eckhart underscore asceticism as an *inner* transformation rather than mere *physical* austerity, emphasizing *inner purification*, *self-transcendence*, and *spiritual detachment* as routes to divine unity. The two thinkers' teachings are catalysts for profound personal transformation and a more fulfilling life in today's world.

Keywords: comparative theology; Rūmī; Eckhart; mysticism; sufism; asceticism; detachment; self-transcendence; suffering; love



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1. Introduction

Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī Balkī, born in Balkh, Khurāsān, in 604/1207 H/CE, emerged from a lineage of spiritual and scholarly repute, being the son of Bahā' al-Dīn Walad, a distinguished Sufi and scholar. The threatening Mongol invasion in 616/1219 H/CE propelled his family into a nomadic state until they established residence in Konya, now part of modern-day Türkiye, where his father secured a prestigious religious position. Following his father's passing in 628/1231 H/CE, Rūmī inherited his role and subsequently delved into Sufism, mentored by Burhān al-Dīn Tirmīdhī—a devoted disciple of his father. The pivotal encounter with Shams Tabrīzī in 642/1244 H/CE transformed Rūmī from a respected jurist to an ardent mystic intoxicated by divine love. The abrupt departure of Shams around 645/1247 H/CE profoundly impacted Rūmī, who withdrew from public sermonizing to focus on the spiritual training of Sufi disciples, flowering into a prolific poet until he died in 672/1273 H/CE.

Born around 1260, likely in Tambach near Gotha in Saxony, Meister Eckhart emerged as a notable late medieval theologian, mystic, and philosopher. Joining the Dominican Order early, he was educated mainly at the Studium Generale in Cologne, established by Albert the Great. Around 1286, Eckhart advanced his studies in Paris, later transitioning to notable administrative and academic roles such as the Prior of the Convent of Erfurt

and Vicar of Thuringia from 1294 to 1298, and Professor at the University of Paris during 1302/1303. Beyond his ecclesiastical positions, Eckhart's teachings, intertwining mysticism and scholasticism, attracted scrutiny, culminating in an inquisitorial proceeding in 1326. Some viewed his ideologies, centering on the human soul's union with God, as heretical. In 1329, posthumously, the Papal Court in Avignon condemned certain of his propositions, with Eckhart likely having passed in 1328, possibly in Avignon. Despite controversies, his substantial oeuvre, including Latin treatises and vernacular sermons, markedly impacted Christian mysticism and philosophy, his insights enduring through subsequent mystics and thinkers, affirming his legacy in religious and philosophical realms.

In examining Islamic mystical literature, the notions of "asceticism" (*rīyāḍat*) and "worldly engagement" often emerge, sometimes poised in contrast rather than being scrutinized for their interconnectedness. Certain individuals understand asceticism in a monastic, world-rejecting, or escapist light. For instance, [Mīhanī \(1988, 27\)](#) sheds light on the life of the distinguished Sufi, Abū Sa'īd Abū al-Khayr (375/967–440/1049 H/CE), narrating his seven years of living in the desert where he subsisted on sparse and harsh offerings such as thorns. Some scholars, like [Mughnīya \(1986, p. 184\)](#), even trace the origins of Sufism back to Christian monasticism—emphasizing its world-rejecting aspect. Contrastingly, [Lala \(2023\)](#) recognizes the world-affirming and world-rejecting facets of asceticism through Ibn 'Arabī's lens, albeit with a different translation of "asceticism". He renders "asceticism" as "*zuhd*", while our paper translates it as "*rīyāḍat*", distinguishing it from worldly "detachment", which we translate as "*zuhd*". (The distinction between *rīyāḍat* and *zuhd* will be further scrutinized in this paper.) The connections between ascetic practices and their association with engagement and affirmation of the world are insufficiently explored. This gap in the existing literature has motivated the present research. This paper bridges scholarly voids by juxtaposing Rūmī's and Eckhart's views on asceticism, shedding light on a world-affirming approach. It offers original translations of Rūmī's work and transcends conventional interpretations by underscoring the significance of love, personal transformation, a more meaningful life, and a more moderate detachment in spiritual enlightenment, fostering a refined understanding of ascetic practices within Islamic and Christian mystical traditions.

This paper has two objectives: Firstly, it seeks to determine whether Rūmī's view on asceticism is "world-rejecting, escapist, and monastic" or "world-affirming". Secondly, it explores potential similarities and differences between Rūmī's and Eckhart's positions—specifically, through the latter's Sermons and Treatises—and assesses the implications for the two figures.

Being two highly influential mystics within their respective traditions, Rūmī and Eckhart present a valuable comparative pair to discern insights into the mystical facets of the two religions. The shared spiritual status between Rūmī and Eckhart and the parallels between the two interrelated religions they signify are foundational to their similarities. For instance, as [Zarrabi-Zadeh \(2016, pp. 9–11\)](#) points out, the range of spiritual stations and states represented in Sufi texts denote the tradition's dynamic nature. Similarly, Christianity also portrays spiritual phases, such as the three-fold path of purification, illumination, and ecstasy, the seven mystical perfection mansions in Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle*, and the seven-tiered ascent towards God outlined in *The Mirror of Simple Souls* by Marguerite Porete.

To accomplish these objectives, some key terms must be defined. In mysticism, the "world-affirming" stance posits engagement with the world as beneficial or essential for spiritual practice when driven by otherworldly or transcendent motives. This view supports pursuing lawful sustenance and financial stability to uphold oneself and one's family, regarded as favorable for one's spiritual progression. It advocates for a balanced interaction with material and spiritual realms, suggesting that forsaking the material world is not requisite for spiritual advancement. The fulfillment from such balanced interactions aligns with sought-after spiritual outcomes. Contrastingly, the "world-rejecting" stance interprets engagement with worldly desires and pleasures as detrimental, especially those

lacking transcendent significance. This viewpoint sees such engagement as injurious to an individual's spiritual health, potentially cultivating harmful traits like greed. It dissuades an undue emphasis on excessive worldly pleasures and desires devoid of a higher transcendent aspiration, recognizing it as an impediment to spiritual growth and inner transformation. "Escapist tendencies" encourage radical disengagement from the material world, its difficulties, and obligations to achieve spiritual objectives or attain inner tranquility. This viewpoint perceives asceticism and mysticism as separate from the practical aspects of life and not actively contributing to societal improvement or addressing real-life challenges. "Monasticism" denotes a religious practice where adherents commit to strict seclusion, self-discipline, and spiritual dedication, usually residing in purpose-built, isolated communities called monasteries. Monasticism encourages individuals to voluntarily renounce worldly possessions and indulgences to pursue spiritual development.

This paper's thesis is that Rūmī's asceticism diverges from a "monastic" (*ruhbanī*) approach, instead harmonizing moderate abstinence with worldly engagement, grounded in the teachings of the Quran and the *ḥadīth* (i.e., prophetic sayings). Rūmī and Eckhart frame asceticism as an avenue for "inner" transformation rather than just "physical" austerity—including physical seclusion—accentuating inner purification, self-transcendence, and spiritual detachment as pathways to divine unity. The teachings of these two thinkers act as catalysts for profound personal transformation, fostering a more fulfilling life in the contemporary world. Their view on asceticism encourages not only inner transformation and spiritual detachment aimed at divine union but also inspires individuals to interact positively with the world. This interaction, founded on moderate abstinence and shaped by the ethical principles of the Quran and the *ḥadīth*, naturally advocates a life of fulfillment and purpose. This comprehensive outlook on asceticism challenges the idea of "escapism", instead depicting a reciprocal relationship between spiritual ascent and worldly engagement, mutually enriching one's path towards personal transformation and a more meaningful, rewarding life.

In addressing this paper's objectives, a crucial aspect is the interpretation method. Unfortunately, a common theme in interpreting Persian mystical poetry is "intercultural" contextualization, where Western works are perceived as the norm. Despite such works' significance, and together with them, Persian poetry—or any intellectual tradition—should first and primarily be contextualized "intraculturally". Thus, in examining Rūmī's primary works, this paper mainly relies on secondary sources within the Persian intellectual tradition. Additionally, it analyzes Rūmī's conception of asceticism within Islam's broader discourse, focusing on the Islamic mystical, or Sufi, tradition. Finally, the paper examines potential parallels and contrasts between Rūmī's position and Christian mysticism, specifically Meister Eckhart's Sermons and Treatises—in particular, *On Detachment* and *The Talks on Instruction*—and how these insights may enrich the two mystics' thought. To address the objectives, the paper examines several recurring themes when exploring Rūmī's stance on asceticism. These themes concern his views on love, detachment (*zuhd*), the world's deceptive nature, and seclusion.

