

## The Mystic View on the Possibility of Discussing the Divine Essence and the Criticism of its Opposing Theory (of 'Allāmah Ṭabātabā'ī)

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### Abstract

The main subject of this study is to examine the possibility of discussing the divine essence in Ibn 'Arabī's school of mysticism. The author of this article intends to investigate the possibility of the relative discussion of the divine essence. However, opposing theories such as 'Allāmah Ṭabātabā'ī's stance in *Al-Rasā'il al-tawhīdiyya* favor the absolute impossibility of talking about the divine essence. In this paper, we examine and criticize the opposing views discussed in *Al-Rasā'il al-tawhīdiyya*. The method used in this article is quotation and analysis of the mystics' opinions about his issue in line with a critical approach to the opposing views (as viewed by this author's stance to the issue). The relative expressibility of the divine essence from the viewpoint of mysticism and the criticisms of the opponents' thoughts are among the main findings of this study.

### Keywords

Essence, Non-conditional being as the source of division, Name, Expressibility.

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## Introduction

### Expressibility of essence

The possibility/impossibility of talking about the divine essence is an issue that is discussed in the religious language domain. Common questions in this domain ask if religious texts have meaning or are meaningless. How can the words related to finite phenomena be used about infinite God? Does religious language bring about knowledge? (Peterson, 1997: 255-256; Stiver, 2005, 53, 59; Pilin, 2004: 293). These discussions about the nature of religious predicates and their features are called religious language ('Alī Zamānī, 1996: 24). Although this is a new topic, there have been various opinions about the relationship between language and God for a long time. Generally, there are three views to this question in the Western intellectual atmosphere, namely apophatic, univocal, and analogical. Plato adopted an apophatic view and said, "God has no name nor can be commented on; He is not knowable nor can be felt or imagined" (Plato, 1970: 142). Later, Aquinas and Scotus started the opposition to the apophatic method. Scotus essentially saw the language related to God as reality and did not stand analogy, but Aquinas argued for analogy. The latter believed that language relates to God analogically rather than univocally or equivocally. The criticism against Scotus was that he had not observed the freedom of God from similitude, while the criticism against Aquinas was that his theory did not provide knowledge about God. The apophatic, univocal, and analogical methods have continued so far, and philosophers of religions address them using new interpretations (Stiver, 2005: 8, 329; Peterson, 1997: 256). This issue has been answered by Muslim thinkers in the form of discussions on the reality and analogy (the interpretive approach of Sayyid Raḍī and Ibn Qutayba), declarative attributes and equivocation (the theological approach of Ashā'ira), univocality (Fakhr Rāzī), and apophatic approach (Shaykh Ṣadūq and Qāḍī Sa'īd Qumī) (Sayyid Raḍī, 1986: 330; Ibn Qutayba, 1981: 132; Ibn Aḥmad, 2019: 227; Makkī 'Āmilī, 1991, vol.2: 317; Taftāzānī, 1986, vol.1: 30; Fakhr Rāzī, 1996, vol.1: 18; Ṣadūq, 1995: 223; Qumī, 1995: 179-247).

In the section on religious language, this article will answer the second questions – i.e. How can the words related to the finite phenomena be used about the infinite God? – from the viewpoint of Ibn 'Arabī. Of course, this issue has not been mentioned directly in Ibn 'Arabī's thoughts, and because of this, we need to explicate his thoughts in this article, too. To answer the question, the ontological principles related to the question are extracted based on which, the theory of "the possibility of relative discussion of the divine essence" is presented. The word *Ijmāl* (relative, superficial) regards the relations of language to divine essence in only some aspects, not every

aspect. We do not think like Plato who deems language absolutely unrelated to divine essence or like Scotus who does not observe the freedom of God from similitude. Language is to some extent able to express the divine essence and affirmatively report on it, but due to the sublimity and freedom of God from similitude, it cannot express all dimensions of the sublime divine essence. The main concern of the author in this issue is the presence of those mystic approaches that consider language as absolutely unable to express the divine essence and deem the divine essence as absolutely unfathomable. Such stances have not paid attention to some of their own basic problems. Verily if language is absolutely unable to express the divine essence, is it possible to use the terms being and non-being for the divine essence? If language is totally unable to express the divine essence, then the word being cannot be used for the divine essence of God (therefore, the divine essence is not being nor non-being), and arguments such as the scarcity of appropriate terms cannot solve this problem. In order to show such problems, the opposing theory has been discussed based on ‘Allāmah Tabātabā’ī’s stances in *Al-Rasā’il al-tawhīdiyya*.

