



The Development of the Recursive Love Argument in Fakhr al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī: From the Comparison with Kitarō Nishida’s Philosophy

*Fahreddîn-i Irâkî’de Döngüsel Aşk Teması:
Kitarō Nishida’nın Felsefî Görüşüyle Karşılaştırmalı Bir İnceleme*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the conceptual framework of love as theorized by Fakhr al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī (1211–1289), a prominent Sufi scholar belonging to the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī, from the perspective of comparing it with the philosophical discourses on love by the Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida. The present article will focus on ‘Irāqī’s masterpiece, *Lama’āt*, and analyse his process of reconstructing the metaphysical concept of existence (*wujūd*) into a recursive structure where the lover, the beloved, and love itself are ontologically unified. The phenomenon of love is most often depicted as an emotion directed from one entity toward another. Consequently, the concept of love necessitates the presence of an object. However, within the framework of ‘Irāqī’s concept of love, the object of love is posited as God Himself, and love is characterized as cyclical. While Sufism often typically discusses love from the ascetic toward God, or love from God toward humanity, ‘Irāqī’s structure of love differs from such typical examples. Consequently, the cyclical nature of ‘Irāqī’s concept of love serves to negate the phenomenon of union with God occurring between two entities. The doctrine places greater emphasis on the concept of separation from God (*firāq*) than on union with God as the primary mode of God’s self-manifestation. The present paper puts forward the argument that ‘Irāqī’s conception of love as a self-reflective, non-dualistic movement finds a close parallel in Nishida’s proposed metaphysics of the self and his understanding of “God as the dynamic foundation of existence.” By contrasting ‘Irāqī’s circular structure of love with Nishida’s discussions of God and love, this paper reveals a shared commitment to a non-objectifying, reflexive ontology in which God manifests through the mirror of the self. This comparative study sheds

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light on the originality in ‘Irāqī’s thought, whilst also establishing a framework for discourse between Sufism and Oriental philosophy.

Keywords: Fakhr al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī, Kitarō Nishida, *Lama’āt*, recursive love, separation from God (*firāk*).

Özet

Bu makale, Ekberî ekolün tanınmış mensuplarından olan Fahreddin-i Irākî’nin (1211-1289) kuramlaştırdığı aşk kavramını, Japon filozof Kitarō Nishida’nın aşk hakkındaki felsefi söylemleriyle karşılaştırmalı bir perspektiften analiz etmektedir. Mevcut makale, Irākî’nin başyapıtı *Lema’āt*’e odaklanarak onun varlık (vücūd) kavramını, âşık, mâşuk ve aşkın kendisinin ontolojik olarak birleştiği döngüsel (recursive) bir yapıya dönüştürme sürecini çözümlemeye çalışacaktır. Aşk olgusu, çoğu zaman bir varlıktan diğerine yönelen bir duygu olarak tasvir edilir. Sonuç olarak, aşk kavramı bir nesnenin varlığını gerektirir. Ancak, Irākî’nin aşk anlayışı çerçevesinde, aşkın nesnesi, Tanrı’nın kendisi olarak konumlandırılır ve döngüsel bir karaktere sahiptir. Tasavvuf düşüncesinde genellikle sâlikten Hakk’a veya Hak’tan insanlara doğru yönelen muhabbetten söz edilirken, Irākî’nin aşk yaklaşımı, bu tipik örneklerden farklılık gösterir. Bu nedenle, Irākî’nin aşk anlayışındaki döngüsellik, iki ayrı varlık arasında gerçekleşen bir vuslat olgusunu geçersiz kılar. Bu anlayış, Hakk’ın tecellisinin birincil biçimi olarak, Hakk’a vâsıl olmaktan ziyade O’dan ayrılışa (*firāk*) daha büyük bir vurgu yapar. Bu makale, Irākî’nin kendine dönüşlü (self-reflective) ve ikilik içermeyen bir hareket olarak aşk tasavvurunun, Nishida’nın öne sürdüğü benliğin metafiziği ve “varlığın dinamik temeli olarak Tanrı” anlayışında yakın bir paralel bulduğu argümanını ileri sürmektedir. Bu makale, Irākî’nin döngüsel aşk anlayışını Nishida’nın Tanrı ve aşk hakkındaki tartışmalarıyla karşılaştırarak, Tanrı’nın benliğin aynasından tecelli ettiği, nesneleştirmeyen ve dönüşlü bir ontolojiye yönelik ortak bir bağlılığı ortaya koymaktadır. Bu karşılaştırmalı çalışma, Irākî’nin düşüncesindeki özgünlüğe ışık tutarken, aynı zamanda tasavvuf ve Doğu felsefesi arasında bir söylem çerçevesi de oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fahreddin-i Irākî, Kitarō Nishida, *Lema’āt*, döngüsel aşk, *firāk*.