Our exploration has a twofold methodological approach. The first, a "horizontal interpretation", elucidates terms and expressions while pointing out allusions to the Quran and *ḥadīth* within the poems. The "vertical interpretation" uncovers the profound meaning of a text by weaving together terms and references gained from the horizontal interpretation. It achieves this by drawing connections between the individual work, the broader corpus of the author's works, and the tradition from which they emerge. Although both interpretations are vital, horizontal analysis is often insufficient to capture a text's true essence fully, necessitating the role of vertical interpretation.¹

In the following sections, this paper delves into Rūmī's and Eckhart's views on asceticism and detachment. First, it explores Rūmī's perspective, emphasizing love's role in the spiritual journey. Then, it investigates Eckhart's concept of detachment and his understanding of suffering as a transformative agent. Finally, it compares both mystics' views, scrutinizing how their thoughts could complement each other.

2. Discussion

2.1. Rūmī: Asceticism

To understand asceticism in Rūmī's mystical thought,² it is crucial to examine "asceticism", or *rīyādat*, in Islamic thought. Literally, "asceticism" signifies the act of controlling animals and restraining their random movements while walking. Concerning human faculties, the analogy implies that our "animal faculty" should remain subordinate to our "rational faculty". Like the act of guiding animals, the rational faculty "guides" and "tames" the animalistic tendencies within humans, which, if left unchecked, may lead one spiritually astray. In this view, the rational faculty liberates the human from desire-driven actions, resulting in harmony and tranquility within the human faculties (Yasrebi 1989, pp. 377–78).

This perspective has historical roots in ancient Greek philosophy. For instance, in Book IV of *The Republic* (Plato 1997, pp. 435e–445e), Plato's "tripartite theory of the soul" divides the soul into rational, spirited, and appetitive parts. According to this theory, justice arises from harmony among these parts—where the rational part rules over the spirited and appetitive parts—while imbalance leads to injustice.³ Interestingly, this echoes the teachings of Rūmī's mentor, Shams Tabrīzī (2021, p. 91), who held that drunkenness is not limited solely to wine; it can extend to various domains. Shams underscored the necessity of resisting temptations, particularly warning against the drunkenness from caprice—or worldly desires—as the most challenging to overcome. This aligns with the ascetic principle of restraining one's desires and underscores the importance of rational control in the face of worldly temptations.

Thus, asceticism does not necessarily and exclusively involve overwhelming "physical" hardships; instead, it entails the subordination of the animal faculty to the rational one to direct the soul's faculties to the divine. Asceticism is a battle often referred to as *jihād-i akbar*, or the "great struggle", a crucial transition point characterized as the "new birth" or "voluntary death", echoing the prophetic saying, "Die before you die" (Majlesī 1886, p. 59).⁴ This asceticism, in Islam, is achieved through the balanced practices stipulated in the divine Law and Tradition (i.e., the Quran and the *ḥadīth*).

Therefore, Islamic asceticism is a deliberate and disciplined practice of self-restraint, abstaining from excessive material and sensual indulgence, and endurance of hardships to promote individual growth, self-mastery, and spiritual advancement. This practice is characterized by austerity in appearance, manner, and attitude. Notably, asceticism, or *rīyādat*, encompasses "resilience amid hardships" and "detachment" (*zuhd*), fostering spiritual growth. Hence, *zuhd* is a part of *rīyādat*.

Zuhd and *rīyādat* are two interconnected concepts within Islamic spirituality, each with distinct nuances. *Zuhd*, or detachment, emphasizes relinquishing worldly desires to pursue spiritual enlightenment and divine approval. On the other hand, *rīyādat*, or asceticism, embodies a disciplined practice of self-restraint, austerity, enduring hardships, and *zuhd* to promote self-mastery and spiritual growth. While *rīyādat* provides a broad framework for disciplined living, *zuhd* is a vital component, promoting detachment from worldly allurements. The practice of *zuhd* supports the objectives of *rīyādat* by directing desires toward spiritual pursuits. Through *zuhd*, the disciplined lifestyle outlined by *rīyādat* is enriched, facilitating a balanced engagement with the worldly realm alongside a spiritually disciplined and detached stance. Harmoniously integrated, the two concepts guide individuals toward spiritual enlightenment and divine unity.

By understanding asceticism from the Islamic perspective, its manifestation in Rūmī's works can be explored. *Rīyādat* plays a pivotal role in Rūmī's philosophy as a vehicle for spiritual advancement. This concept is deeply rooted in the Quran, which proclaims, "We will indeed test you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth, souls, and fruits; and give glad tidings to . . . those who, when affliction befalls them, say, 'Truly we are God's, and unto Him we return'" (Quran, 2:155–156).⁵ This verse underscores life's trials and stresses the significance of maintaining faith and gratitude amidst adversity. By incorporating Quranic teachings, Rūmī portrays asceticism as an integral component

of spiritual development and a means to connect with the divine. The question of the extent to which Rūmī embraces asceticism, specifically whether his understanding of *rīyādat* is “world-rejecting, escapist, and monastic” or “world-affirming”, warrants further examination; thus, it is essential to analyze asceticism as it is portrayed in Rūmī’s works to address this inquiry.

Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* (V:3780–3814)⁶ provides insights into his understanding of asceticism.⁷ He portrays the spiritual journey from seeking glory and honor through physical suffering in battle to realizing that the true struggle lies in “purifying the soul” and “overcoming the lower self”. In the story, the journeyer embarks on an ascetic lifestyle—embracing solitude, fasting, and self-discipline—emphasizing that the “great struggle” (*jihād al-akbar*) is the inner battle against one’s self (ego, *nafs*) and desires. This spiritual practice allows the individual to focus solely on the Divine and resist the temptations of the lower self.⁸ The sacrifices made in seclusion are solely for God, emphasizing the importance of sincerity in one’s spiritual practice. Further, Rūmī contends that a genuine Sufi appreciates both the great struggle of purifying the soul and the “lesser struggle” (*jihād al-aṣghar*) of physical battle, recognizing the significance of each in their spiritual journey, though prioritizing the former struggle.⁹

Furthermore, in *Mathnawī* (III:3390–3398), Rūmī encourages journeyers to willingly embrace asceticism and commit their bodies to serve their souls. By advocating for such self-discipline, Rūmī implies that practicing restraint can lead to a deeper connection with one’s true self and foster spiritual development. “Embrace asceticism with your soul, its seeker be/Once your body serves the soul, success you’ll see” (III:3396).¹⁰ Rūmī adds that asceticism—even when imposed upon an individual by God—is a critical spiritual opportunity that contributes to one’s overall spiritual growth (III:3397–3398). By encouraging journeyers to approach such situations with gratitude, Rūmī underscores the notion that asceticism is not simply a personal endeavor but a divine gift.

Rūmī emphasizes the importance of suffering and challenges in attaining spiritual growth and transformation, stating that he has given sweet lives to buy afflictions (*Dīwān*, G.1372:16).¹¹ As Mazaheri and Ali Zamani observe (Mazaheri and Ali Zamani 2018, p. 74), “Rūmī’s profound and irremediable suffering revolves around themes of ‘loss’, ‘estrangement’, ‘alienation’, and ‘separation’”. This suffering stems from being separated from the Beloved and confined within the physical realm—a natural consequence of being separated from perfection and tolerating its absence. Rūmī acknowledges that the path to spiritual perfection is challenging, requiring a committed and nimble traveler who will not be easily discouraged by the obstacles they encounter. “But this trait is for the nimble traveler, agile and bold/You, the world’s sweetheart, where could you ever uphold?” (G.959:7).¹²

Concerning embracing hardships, Chittick offers intriguing insights (Chittick 1983, pp. 237–39). Suffering is crucial to the human pursuit of divine love and unity—a symptom of separation from God. The more one becomes aware of this separation, the more they suffer, which encourages one to seek deliverance from the source of their pain—i.e., self-existence. The intensity of suffering reflects the degree of separation from God, with worldly comforts like wealth as veils preventing divine unity. The willingness to embrace suffering demonstrates a break from self-attachment. This perspective, and Rūmī’s emphasis on submitting one’s self, aligns with Islamic asceticism.