With regard to the works related to this question, there exists no separate mystic work which has addressed the question from the opposing viewpoint. Of course, some notables such as Imām Khumaynī in his *Miṣbāh al-hidāyah* and Qāsim Kākā’ī in his book *Unity of being in the eyes of Ibn ‘Arabī and Myster Ekhart* have noted this issue in their words and have introduced the divine essence as absolutely inexpressible. The lack of separate works in this regard and the necessity of discussing the problems of the opposing views comprise the significance of this study.

### **The possibility of discussing the divine essence from the viewpoint of Ibn ‘Arabī**

For mystics, the sublime divine essence is the absolute unknown, and no one – even the prophets – is able to know the divine essence and this domain is the field of bewilderment and wandering (Qyaṣarī, 1996: 346; Qūnawī, 2002: 25). Therefore, it is not possible to use verbal terms and mental imaginations to refer to the divine essence. However, this impossibility of reference is when it is directed to a comprehensive concept of the divine essence with all its aspects, while we believe in the possibility of relative reference of the mind and language to that unique divine essence. A statement by Qūnawī can be used to support this claim, “The rejection of reference to the divine essence regards the absoluteness of the divine essence, and this does not conflict with the possibility of relative reference to the divine essence and its determinations” (Ibn Fanārī, n.d.: 13).

With regard to this issue, Qūnawī asserts that the absoluteness and qua of the sublime divine essence cannot be referred to. However, if the divine essence is determined in the form of attributes, then the relative reference becomes possible. It seems that the realities of the divine essence can be understood to some extent in the light of the relative verbal terms and relative images, and so, different verbal terms can be used for Him. In order to specify this theory, some premises need to be mentioned: the ambiguity of the true nature of essence, the divine essence in mysticism, and divine names in mysticism.

#### **Ambiguity of the true nature of the divine essence**

The divine essence cannot be known by anyone (Jāmī, n.d.: 5), because there is no relationship between the infinite essence of God and the finite essence of the human (Qūnawī, 1996: 175). Compared to what we don't know about the infinite essence, all we know about God – which has come from determinations and attributes about him – is like the relationship between the infinite and the finite (Jāmī, 1991: 5). Compared to that infinite essence, our limited imaginations are nothing and language cannot provide an image of the true nature of the divine essence. However, despite the fact that the true nature of the divine essence cannot be expressed comprehensively by the human language, can't it be relatively referred to either? The answer to this question relies on the definition of divine essence and name.

#### **Divine essence in mysticism**

The divine essence is qualified as the absolute being as the source of division. Absoluteness is an objective, external, and all-inclusive quality. The divine names and attributes do exist when the divine essence is discussed as the absolute source of division; however, this does not require composition, multiplicity, and privilege. Qūnawī says that no attribute in the divine essence can be determined separately from another attribute (Qūnawī, 2002: 103, 105). This means that we negate the attribution of those attributes to the divine essence which lead to the consideration of distinction between the divine essence and attributes. Qūnawī says in this regard that the divine essence can receive all judgments and attributes, but cannot be limited. The divine essence is both absolute and particular, but is not limited to either. The divine essence includes all existence and goes beyond that; even though the divine essence is free from unity and multiplicity as well as absoluteness and particularity, but it has relation with all of them (Qūnawī, 1983: 7).

Based on Qūnawī's words, the divine essence involves all names and attributes, but is not limited to any of them. The absoluteness of the divine essence enjoys the two aspects of objectivity and sublimity. While the divine

essence is the essential reality of objects, it is beyond them and is sublime. According to Jundī, “It is said that the divine essence is not praised with respect to the essence; rather, the intention is to reject the attribute and to differentiate praise from the praiser and the praised” (Jundī, 1982: 8). A closer look at this discussion shows that the relation between attributes and the divine essence is negated if it leads to multiplicity and separation in the divine essence. Conversely, if the relation between attributes and the divine essence does not lead to distinction and multiplicity, the attributes can be truly assigned to the divine essence.