In conclusion, Rūmī emphasizes asceticism’s integral role in spiritual development and fostering a profound relationship with the divine. While Rūmī acknowledges the challenges associated with asceticism, he emphasizes its transformative power in purifying the soul and overcoming the lower self. Rūmī’s interpretation of asceticism entails a purposeful, methodical, and *world-affirming* (*more later*) approach to self-control, refraining from overindulgence in material and sensory pleasures and tolerating adversity to foster personal and spiritual growth.

Intriguingly, Rūmī presents a potent element that alleviates the ascetic practices’ challenges, transforming them into delightful experiences. This transformative component

is “love”, a theme previously discussed by other mystics but attaining incomparable prominence in Rūmī’s mystical poetry.¹³

2.1.1. Love’s Role

In *Maqālāt* (Shams Tabrīzī 2017, p. 27), concerning love’s role, Rūmī’s life-changing mentor, Shams Tabrīzī, writes,

He [God] is self-sufficient; you must express your need to Him, for the Self-Sufficient loves the needy.¹⁴ Through that need ..., something from the Eternal would be bestowed on you, which is love. ... Through that eternal [i.e., love], you perceive the Eternal [i.e., God].

The centrality of love in Sufism is fascinating, particularly as it intersects with the teachings of Rūmī. Though the conceptualization of love in this tradition evades a straightforward definition, it is seen as an inexhaustible, eternal concept, surpassing the bounds of logic and experience. From the viewpoint of Jalāl al-Dīn Homāī (d. 1400/1980 H/CE) (Homāī 1990a, p. 407)—a distinguished Iranian Rūmī scholar—love is the sustaining force behind the cosmos and the essential link within the chain of beings; its absence could rupture this interconnected structure.¹⁵ Homāī’s emphasis on love can be elucidated through the lens of the “unity of existence”, a doctrine central to Sufism and systematized by Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240 H/CE).

This doctrine asserts that the Real, through His manifestations, pervades the world, culminating in a singular existence. Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640 H/CE) further nuanced this concept by introducing the “gradational (*tashkīkī*) unity of existence”. This unity views existence as an interconnected, hierarchical reality with diverse instances or “existents”. This reality encompasses “horizontal multiplicity”, denoting diverse existents with unique attributes within the same existential plane. Conversely, “vertical multiplicity” entails different existential ranks marked by varying degrees of perfection. The ranks extend from the pinnacle of the Essentially Necessary to the lowest level of existence—i.e., the prime matter—each level exhibiting a unique blend of constraints and perfections (Tabāṭabāī 2011, pp. 17–20).¹⁶

In this light, Yasrebi (1989, pp. 27–28) highlights that, by mirroring existence’s diverse ranks, love, too, possesses different levels, from the love for lower levels of existence to the love for the Essentially Necessary. This love arises from each existent’s pursuit of the higher level’s perfection, with love for the Essentially Necessary deemed as “real love” and that for created existents classified as “metaphorical love”. The profound resonance between humans and God—exemplified by their mutual love¹⁷ (Quran, 5:54)—prompts humans to love all manifestations of God, i.e., all levels of existence. Based on this explanation, it can be inferred that the real love’s force stimulates metaphorical love, and pursuing the latter can lead to attaining the former if one “consciously” seeks the real love reflected in these “metaphorical mirrors”. This perspective illuminates Shams Tabrīzī’s assertion in the *Maqālāt*: Through love, you perceive God (Shams Tabrīzī 2017, p. 27).

Rūmī repeatedly refers to love as a cure for suffering and challenges. For instance, in *Dīwān-e Shams Tabrīzī* (G.1372:10), he writes, “But if love’s pain should conquer you/With this pain the sorrow of the heart you can cure”. In *Fīh Mā Fīh* (Rūmī 2006, pp. 103–7), he contends that love seekers must strive for inner illumination—which follows asceticism—to achieve tranquility and liberation from worldly desires. In such people’s hearts, contrary to the materially oriented individuals, worldly temptations appear as fleeting desires, never settling. The path to true spiritual understanding is long and demanding, yet it can be traversed through the transformative power of love.¹⁸

Further illuminating love’s role in Sufism, in *Mathnawī* (V:2180–2181; VI:2680–2683; I:1740), Rūmī distinguishes the spiritual journeys of a *zāhid* (a practitioner of *zuhd*), *‘arif* (gnostic), and *‘āshiq* (lover of God). As Homāī (1990b, pp. 818–19) observes, this distinction reflects their differing capabilities to traverse the divine path: Rūmī metaphorically conceptualizes the divine realm as a “kingdom” comprising the “court” and “throne”. Although

the *zāhid* can journey towards the court, they remain distant from the king's presence. In contrast, the *ārif* makes significant strides, with just a single step, reaching the king's throne, transcending the tedious journey of the *zāhid*. Fascinatingly, the *āshiq* goes beyond the *zāhid* and *ārif*, traversing the court and throne swiftly and attaining a union with the King. This union signifies the profound stages of "annihilation in God" and "subsistence with God", considered the pinnacle of spiritual progress.¹⁹

Therefore, to Rūmī, love propels the spiritual journey and lightens its challenges, underscoring love's role as the driving force behind the seeker's journey and asceticism as the tool for transcending one's lower self. The aim of this journey is not self-denial *per se* but rather self-transcendence, leading to divine unity through love and asceticism.

Navigating through Rūmī's elucidated trajectory of transcending one's lower self via love and asceticism, the discourse naturally extends to his pivotal tenet of self-knowledge. Anchored in the Islamic belief that humans are created through the divine Breath (Quran, 38:72), embodying God's image, Rūmī highlights introspection as a conduit to unveil one's true essence. This notion aligns with the theme of love, positing self-discovery as a vessel toward a profound understanding and engagement with divine love. Rūmī's allegorical portrayal in *Dīwān* (Quatrains, 1756) describes the human entity as "the copy of the divine letter" and "the mirror of the King's Beauty", urging individuals towards self-inquiry to uncover that everything they seek resides within them. In this self-discovery and love, seekers are ushered further on the path of spiritual transcendence, encapsulating Rūmī's vision of the soul's voyage toward divine unity.

2.1.2. Detachment

A crucial concept that illuminates Rūmī's asceticism is "*zuhd*". The Arabic term *zuhd* means to become uninterested, to turn away from something, to abandon the world, and to renounce worldly desires. In Islamic terminology, it refers to detachment from worldly pleasures to pursue spiritual pleasures and God's approval. Considering this definition, in this paper, *zuhd* is translated as "detachment". In Islamic thought, the conceptualization of *zuhd* is multifaceted. In *Ishārāt* (Ibn Sīnā 2013, *Namaṭ* 9, pp. 439–61), Ibn Sīnā delineates this concept, providing an intricate framework to explore Rūmī's perspective. To Ibn Sīnā, the individual who consciously turns away from worldly desires is deemed a *zāhid* (a practitioner of *zuhd*). The *ābid*, the pious devotee, goes beyond the compulsory to engage in supererogatory practices. The highest stage is that of the *ārif*, or gnostic, who focuses solely on God, causing divine Light to illuminate their heart. In Ibn Sīnā's view, being a *zāhid-ābid* signifies trading with God. The true spiritual journey demands the individual to be an *ārif*, integrating aspects of a *zāhid* and an *ābid*.²⁰

Closely analyzing Rūmī's poetry shows that the *zuhd* he praises is that of an *ārif*, which encompasses the other two. To substantiate this claim, let us explore the Persian poet's view of the world and the significance he placed on *zuhd*.

In *Mathnawī* (VI:2090–2091), Rūmī stresses *zuhd*'s transformative potential in facilitating spiritual enlightenment, true wisdom, and connecting with the divine by pointing to the relationship between detachment and knowledge (*ma'rifat*). In this context, Rūmī associates the soul of religious Law and piety with the *ārif*, or gnostic, implying that adherence to religious tenets is crucial for comprehending spirituality. This connection demonstrates Rūmī's assumption that *zuhd* is rooted in the principles derived from the Quran and the ḥadīth. In contrast to some Sufis who disregard divine Law entirely and depend solely on the inner dimensions of Islam, Rūmī emphasizes the importance of adhering to both religious tenets and spiritual exploration. In line with the *social* ethos of Islamic principles, Rūmī's equal emphasis on both the spiritual and religious dimensions reinforces this paper's assertion that his mystical teachings, while advocating for *zuhd*, affirm worldly engagement.