The relationship between the foregoing discussion and the expressibility of the divine essence is as follows. God involves all names and attributes in an integrative manner. These nouns and attributes have no distinction and privilege in the divine essence. The language that refers to the divine essence refers to a set of undifferentiated nouns and attributes that truly exist in the divine essence. Through terms such as “the absolute being as the source of division”, this language provides an image of the divine essence that is deeper than the names and perfections, while all of them are undetermined and rely for their existence on the unique divine essence. This language is an affirmative and real language; the term “the absolute being as the source of division” does not attribute negation and non-being to the divine essence; rather, it attributes a pure existence to the divine essence that has all perfections without giving privilege to any of them. In this term, the divine essence is an absolute existence that involves all names and attributes in its simplicity and sum. After clarifying the possibility of the affirmative and real reference of language to the divine being, we come up with a new question. If we can refer to the divine essence using verbal terms, how can such a reference be compromised with the open assertion of the mystics that the divine essence is not encompassed by any name and attribute? On the other hand, does the expressibility of the divine essence mean that it can be comprehensively referred to by the verbal terms and language? To answer this question, we should define the mystic term “name”.

### **Name in mysticism**

Name is taken in mysticism to mean that the divine essence is described by one of its attributes, and the verbalized names are in fact the names of the names of God (Āshtiyānī, 1993: 243). Kāshānī defines name as “It is through name that the reality of something which has been given that name is known” (Kāshānī, 2006, vol.1: 172). In this definition, name regards the name of the name rather than the external reality of the names. However, after this verbal and arbitrary definition of name, Kāshānī provides its mystic definition, “The verbalized names are the names of the names and the real

and mystic name is the divine essence along with a particularity” (*ibid*: 12; *Hakīm*, n.d.: 607).

We defined the divine essence as a “non-conditional being as the source of division” and this means that there are no distinct particularity or attribute at the station of essence. As Sayyid Haydar Āmu’ī asserts, “Attributes and divine essence are the same” (Āmūlī, 1994: 325). This means that at the station of essence, attributes are the same as the divine essence and there is no distinction between them. As a result, it is not possible for any verbal term to refer to the divine essence, because any term regards a distinct reality of the attributes and particularities of the divine essence, and since no distinct attribute exists in the divine essence, no verbal term can be used in a real and affirmative manner to describe the divine essence.

So far it has been made clear that if mystics negate the existence of any distinct name and noumenal reality or any verbal reference to the divine essence, they intend such definition of name. Meanwhile, mystics believe that the station of essence involves all realities and all names. Qūnawī says, “All perfections are true about Him, while He is free from all of them”. The freedom of the divine essence from all perfections means that the perfections (i.e. attributes) are not distinct from the divine essence. Therefore, the divine essence is the bearer of all perfections and at the same time is free from their distinct multiplicity (*ibid*, 1983: 7). However, the existence of these names and attributes in the divine essence should not lead to the consideration of distinction in the divine essence (*id.*, 2002: 105). If we want to compromise these two claims of Qūnawī, we should assert that all names and attributes are rooted in the absolute divine essence, while there is no multiplicity or distinction among names and attributes nor there is any multiplicity or distinction between the divine essence and the names and attributes. Therefore, at the same time that we believe in the existence of names and attributes in the divine essence, we should believe in the sameness of the divine essence, names, and attributes, too, because the attribution or realization of this multicity in the divine essence does not add or remove anything from the divine essence. With regard to what we said, mystics use verbal terms to refer to the divine essence. Among mystics, some use the verbal term “necessity by itself” to refer to the divine essence. The necessity by itself does not conflict with the absoluteness of the divine essence because the necessity by itself is not among the particularities of the divine essence. Rather, the divine essence is divine essence because it receives this reality (Ibn Turka, 1981: 98). Some others use verbal terms such as essential praise and essential knowledge to refer to the divine essence, and consider it

different from the praise and knowledge distinct from the divine essence (which is only a particularity and name) (Jundī, 1982: 29).

### **The relative expressibility of the divine essence**

Now the question that comes to mind is that if these terms refer to the divine essence in a relative or absolute manner. The answer is “in a relative manner. However, how does this relative description of the divine essence take place? These attributes, without reference to the true nature of the divine essence, make it clear that beyond all particularities and attributes, there exists a reality that is the origin of all of them and no station and particularity is void of its inclusive presence. Qūnawī believes that the divine essence cannot be known by anyone only with regard to its essence and without taking into account the particularities; but we might know the divine essence relatively, “[trying to know the essence of the divine essence is not possible] but in a relative manner [it is possible]; that is to say, beyond all these particularities, there is a non-particular that the existence of everything depends on it” (Ibn Fanārī, n.d.: 98).