Among many themes, the significance of the world's deceptive nature for Rūmī relates to his view of detachment and asceticism. Therefore, the following section explores this theme.²¹

The World's Deceptive Nature

Rūmī considered the world to be of little significance. In *Mathnawī*, he likens it to a “mosquito’s wing” (VI:1640), underscoring its insignificance. This perspective, grounded in Islamic tradition,²² forms the basis for his acceptance of “asceticism”. Rūmī’s view on detachment centers on the world’s *deceptive* nature, a theme crucial to understanding his perspective.

This theme is exemplified in *Dīwān* (G.2303:1–9), where the world is portrayed as a “harlot adorned with a rosy veil”, emphasizing its deceptive appearance. Rūmī elaborates on the inability of the rosy veil to disguise the ill-spined thorns, representing worldly attachments and distractions that pierce the hearts and souls of those trapped.

Don’t gaze at her anklet, behold her dark leg,
Night play is delightful, yet behind the curtain.
Wash your hands off her, O righteous Sufi,
Detach your heart from her, O man of steadfast strength.

(*Dīwān*, G.2303: 5–6)²³

Rūmī advises against being captivated by the world’s superficial charms, indicated by the alluring “anklet”, and instead encourages the recognition of the underlying darkness, represented by the “dark leg”. Alluding to the worldly pleasures (“night play”), he reminds journeyers that these pleasures are ephemeral, and their true nature is hidden behind the curtain. This is why Rūmī urges spiritual travelers to detach from the material world and prepare their hearts for spirituality instead.²⁴ Notably, while Rūmī advocates for worldly detachment, his mysticism inherently holds a world-affirming stance. The poet advocates a balanced engagement with life’s material and spiritual dimensions, negating the necessity to forsake the material world solely for spiritual development or excessively delving into worldly affairs (to elaborate in Section 2.2).

In another poem, Rūmī employs the metaphor of a “worldly bride” and “Satan as her broker” to emphasize the world’s deceitful nature (*Dīwān*, G.2416:7). The poet’s comparison between the bride, symbolizing the world, and the broker’s trade, representing Satan’s manipulative endeavors, accentuates the treacherous aspects of worldly pursuits. He employs the bride analogy again elsewhere in *Dīwān* (G.2757:2): “The bride of life’s feast is old/Marry her, and soon you’ll wish her dead” (G.2757:2).²⁵ Furthermore (*Mathnawī*, IV:3189–3241), Rūmī compares the world to an “old sorcerer” who casts spells on its inhabitants, captivating and leading them astray from their true path.²⁶

In summary, Rūmī’s portrayal of the world as deceptive shapes his *zuhd* and asceticism. He sees the world as a misleading veil that distracts individuals from pursuing divine wisdom. This insight promotes the philosophy of *zuhd*, a deliberate detachment from earthly enticements central to Rūmī’s asceticism, which advocates self-discipline and temperance in material and sensual endeavors. Consequently, by advocating separation from the illusory world, Rūmī’s doctrines define asceticism as a path of transformation. This journey, guided by love and lit by the Divine Light, ultimately leads to unity with the Divine.

2.2. Rūmī: Why Not Monasticism

It is not the world itself that is evil but humans’ “excessive preoccupation” with it. This can be explained within two types of engagement with the world (Narāqī 2012, pp. 329–30): praised and condemned. The motivating factor behind praised engagement is “other-worldly”. In this perspective, the financial aspect of engagement with the world falls within the category of praiseworthy conduct. Pursuing the necessary means to sustain oneself or one’s family is approved and seen as contributing positively to an individual’s spiritual journey. Thus, the fulfillment and satisfaction derived from such worldly interactions align with the beneficial outcomes of praised engagement. As affirmed in the Islamic *ḥadīth* tradition, this perspective is encouraged, as the prophetic saying goes, “Worship consists of

seventy parts, the highest of which is seeking lawful sustenance" (Narāqī 2012, p. 327). The second type of engagement with the world, which Narāqī classifies as condemned, is characterized by preoccupation with desires and worldly pleasures that are not otherworldly. This engagement can lead to an ill heart, fostering harmful attributes like greed.

This understanding provides a foundation to examine Rūmī's perspective. Despite discussing abstract and intuitive matters, Rūmī's language also includes social, civic, and everyday matters—which shows that he considers the worldly life important too (Zamani 2021, pp. 14–15). Our poet suggests a harmonious balance between life's material and spiritual aspects, where one neither needs to renounce the material world to achieve spiritual growth nor become immersed in worldly matters. This approach aligns with Islam's emphasis on living within the median path (*bayn al-ifrāt wa al-tafrīt*). To further substantiate this assertion, let us examine his works.

In *Fīh Mā Fīh* (Rūmī 2006, pp. 103–7), Rūmī elucidates his view on "monasticism" (*ruhbānīyyat*), referencing the Prophet Muḥammad's (PBUP), saying that "Islam does not endorse monasticism".²⁷ He posits that God revealed to the Prophet a path more demanding than monasticism, which encompasses marriage and tolerance of marital difficulties.²⁸ Demonstrating patience over such difficulties purifies one's character. Recognizing this, says Rūmī, consider your spouse a means for self-cleansing and self-improvement (and vice versa). He adds that the path of the Prophet Muḥammad includes enduring the challenges of jealousy, generosity, providing for one's spouse, and other difficulties. But the path of Prophet Jesus (PBUH) focuses on the solitary struggle and resisting lust. Intriguingly, Rūmī advises that if you cannot follow the Prophet Muḥammad's path, at least pursue Prophet Jesus' path so as not to be utterly deprived.

This compelling passage shows that although Rūmī does not entirely dismiss monasticism, he believes confronting family and social challenges is more spiritually rewarding and superior to monasticism. As a result, he implicitly urges seekers to pursue the former path primarily, and if they cannot do so, they may resort to the latter. This empathetic approach is one of the many reasons Rūmī's teachings have remained relevant and universally appealing for centuries.²⁹

Further endorsement for the paper's argument that Rūmī's asceticism does not adopt a monastic approach comes from his eminent commentator, Ja'farī Tabrīzī (n.d., p. 45). The commentator illuminates the distinctness of Rūmī's mystical methodology, noting the poet's welcoming of human attributes, instincts, and the tangible world. Rūmī's mystical path diverges from the path of unhealthy mysticism—one advising monastic and extreme practices—and aligns with the broader Islamic tradition—as evident from his heavy reliance on the Quran and the *ḥadīth* in his writing.³⁰ Rūmī's acceptance even extends to the sexual instinct, its associated pleasure, and the process of human reproduction, which he views as an expression of the Divine Will in the world. However, Rūmī (*Mathnawī*, II:3151) asserts that overindulgence in sexual pleasure can damage other human facets and aptitudes.

Rūmī's perspective on *zuhd* and asceticism can be further understood through his views on "solitude" or *khalvat*. For him (*Dīwān*, G.99:1–20), "solitude" is significant, as it provides an opportunity to cultivate a deeper, more intimate relationship with the Beloved or the Divine. Amid the chaos and turbulence of existence, the Beloved remains hidden, particularly from those unworthy or incapable of recognizing the Divine's presence. Solitude is a refuge where one attains inner peace and a connection with the Divine, away from undeserving individuals' influence and worldly distractions. "The Beloved, concealed amidst the chaos/All have gone, in solitude now, appear" (*Dīwān*, G.99:1).³¹

Our poet (*Dīwān*, G.126:1–8) highlights the importance of the "solitude of love" as the ultimate remedy for the heart's grief. Considering the presence of undeserving and disheartened individuals, Rūmī suggests that the only solution for their troubled hearts is the intimate sphere of love's seclusion (G.126:6).³² This isolation represents a private, sacred space where profound connections with the Beloved can be forged, far from the world's superficiality and duplicity. The role of solitude emphasizes the need to withdraw from external distractions and focus on the inner realm of affection and longing.³³

In examining Rūmī's solitude, the distinction between two kinds of solitude in Islamic mysticism becomes evident. As delineated by Sayyid Muḥammad Maḥdī Baḥr al-'Ulūm (d. 1212/1798), these two forms can be categorized as "general solitude" and "special solitude", each with its unique features and implications (Baḥr al-'Ulūm 2007, pp. 160–63). General solitude, or *'uzlat*, characteristically involves maintaining a distance from individuals³⁴ unless necessary. The fundamental premise here is not the avoidance of people *per se* but the avoidance of certain kinds of human interactions. This elucidates why physical location is not a determinant factor in this solitude. Turning to "special solitude", this form calls for more radical separation from societal interaction and hustle. It necessitates spending time in a specially designated space—large enough only for worship—often enhanced with fragrances. Here, physical presence is significant.³⁵

A comparison of these two forms of solitude highlights the moderation of the first type, which is more closely aligned with Islamic teachings. In contrast, the second type possesses a radical character that deviates from the usual norms of Islamic social life.³⁶ Reflecting upon Rūmī's discourse on solitude, it appears he leans more toward general solitude and, thus, a balanced approach to mysticism.

In conclusion, grounded in the broader Islamic tradition, Rūmī's worldly engagement and spirituality perspective emphasizes a harmonious balance between material and spiritual aspects of life, far from monasticism, highlighting the spiritual rewards of confronting family and social challenges. His acceptance of human attributes and the empirical world further distinguishes his mystical methodology from monasticism.

2.3. Meister Eckhart: Asceticism and Detachment

The Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart's (d. 1328 CE) understanding of asceticism centrally revolves around "detachment", or German "*Gelassenheit*", derived from the Greek "*apatheia*" in the ancient Christian tradition. Detachment, for Eckhart, has dual implications. It first refers to the renunciation of earthly pleasures in pursuit of spiritual fulfillment and God's approval—as used broadly throughout this paper. Secondly, Eckhart ascribes to "detachment" a more technical meaning that involves the human intellect's capacity to dissociate itself from all finite created entities, including its existence.³⁷

Let us examine the first type of detachment. As depicted in his sermons (Eckhart 2009a, S.6:67–68, S.10:91, S.48:258–260, S.86:419),³⁸ Eckhart's mysticism points to an asceticism focused on inner purification, disavowal of worldly desires, and a quest for unity with the divine. It emphasizes cleansing the soul and enduring hardship as essential elements of the spiritual journey. The ascetic aspects in Eckhart's sermons pave the soul's path to divine and angelic enlightenment, understanding God's work, aligning with the divine order, and achieving inner illumination. This journey is characterized by the bitterness of former pleasures, in which the soul finds solace solely in God and maintains perpetual detachment from transient entities.

In his treatise *On Detachment* (Eckhart 2009b, p. 574), Eckhart underscores the indispensable role of suffering in one's spiritual progression. He articulates that the requisite detachment for spiritual ascent is most proficiently attained through suffering, deeming it the "quickest" pathway to divine perfection. This is elucidated further when he notes that individuals who embrace the utmost bitterness alongside Christ will subsequently experience the "greatest" eternal bliss. Although suffering might mar the physical body in the earthly realm, it, conversely, beautifies the soul in the divine sight. Hence, Eckhart perceives suffering as a transformative conduit that refines the soul, facilitating a profound union with the divine. To augment this assertion, Eckhart mentions, "if you suffer for God and God alone, your suffering does not hurt and is not hard to bear, for God bears the load" (S.8:80). Furthermore, he posits, "Truly, it is in the darkness that one finds . . . [divine] light, so when we are in sorrow and distress, then this light is nearest of all to us" (S.83:400–401), articulating that our suffering is transformed into divine light. These elaborations clarify the intricate relationship between suffering and spiritual ascension in Eckhart's perspective,

offering a nuanced understanding of how suffering is not merely an adverse state but a pivotal process toward achieving divine union.

Pursuing the technical interpretation of “detachment” in Eckhart’s thought, treatises *On Detachment* and *The Talks of Instruction* are crucial. Throughout *On Detachment* (Eckhart 2009b, pp. 566–74), Eckhart depicts detachment as void of earthly desires, paving the way for divine will to inhabit the heart. He likens this to a race towards divine unification, where the detached heart, open for divine imprinting, attains the highest state of blessedness. Detachment is the soul’s greatest potential and is, ultimately, a path to perfection.

The Talks of Instruction further elucidates Eckhart’s “spiritual” detachment. Specifically, in “On Detachment and on Possessing God” (Eckhart 2009c, pp. 490–92), he emphasizes detachment as an “internal” state rather than mere “physical” seclusion. Eckhart critiques the superficial peace in solitude, proposing that a person in the “right state” can achieve equanimity anywhere. This state signifies an internal alignment with God, where a truly detached person possesses God, unhindered by location, task, or company. Interestingly, this viewpoint sets Eckhart apart from the usual monastic life many Christian mystics embrace. His softer, more communal approach to spirituality seems influenced by his philosophical orientation. This mindset entails the rational and mystical balance in spirituality.

Similarly, in “Of Diligence” (Eckhart 2009c, pp. 511–15), the Dominican asserts that detachment involves continuous self-renunciation to align one’s will with the divine. This constant process of self-emptying transforms the self to receive God’s presence entirely, extending beyond mere rejection of external entities to encompass vigilance against internal distractions.³⁹

McGinn (2001, pp. 131–47) and Dobie (2010, pp. 187–95) elucidate Eckhart’s understanding of inner detachment. McGinn (2001, p. 131) expounds on the relationship between detachment and two other critical elements in Eckhart’s metaphysics: “birthing” and “breaking through”.⁴⁰ In this triad, “birthing” symbolizes the divine Word’s manifestation within the individual, which follows detachment and involves relinquishing possessiveness, ego, and will, paving the way for the divine Word to manifest within. The final element, “breaking through”, follows birthing. It goes beyond recognizing God as the creator to realizing divine unity. Upon breaking through, the individual exists beyond all created things—no longer simply God’s creation but part of divine unity. McGinn illustrates the interconnection of these concepts using Eckhart’s metaphor of the “desert” as a state of emptiness devoid of everything material or spiritual. This metaphor marks the endpoint of detachment, birthing, and breaking-through, where the soul transcends mere comprehension of God to complete union with Him.

Complementing McGinn, Dobie (2010, pp. 187–95) explores the relationship between detachment and intellectual abstraction. Dobie posits two types of abstraction within a human intellect. The first involves the intellect’s capacity to abstract forms from sensible substances, while the second, which Eckhart calls “detachment”, goes further. Detachment involves the intellect’s capacity to separate itself from all finite created beings, including its existence as a creature, to fully conform to existence itself or the Absolute Being. This second abstraction perfects the soul in its intellectual nature. In this detachment, while maintaining its creaturely attributes outwardly, the soul remains intellectually active, comprehending existence as such. It is devoid of any particular mode, thus enabling the reception of God “without any mode”.

What is love’s role in Eckhart’s asceticism and mysticism? According to Eckhart (2009a, S.16:125), love dictates one’s adherence to divine will and forsaking of self-interest. This love, reaching its peak when contradicting God’s will becomes unthinkable, drives asceticism, urging the abandonment of worldly desires to seek divine unity. Furthermore, the apex of detachment—seeking nothing for oneself and performing all acts out of love—essentially denotes unity with God. Consequently, love for God propels detachment, guiding individuals towards self-surrender and divine union.⁴¹ “He who has abandoned self and all things, who seeks not his own in anything, and does all he does without why

and in love, that man being dead to all the world is alive in God and God in him" (Eckhart 2009a, S.16:125).

In conclusion, Meister Eckhart's philosophy of asceticism revolves around "detachment" and its vital role in spiritual growth and unity with the divine. According to Eckhart, detachment is a twofold process involving renouncing earthly pleasures and the intellectual capacity to dissociate from all created finite entities. Integral to this process is the divine love that fuels asceticism, compelling the surrender of worldly desires and self-will and guiding individuals towards unity with God. Through his sermons and treatises, he underscores that true asceticism transcends physical austerity, requiring a sincere inner transformation characterized by spiritual enlightenment and sacrifice of self and will. Eckhart perceives suffering as a transformative agent leading to spiritual elevation. His unique take on asceticism highlights the balance between rational and mystical aspects of spirituality. For Eckhart, detachment becomes the soul's greatest potential, culminating in unity with God.

2.4. Comparing Rūmī's and Eckhart's Views

The comparative analysis of Rūmī's and Eckhart's perspectives on asceticism and detachment discloses a nuanced mystical discourse. Their notable agreement on spiritual purification and inner transcendence, juxtaposed with distinct cultural and philosophical expressions, enriches the comprehension of divine unity pursuit. This section aims to articulate their shared stance on surpassing earthly desires and the nuances in their mystical outlooks, fostering a more encompassing discussion on the spiritual facets of asceticism.

Rūmī and Eckhart concur in their belief that the lower self should yield to the inner self through asceticism, conceiving asceticism as a process of spiritual purification. This purification involves the renunciation of earthly desires in pursuing spiritual enlightenment. Both mystics underline that true asceticism extends beyond physical austerity; it demands a profound transformation of the soul, a renunciation of ego. This shared belief forms this paper's thesis and gives their accounts a unique nuance compared to the generational understanding of asceticism.