The terms that the mystic uses for the divine essence originate from witnessed realities and regard them. Therefore, when a mystic says, “The divine essence is the absolute, non-conditional source of division”, he is talking about his real understanding. Of course, such terms do no depict all aspects of the divine essence; rather, they describe some aspects of the divine essence because the divine essence has infinite aspects compared to which the mystic is not counted (Qūnawī, 1996: 98).

Propositions such as “the divine essence is the absolute source of division” assert that first, the divine essence is supra-particular and second, in its supra-particularity quality, it is the creator of any particularity and exists in it. Terms such as “qua being” depict that the reality of the non-particular essence of God is the very essence. These terms derive from the essence of the divine essence and only refer to the principle of the divine essence realization (Ibn Turka, 1981: 98).

Then, we conclude that only those predicaments can be used about the divine essence that are derived from the reality of His essence, not the ones derived from the meaning and conditions external to the divine essence, i.e. the particularities. The propositions that bear these predicaments give in a clear and affirmative image of the essence through affirmative and real language, of course within the boundary of their declaration.

The mystic believes that all perfections are attributable to the divine essence if the divine essence is free from all of them (Qūnawī, 1983: 6). This freedom of the divine essence from perfections is possible when the perfections attributed to the divine essence are illustrated in an integrated

and potential manner, and no distinction is made between a perfection and other perfections or the divine essence. This way, we might “Attribute praise, the praiser, and the praised – without making any distinction – to the divine essence” (Jundī, 1982: 118). Therefore, the proposition “In its absolute source of division, the divine essence is the praise, the praiser, and the praised” attributes three realities that have no distinction from the divine essence or other perfections.

### **‘Allāmah Ṭabātabā’ī and the possibility of talking about the divine essence**

‘Allāmah discusses this issue in the unity of the divine essence and presents his stance based on the thoughts of the mystics. He asserts, “The divine essence is void of any conceptual particularity and referential limitation, and does not stand any kind of distinction, and even this judgment is not applicable to the divine essence” (Ṭabātabā’ī, 1995: 8). From the viewpoint of ‘Allāmah, if the term and concept encompasses the divine essence, it will bring about distinction and multiplicity in it, and since the divine essence is void of any multiplicity, it cannot be encompassed by any term or concept.

‘Allāmah totally rejects any attribution from the divine essence. He believes that the terms “station” and “rank” are virtually attributed to the divine essence and the scarcity of appropriate terms forces us to use these attributions (ibid: 20). Therefore, due to the negation of any attribution and word from the sublime essence of God, there is no solution but to deem permissible all verbal terms that are used about the divine essence. The result of this opinion is that no term can be really attributed to the divine essence and even terms such as being, unity, and essence are metaphors used for the divine essence. The divine essence evades any type of knowledge and the depictions of language have no power in expressing the divine essence (ibid: 19-20). In fact, the knowledge of reality is formed in the relationship between the human and the reality and there is no relation between God and human (ibid: 20). Language undoubtedly reflects something with which it has a relation, while no relation can be found between language and the divine essence.

‘Allāmah has not referred to the principles of his thought, but the author of this article has extracted and explained these principles to better understand this thought and its criticism. These principles include the utmost freedom of the divine essence from similitude, the impossibility of introducing multiplicity and distinction in the divine essence, and the lack of any relationship between the divine essence and the manifestations.

For ‘Allāmah, the divine essence is an absolute essence free from similitude, and this freedom is in a way that makes impossible the

relationship with anything. Therefore, the divine essence cannot be encompassed by any term or image; it can be referred to only through metaphor. If the divine essence is depicted at this apophatic level, then the language will be unable to make real references to it.

Based on the second principle, ‘Allāmah takes the divine essence beyond any multiplicity and should take any distinction away from it. Accordingly, the divine essence cannot be encompassed by the verbal references, because any reference to the divine essence will reduce it to a distinguished and limited subject. This principle and the first one are in line with each other and undoubtedly, when the divine essence is depicted this way, it goes beyond the multiplicity and distinction which arise from language, and becomes inexpressible.

‘Allāmah believes that the divine essence and its manifestations have no relationship and this belief originates from the first principle and ‘Allāmah’s perception of the divine essence. It is for sure that if the essence is so apophatic and is beyond any relation, particularity, and image, then the language will be unable to refer to it.

### **Evaluation and criticism**

1. For ‘Allāmah, the divine essence is completely apophatic, and this cannot be compromised with the consideration of the divine essence as “the non-conditional being as the source of division”. In mysticism, the divine essence is “the absolute being as the source of division”. In addition to going beyond phenomena and being free from them, it also comes to include them, and so, ‘Allāmah’s view to the divine essence does not seem to be comprehensive. Due to the point that it goes beyond manifestations, the divine essence goes beyond the sphere of language as a manifestation, but with regard to the inclusion of the manifestations, it includes language, and these qualities of being beyond language and coming to include it are both real. In fact, this inclusion and beyond-ness should be balanced. It seems that language and proposition somewhat regard the divine essence, and this is due to the inclusivity of the divine essence. In this relationship, language makes clear some aspects of the divine essence in a real manner; its depictions are not metaphorical or due to the scarcity of appropriate terms. Terms such as “the absolute being as the source of division”, unity of essence, and absolute simplicity represent the realities hidden in the divine essence. However, due to its quality of beyond-ness, the divine essence does not lend all its aspects to the mind and language of the human and because of this, language cannot depict a comprehensive picture of the divine essence.

2. ‘Allāmah says that the divine essence is void of any multiplicity. However, multiplicity is negated for the divine essence in case it is actual and non-integrative rather than potential and integrative, and language indicates that hidden, integrative multiplicity.
3. ‘Allāmah believes that the divine essence does not tolerate any relationship. However, it should be said that the divine essence does not stand any relationship in case that relationship leads to the multiplicity in the divine essence. If the relation between the manifestations and the divine essence is perceived in an integrated, conditioned mood, all manifestations will be related to the divine essence; without this premise, the divine essence will not stand any relationship. We can relate knowledge, power, life, honor, and all attributes of perfection and believe that in its depiction of these relationships, language adopts a completely real process.
4. ‘Allāmah believes that the terms about the divine essence are metaphorical. But these questions might be asked that if the divine essence does not receive any relationship, how can we attribute metaphorical terms to it? It seems that the absolute inexpressibility of the divine essence and its going beyond all those relations will lead to the absolute silence of the language and mind with regard to the divine essence. This consequence makes it unacceptable to support the use of metaphor to depict the divine essence, because if the divine essence cannot be freed from the absolute silence, then the consideration of the metaphorical language as a way to break this silence will be meaningless. The second question in this regard is that if metaphor is the language which is related to the divine essence, then what is the source of these metaphorical terms? Shouldn’t the mind – before using the metaphors – attain real images of the divine essence to provide real terms about the divine essence and then, metaphor pours out of these real terms?
5. If the inexpressibility of the divine essence is taken to mean that there is no real term to refer to the divine essence, then no discussion can be started about God in any kind of proposition. When we say “God”, we refer to an interpretation of the divine essence to which the title “God” can be applied. Now, if the divine essence is absolutely unknown and completely supra-lingual, then all terms used about it will lose their main subject, because at the end, all these terms originate from the divine essence and it is the main source of these terms. If a real relationship does not exist in the main source of these terms as the “mother-topic” of all these terms while those terms are the

predicaments of that “mother-topic”, these terms will turn into subject-less predicaments and – in this case – do not have any message in them, because they do not speak about the subject. If in such conditions a word is made about the metaphorical relationship of these terms with the divine essence, then it should be said that these metaphors should be realized somewhere from which then we can talk about the divine essence.

### **Conclusion**

The ambiguity of the true nature of the divine essence does not mean that it is absolutely inexpressible; the divine essence has been depicted in mysticism in a way that makes its expressibility possible. Since the divine essence is “the absolute being as the source of division”, it is expressible. The lack of name for the divine essence in mysticism does not mean it is inexpressible because the divine essence does not have a common mystic term: not in the form of a name nor a term. The divine essence includes all names and perfections in an integrative way. The divine essence is relatively expressible but the language is not able to depict all aspects of the divine essence. Mystics stipulate that verses such as “Say: He is God, the One and Only” (Qur’ān 112:1) refer to the divine essence. According to ‘Allāmah Tabātabā’, the divine essence is completely beyond language, but Ibn ‘Arabī considers the divine essence to be beyond the common names of mysticism not those of the language.

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