Both mystics regard detachment as a cornerstone of asceticism, emphasizing the necessity of distancing from worldly pleasures and personal will to attain divine unity. They underscore self-transcendence through love as a vital avenue to this divine unity. Here, love emerges as a catalyst, propelling the spiritual journey while easing its challenges, and suffering is perceived as a medium for spiritual advancement. They depict love as the central force steering the soul toward divine union. For Rūmī, love operates as a crucial force, propelling the ascetic on the spiritual path and aiding in overcoming worldly attachments. Conversely, Eckhart sees love as pivotal for adhering to the divine will, urging individuals to relinquish self-interest in pursuit of divine unity. Notably, despite advocating for detachment, their asceticism is world-affirming, showcasing a moderate approach to earthly detachment while accentuating the inner aspect of renunciation.

The personal transformation articulated in both mystics' teachings entails a shift from earthly desires to a divine focus. Through detachment, individuals undergo a metamorphosis, shedding ego and self-will. This transformation is prominently illustrated in Eckhart's concept of "breaking through" to realize divine unity and similarly in Rūmī's concept of "annihilation in God". Both mystics portray a meaningful life as achievable through a spiritual journey anchored in love and detachment from worldly desires. The goal is divine union, fostering a deep sense of fulfillment and purpose. The odyssey towards this union, facilitated by love and exemplified through ascetic practices, delineates a route to a more meaningful existence.

However, several distinctive aspects differentiate their understandings. Traditional, religious, geographical, and cultural differences shape their thoughts and beliefs. Eckhart's language leans towards philosophical discourse, while Rūmī utilizes metaphorical and poetic vocabulary, making Rūmī's depiction of God appear more personal. Additionally, because of Rūmī's poetic and narrative writings—among many reasons—his teachings

reach a broader, more public audience. This could explain why Rūmī's asceticism might attract more followers. In contrast, Eckhart's intellectual discourse appeals more to an intellectually trained audience. Moreover, Rūmī, rooted in the Sufi tradition, accentuates the necessity for a spiritual mentor more than Eckhart does.

Their divergent approaches can be mutually enriching. Rūmī's emotive and metaphorical approach to mysticism and asceticism offers a compassionate complement to Eckhart's intellectual discourse. In contrast, Eckhart's philosophical discourse can help clarify Rūmī's metaphorical explanations, adding depth to understanding the spiritual path. Furthermore, Eckhart's discussion of "birthing" and "breaking through" and Rūmī's "annihilation in God" and "subsistence with God" complement each other, providing an enriched depiction of the spiritual journey.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, exploring asceticism through the lens of Rūmī's and Eckhart's ideologies sheds light on this pivotal practice within Islamic and Christian spiritual realms. This paper underscores a shared advocacy from both mystics for an asceticism rooted in inner transformation rather than mere physical austerity, transcending their varying traditional, religious, geographical, and cultural backgrounds. They accentuate the need for the lower self's subservience to the rational inner self and the spiritual purification achievable through renouncing earthly desires and personal will. The linchpin of their teachings is the spiritual detachment that, despite worldly engagement, catalyzes self-transcendence, facilitated by the transformative role of suffering and love, guiding the spiritual traveler towards divine unity. This comparative analysis refines traditionally rigid interpretations of asceticism, pivoting them towards a world-affirming approach centralized around detachment, love, personal transformation, and divine unity.

Moreover, the comparative lens illuminates the unanimous portrayal of love by Rūmī and Eckhart as a cardinal force steering individuals along the spiritual journey toward a richer, meaningful existence. Despite their divergent expressions—Rūmī's poetic articulation and Eckhart's philosophical discourse—they converge on love's transformative essence, fostering personal transformation and an enriched comprehension of one's divine interrelation.

Additionally, this exploration accentuates the universal accessibility of such spiritual quests, unhindered by the distinct religious and cultural frameworks within which Rūmī and Eckhart navigated. Through the prism of love and personal transformation, they extend a universal invitation towards spiritual enlightenment and divine union, transcending religious doctrine and cultural conventions.

Finally, this study broadens the comprehension of asceticism from a multi-cultural and inter-religious standpoint, offering a nuanced narrative that inclusively encompasses diverse spiritual pathways towards deepening divine understanding and connection.

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Notes

- 1 In his work (Lewis 2013): Oneworld Publications, Franklin D. Lewis (9–19) examines various methods Rūmī translators employ, particularly focusing on the tension between the roles of the translator as an “interpreter” or a mere “conveyor of the original text”. Considering Lewis’ observations, an “interpretive” translation method, which Lewis calls “nativizing a foreign work in English” (*ibid.*, p. 17), seems to be a more effective approach to translating Persian poetry into English. Retaining the aesthetic expression of the poems as much as possible, it is essential to convey the underlying meaning, which is the reader’s primary goal. Therefore, in this paper, this interpretive translation approach is implemented. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are ours, and importantly, the translations are crafted and adjusted within acceptable limits to preserve the original text’s meaning while effectively conveying the intended conceptual objectives in a coherent, scholarly, and eloquent manner.
- 2 Indeed, Rūmī’s thought defies straightforward categorization. Given his great psychological fervour, spiritual ecstasy, and multi-faceted intellectual aptitudes, it is impractical to confine Rūmī’s ideas within a rigid philosophical framework, all-encompassing worldview, or standard scientific viewpoint. As Ja’farī Tabrīzī (n.d., p. 22) insightfully observes in *Molavī va Jahān Bīnīhā dar Maktabhā-ye Sharq va Gharb*, “Those who intend to fit this volcanic mountain of knowledge into conventional philosophical and scientific molds such as Peripatetic, Illuminationist, Idealism, and basic Realism either lack sufficient information about Rūmī’s thought, or they consider their philosophical and scientific frameworks so absolute that they cannot conceive beyond that framework”. Ja’farī (*ibid.*, p. 24) maintains that the foundational reason for super-systemic structure of Rūmī’s knowledge is the diverse dimensions of the world and the human. The fundamental principles of these two diversities transcend the world and the human, maintaining a direct connection with infinity. Consequently, although Rūmī’s epistemology flows in literary, scientific, philosophical, and psychological forms, his knowledge’s continuity with the infinite realm is preserved, which is another reason why his thought cannot be confined into a definite system. Another intriguing point about Rūmī’s thought concerns his approach to writing. He admits that analogies do not prove or fully explain realities. Adjusting his discourse to the public’s cognitive level, he strives to present fundamental cosmology, anthropology, and metaphysics principles in tangible and familiar concepts through analogies, comparisons, and metaphors.
- 3 To elaborate, in Book IV (pp. 435e–445e) of *The Republic* (Plato 1997), Plato uses the “tripartite theory of the soul” to explicate the nature of justice in an individual. The three parts are the rational, spirited, and appetitive parts. He postulates that each has distinct roles and functions, and when operating harmoniously, they constitute a just individual. The rational part embodies wisdom and prudence and is the ruling faculty. Its function is not merely administrative but also prescriptive, providing the intellectual capacity for discerning what is advantageous for each part and the soul as a whole. On the other hand, the spirited part is characterized as the guardian of rational decrees, filled with a sense of honor and indignation towards perceived injustices. While it might appear to be driven by passion, Plato suggests it aligns more with the rational part than the appetitive. It exhibits resilience in times of hardship and challenges, fighting for what it believes to be just. Lastly, the appetitive part represents the desires, cravings, and assorted wants, chiefly those related to physical needs and monetary pursuits. It is depicted as the most insatiable and potentially disruptive part of the soul if not appropriately managed. For Plato, a just individual is marked by a well-ordered soul, where the rational part exercises dominion over the spirited and appetitive parts, establishing a hierarchy of control. This internal harmonization, where each part performs its function without meddling in the affairs of the other, results in justice. Consequently, Plato’s concept of individual justice in the tripartite theory of the soul is fundamentally about maintaining internal order, balance, and harmony, predominantly directed by the rational faculty.
- 4 The prophetic saying, “Die before you die”, in the context of spiritual journeying, suggests that one must overcome personal desires and allow their rational faculty to control their animal faculty. This implies a necessary transcendence beyond one’s lower self. Often referred to as a “voluntary death”, which signifies a metaphorical demise of the self (*nafs*).
- 5 The references to the Quran used throughout this paper have been extracted from the work of Nasr (Nasr et al. 2015). Despite this, the year is not individually cited each time a Quranic verse is mentioned. Only the specific chapter and verse numbers are stated when providing citations; The assertion that Rūmī’s understanding of asceticism is fundamentally based on this specific Quranic verse is also confirmed by his commentator, Homāī (1990a, *Molavī Nāme*, pp. 507–8).
- 6 All citations from *Mathnawī* are taken from (Rūmī 2021). To streamline the text, the year 2021 is omitted from citations. When citing *Mathnawī*, the Book number and verse numbers are referenced. For example, the citation (V:3780–3814) signifies Book V, verses 3780–3814. Similarly, references to *Dīwān-i Shams Tabrīzī* are indicated by Ghazal numbers, denoted as “G”, and line numbers. These references are based on (Rūmī 2020), and to maintain fluency, the year in each citation will not be indicated.
- 7 *Mathnawī* has been translated into various languages. For those interested in exploring this masterpiece in their language, Nicholson’s study is a valuable resource (Nicholson 1926). There (xiv–xv), he provides a comprehensive list of several translations and offers an insightful analysis of their strengths and weaknesses. However, the landscape of translated works presents a contrasting image when it comes to *Dīwān-i Shams Tabrīzī*—a work that remains largely untapped. This translation discrepancy between *Mathnawī* and *Dīwān* is attributable to several factors. Firstly, the more substantial volume of *Dīwān* compared to *Mathnawī* might be one reason. A more significant aspect, however, lies in the differing complexity of the two works. *Mathnawī* employs a relatively simple language, as Rūmī predominantly assumes a “teacher” role, conveying his wisdom through narratives. Contrarily, *Dīwān* poses a more challenging endeavor, showcasing an intoxicated, selfless Rūmī who masterfully employs a highly technical literary language. The high complexity of *Dīwān* might deter translators, resulting in fewer translations than *Mathnawī*.

- 8 In the story, when the call to battle resurfaces, the journeyer's lower self, or ego, attempts to lure him back to the battlefield, arguing for an "honorable death". However, the journeyer sees through this deception and remains steadfast in his commitment to the grander ascetic path. Rūmī highlights the purity of intention in asceticism by contrasting it with acts of valor on the battlefield, which the desire for praise and recognition can drive.
- 9 Additionally, in *Mathnawī* (I:3458–3466), using the metaphor of a "mirror becoming free from rust", Rūmī advises readers to cleanse themselves of all personal attributes to experience the true essence of their being. He suggests that when one's heart is purified through asceticism, one can attain the knowledge of prophets without the need for external sources. This notion highlights the transformative power of asceticism, allowing individuals to access true knowledge.
- 10 Farsi: پس ریاضت را به جان شو مشتری/چون سپردی تن به خدمت جان بری
- 11 Farsi: صد جان شیرین داده‌ام تا این بلا بخریده‌ام
- 12 Farsi: ولیکن این صفت ره روان چالاکست/تو نازنین جهانی، کجا توانی کرد
- 13 In *Mathnawī* (IV:2006–2016), Rūmī acknowledges that ascetic practice inevitably entails struggles and difficulties, and emphasizes that even the prophets encountered challenges when guiding their followers in asceticism, suggesting that the path is arduous and demanding, even for the most spiritually advanced individuals. The core of the question "What is poetry's position in Sufism, and how does it relate to theoretical Sufism?" finds an enlightening answer in Demirli's work (Demirli 2018). Reprint, 2. Therein, Demirli (2018, pp. 10–11) proposes that poetry, particularly within Sufism, is a significant and influential literary aspect intimately connected to theoretical Sufism, on par with prosaic texts in conveying mystical ideas. The uniformity in presenting mystical thoughts among poets and prose writers is a debatable matter. This, in turn, raises another challenge: determining how to analyze mystical poetry. To resolve this, in Islamic metaphysics, poetry was brought closer to theoretical texts; Sufi poetry was examined within theoretical frameworks, establishing a profound correlation. Such a process turned poetry into a structured entity open to interpretation, adhering to order and structure. This viewpoint forms the basis for many poetry interpretations, highlighting how Sufi poetry aligns with and amplifies theoretical Sufism.
- 14 Literally, "need".
- 15 In Sufism, love is viewed as a central motive for creation. As per a saying, or *ḥadīth*, from the Prophet Muḥammad, it is said that God, the "Hidden Treasure", desired to be recognized and created the universe. The phrase, "I was a Hidden Treasure; I loved to be recognized, so I created the creatures to be recognized", articulates this point. It indicates that the "Hidden Treasure", an metaphor for God, wished to be known, suggesting a deep-seated longing. This concept infers a process of knowledge transmission that is grounded in love. The love of God is manifested as a "wish" to bestow knowledge upon the created. Therefore, creation is not a matter of necessity but a result of God's love and desire to impart knowledge. Furthermore, it is implied that knowing God fulfills the purpose of creation. In conclusion, within the framework of Sufism, divine love materializes as an act of imparting knowledge, highlighting that the ultimate purpose of creation is founded on love and knowledge.
- 16 The following is a more extensive account of this unity (Tabāṭabā'ī 2011, *Bidāyat al-Ḥikma*, pp. 17–20). The "gradational unity of existence" encapsulates existence as a singular, interconnected reality comprising diverse instances or "existents" that are individual and unique yet linked in a hierarchical and gradational relationship. The concept is multifaceted, manifesting through two interrelated categories—horizontal and vertical multiplicities. The "horizontal multiplicity" arises when existence is ascribed to various quiddities, leading to a range of existents, each characterized by unique attributes. Despite being on the same existential plane, each existent possesses distinguishing features. The horizontal multiplicity reflects multiple existents, denoting independent and discrete entities, each unique in its particularity. While connected through their shared aspect—i.e., existence—these unique existents retain their identities. Importantly, while horizontal multiplicity may appear to counteract the concept of unity, it is only accidental to existence and does not affect its fundamental essence. In contrast, the "vertical multiplicity" encompasses various existential ranks. This concept captures a layered, hierarchical gradation of existents ranging from the absolute Existence at the pinnacle to the absolute potentiality of prime matter at the foundation. As Izutsu points out (Izutsu 1971, p. 68), each level within this gradation represents a different mode of being, with varying intensity levels, perfection, or deficiency (Izutsu 1971). In vertical multiplicity, each level is in a state of nuanced constraint relative to the level above it while also holding a distinct superiority compared to the level below. The gradations within vertical multiplicity undergo subtle transformations as we ascend or descend through the levels. Lower levels exhibit an expanded range of limits and a consequent narrowing of existence, resulting in decreased perfection. Conversely, as Apaydın phrases it (Apaydın 2019, p. 143), higher levels are marked by expansive existence and diminished limits, enhancing perfection (Apaydın 2019). This gradational change emphasizes the varying degrees of perfection across different levels, culminating in unlimited perfection at the highest level.
- 17 "God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him . . ." (Quran, 5:54).
- 18 In a powerful poem in *Mathnawī* (V:2734–2748), Rūmī portrays love as an omnipresent force, indifferent to worldly affairs but carrying transformative might. He presents love as "boiling oceans", "grinding mountains", and "shaking the earth". Rūmī also aligns love with divinity, intertwining it with the Prophet Muḥammad and suggesting that the universe hinges on love. In Rūmī's metaphors, mountains symbolize unwavering lovers, further expressing love's enduring strength. Nevertheless, Rūmī underscores the inadequacy of human language to capture love's essence fully, saying that one only approximates the reality of love.
- 19 Additionally, in *Molavī Nāme*, Homāi (1990b, p. 813) points out that Rūmī's *Mathnawī* (V:2163–2227) highlights a distinct divergence between the experiences of *zāhid*, *'ābid*, and *'āshiq*. The tranquillity permeating an *'āshiq* significantly sets them apart.

Their emotional landscape is void of fear, attributed to their detachment from worldly affairs and singular focus on God. This concentration, devoid of any other concerns, distinguishes them from the *zāhid* and *'ābid*, thereby emphasizing the unique spiritual depth and serenity enjoyed by an *'āshiq*.

20 Quran repeatedly encourages people toward *zuhd* (28:60, 57:20). For instance (20:131), “Strain not thine eyes toward the enjoyments We have granted certain classes of them, as the splendor of the life of this world, that We may test them concerning it. The provision of thy Lord is better and more lasting”.

21 This paper focuses on the primary theme—i.e., the world’s deceptive nature—that elucidates Rūmī’s perspective on *zuhd* and asceticism due to limitations of length. However, it is worth noting that other, perhaps less prominent themes, such as “poverty” and “silence” also play a role in Rūmī’s view on asceticism. While beyond the scope of the present study, these themes certainly warrant further investigation in future research. Though this paper examines Rūmī’s understanding of “solitude”—a central theme in *zuhd* and asceticism—in Section 2.2.

22 The Quran states (57:20), “Know that the life of this world is but play, diversion, ornament, mutual boasting among you, and vying for increase in property and children—the likeness of a rain whose vegetation impresses the farmers; then it withers such that you see it turn yellow; then it becomes chaff. . . . the life of this world is naught but the enjoyment of delusion”. Additionally, in one *ḥadīth*, Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) declares (Kulaynī 2020, IV, 343, h.12), “In the pursuit of worldly matters, the afterlife suffers, and conversely, in seeking the afterlife, worldly affairs are affected. Letting your worldly life bear the loss is more beneficial, as it is preferable to causing detriment to the afterlife” (Kulaynī 2020). This perspective of detachment is the praised *zuhd*—i.e., that of a gnostic—not the blamed one.

23 Farsi:

منگر تو به خلخالش ساق سپهش را بین/خوش آید شب بازی لیک از سپس پرده
رو دست بشو از وی ای صوفی روشسته/دل را بستر از وی ای مرد سراسزده

24 Additionally, in *Dīwān* (G.2028:7), Rūmī emphasizes the world’s deceptive qualities and ability to ensnare individuals, regardless of their cunning or naivete. He introduces the pursuit of love as a means of liberation from the world’s strife. However, he warns against the pervasive nature of the world’s deceptions by highlighting its impact on even powerful figures such as kings and lions, thus illustrating the universality of its influence. Lastly, Rūmī presents a paradoxical image of a peculiar trap: the senseless are ensnared only up to their ankles, while the awake are trapped up to their necks. This imagery implies that individuals oblivious to the spiritual realm and focusing solely on the sensual domain are more entangled in the world’s trap. The paradoxical nature of the trap highlights the complexity of navigating the world and serves as a cautionary tale for those seeking liberation from its snares.

دامی است دام دنیا کز وی شهان و شیران/ماندند چون سگ اندر مردار تا به گردن

“A snare is this worldly trap, where kings and lions/Like dogs, remained in carrion up to their necks”.

دامی است طرفه تر زین کز وی فتاده بینی/بی عقل تا به کعب و هشیار تا به گردن

“A trap stranger than this, where you can see/The senseless to their ankles, the wise up to their necks” (*Dīwān*, 10–11).

25 In Farsi: پیر است عروس عیش دنیا/مرگش طلبی اگر ستانی

26 In *Fīḥ Mā Fīḥ* (Rūmī 2006, p. 222), Rūmī characterizes the world as fundamentally rooted in heedlessness or ignorance, asserting that engagement with the material world often results in individuals becoming preoccupied and absorbed by it. According to Rūmī, this preoccupation hinders individuals from pursuing spiritual growth and understanding. He posits that once a person begins to engage with the spiritual realm, they naturally grow cold and detached from the material world. This detachment, Rūmī argues, enables individuals to concentrate on their spiritual journey, ultimately leading to purification and a deeper connection with the Divine. Building on this theme of detachment, Rūmī utilizes the metaphor of a cat, preoccupied with hunting a bird and subsequently caught off guard, to further illustrate the dangers of excessive engagement in worldly matters (*ibid.*, p. 246). The cat, fully absorbed in its task, neglects its surroundings and becomes vulnerable to capture. Drawing on this metaphor, Rūmī advises against immersing oneself too deeply in the world’s affairs, which can lead to losing sight of what is truly significant.

27 Similarly, the sixth *Shīr* Imām, Imām Ṣādiq (PBUH), asserts that “There is none among us who abandons the world for the sake of the hereafter or forsakes the hereafter for the world” (Narāqī 2012, p. 328, *Mī rāj al-Sa’āda*).

28 There, he emphasizes that one should improve their morals before attempting to refine those of their spouse. Begin with self-improvement, he advises, show empathy towards your spouse, and be open to their perspective, even if it seems unreasonable.

29 In another passage (*Mathnawī*, V:579–580), Rūmī’s discourse reveals his inclination towards a non-monastic approach. In this passage, Rūmī underscores the need to balance “earning” and “spending” as described in the Quran’s call to support the poor. He suggests that to spend, one should first earn. Rūmī’s emphasis on acquiring and sharing reveals the importance of social interactions from his perspective. In this context, “earning” refers to material gains and implies personal development. However, the aim is not to accumulate wealth for worldly purposes but to be generous in sharing it with the less fortunate, embodying humanity, compassion, and love. This harmonious balance between individual progress and the upliftment of others accentuates the significance of a well-rounded lifestyle—distinct from monasticism’s isolated nature.

30 Indeed, Rūmī references the Quran so extensively in his work that many regard the *Mathnawī* as a Quranic commentary.

31 Farsi: دلارام نهان گشته ز غوغا/همه رفتند و خلوت شد برون آ

- 32 Farsi: جز خلوت عشق نیست درمان/رنج باریک اندهان را
- 33 Building upon this notion, Rūmī (*Dīwān*, G.164:1–7) further emphasizes the importance of solitude in purifying the heart. He posits that a heart cannot be cleansed without the “fire” (symbolizing “difficulties”) within the prison cell. This idea is connected to Rūmī’s earlier argument on the transformative power of solitude.
- 34 Such individuals typically include children, sinners, and those perceived as foolish, though keeping the company of the faithful does not harm this solitude.
- 35 As Baḥr al-Ulūm there explains, in special solitude, the individual is typically seated on the ground or a surface originating from the ground, such as a mat.
- 36 However, this does not invalidate the benefits of “special solitude”. One could potentially integrate aspects of “special solitude” into “general solitude” to enhance the spiritual experience while maintaining a moderate approach. For example, instead of complete seclusion, an individual could seek out quiet places like a house of worship, a home, or a garden. This approach allows for a balanced experience of solitude and social interaction, a combination emphasized in Islam. A critical condition, however, remains: refraining from associating with sinners. This element continues to be valid and essential in both forms of solitude in maintaining the moral and spiritual integrity of the individual. Nonetheless, embracing special solitude is essential at specific spiritual stages. At these points, an individual needs to nurture and solidify their spiritual state before interacting with others, which can be challenging without this period of isolation.
- 37 Interestingly, at the beginning of *On Detachment*, Eckhart (2009a, p. 566, *emphasis added*) writes: I have read many writings of pagan masters, and of the prophets, and of the Old and New Testaments, and have sought earnestly and with all diligence to discover which is the best and highest virtue whereby a man may chiefly and most firmly join himself to God, and whereby a man may become by grace what God is by nature, and whereby a man may come closest to his image when he was in God, wherein there was no difference between him and God, before God made creatures. After a thorough study of these writings I find, as well as my reason can testify or perceive, that only *pure detachment* surpasses all things, for all virtues have some regard to creatures, but detachment is free of all creatures.
- 38 Eckhart’s sermons are cited using sermon numbers indicated by “S”. and accompanied by page numbers. Hence, referring to (S.6:67–68) signifies sermon 6, pages 67–68. It is important to note that all sermons mentioned are sourced from (Eckhart 2009a). The year 2009 is omitted in each subsequent citation for brevity and clarity.
- 39 In “On Diligence” (Eckhart 2009c, p. 514), Eckhart asserts, God “only gives Himself in His own will. Where God finds His own will, He gives Himself and bestows Himself in it with all He is. And the more we die to our own, the more truly we come to be in *that*”. He implies that God’s presence is not attainable without aligning with His will. Eckhart underscores the necessity of persistent self-sacrifice for the complete reception of God’s presence, underscoring the transformative power of detachment.
- 40 McGinn’s exploration of “birth” and “breaking through” is primarily rooted in Eckhart’s Sermon 48 (Eckhart 2009a, pp. 258–60), where the Dominican discusses these concepts.
- 41 Relating love towards God to human will, in a fascinating passage, Eckhart says (*ibid.*, S.16, 125), “So long as you are capable of doing anything that is against God and His commandment, you have not the love of God, though you may deceive the world into thinking you have. The man who is in God’s will and God’s love is fain to do whatever is pleasing to God and to leave undone whatever is opposed to God, and he can no more leave undone a thing that God wants done than he can do a thing that God abhors . . .”.

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