1. Introduction

This paper will discuss the concept of “love” in the work of Fakhr al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī (1211–1289), a Sufi of the Ibn al-‘Arabī school. Fakhr al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī was born in Hamdān, in western Iran. After 17 years of studying abroad in India,¹ he established his residence in Konya

around 1267, where he continued his studies under the tutelage of Qūnawī (d. 1274). During this period, it is known that ‘Irāqī attended lectures on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* given by Qūnawī. It is believed that the inspiration he gained from Qūnawī’s lectures contributed to the composition of his renowned work, *Lama’āt*.²

¹ *Lama’āt*’s discussion is rooted in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of “Existence (*wujūd*),” which is not concerned with the human emotional concept of love, but rather with the philosophical love of God. Conversely, in his *Dīwān*, composed during his residency in India, ‘Irāqī utilizes motifs frequently encountered in Persian Sufi poetry, such as the “tavern” and “cup-bearer,” to discuss love as an emotion, exhibiting minimal influence from Ibn al-‘Arabī. In the poetry collection, he discussed the Sufi custom of seeing divine manifestations in the faces of beautiful young boys, known as *Shāhid-bāzī*. For additional

information regarding ‘Irāqī’s perspective on child play, see Ève Feuillebois-Pierunek, *À la croisée des voies célestes: Fakh al-Dīn ‘Irāqī: poésie mystique et expression poétique en perse médiévale* (Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 2002).

² Ève Feuillebois-Pierunek, “‘Irāqī, Fakhr al-Dīn,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three Online*, eds. K. Fleet, et al., (Brill, 2017).

It has been said that in Konya, ‘Irāqī’ became acquainted with Rūmī (d. 1273), a figure of prominence in the town, and took part in Rūmī’s *samā’* ceremony and was present at his funeral.³ Mu‘īn al-Dīn Parvāna (d. 1277), who frequently attended Rūmī’s gatherings, became ‘Irāqī’s patron. It is believed that Parvāna built a *khānqāh* for ‘Irāqī in Tokat. In his later years, ‘Irāqī departed from Konya, following the downfall of Parvāna, relocated to Cairo, and finally settled in Damascus, where he passed away. He was entombed in the cemetery next to the mausoleum of Ibn al-‘Arabī, although ‘Irāqī’s grave is believed to have been lost to history.⁴

2. ‘Irāqī’s Masterpiece: *Lama’āt*

Lama’āt, widely regarded as ‘Irāqī’s magnum opus, is composed of short prose and poetry. According to sources, ‘Irāqī composed this work after finishing Qūnawī’s lectures on *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, which inspired him.⁵ It has been noted by scholars that *Lama’āt* is segmented into 27 chapters,⁶ a structure that appears to be modeled after Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*.⁷

It is noteworthy that ‘Irāqī stated in the preface to *Lama’āt* that this text was inspired by Aḥmad Ghazālī’s (d. 1126) *Sawānīh*: “For some words that explain the different degrees

of love, I followed the customs (sunan) of *Sawānīh*.”⁸

Hence, it is frequently characterized as a work that employs the Persian Sufism idea, typified by Ghazālī, that love, the lover, and the beloved are one, and discusses the doctrine of the unity of three elements.

Since Ibn al-‘Arabī wrote extensively on love, some scholars consider ‘Irāqī’s treatise on love also to be an example of discourses on love in the framework of Ibn al-‘Arabī school of thought. The most renowned commentary on *Lama’āt* is Jāmī’s (d. 1492) *Ashī‘at al-Lama’āt*, which is largely an exegesis from the perspectives of both Qūnawī and Ibn al-‘Arabī.⁹ Henry Corbin (d. 1978) classifies Ghazālī, ‘Irāqī, and Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 1209) as members of the “School of Love,” which possesses characteristics typical of the “Iranian Sufi” tradition. This tradition seeks the ultimate, one love, characterized by the unity of three elements: love, the lover, and the beloved.¹⁰ Scholars who are concerned with Iran or Persian studies have a tendency to interpret ‘Irāqī as a “Persian” thinker. Conversely, scholars of Ibn al-‘Arabī have a tendency to interpret him as a thinker within the Ibn al-‘Arabī tradition.¹¹

3 William Chittick, *Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī: Divine Flashes*, trans. William Chittick and Peter Lamborn Wilson (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1982), 43. The first 66 pages of this book are Chittick’s introduction.

4 Feuillebois, “‘Irāqī,” 2017.

5 Chittick, *Divine Flashes*, 45.

6 However, some manuscripts do not clearly indicate the beginning and the end of each chapter; therefore, there is no consensus on whether *Lama’āt* has 27 or 28 chapters.

7 Julian Baldick, “Medieval Sūfī Literature in Persian Prose” in *History of Persian Literature: From the Beginning of the Islamic Period to the Present Day*, ed. G. Morrison, (Leiden: E. J. Brill., 1981), 99–100.

8 Fakhr al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī, *Lama’āt*, ed. by Muḥammad Khwājāwī (Tehrān: Intishārāt-i Mawlā, 2021), 40.

9 William C. Chittick, “‘Erāqī, Fakhr al-Dīn Ebrāhīm,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, accessed October 2, 2025, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/eraqi/?highlight=eraqi>

10 Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques: Les fidèles d’Amour Shī’isme et Soufisme*, (Paris, Gallimard, 2009), III: 17, 67.

11 In consideration of the Persian Suf tendencies that are inherent in ‘Irāqī’s thought, it is important to acknowledge not only the earlier mention of Aḥmad Ghazālī, but also the particular relationship between ‘Irāqī and Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 1209). It is noteworthy that in the years following Rūzbihān’s passing, references to him were predominantly made by Sufis affiliated with the Ibn al-‘Arabī school, including Ibn al-‘Arabī himself, Jāmī (d. 1492), and ‘Irāqī. Indeed, Ibn al-‘Arabī and Jāmī make reference to Rūzbihān by name

As Chittick pointed out, it was sufficient to replace the term *wujūd*, used by Ibn al-ʿArabī, with “love” to understand ʿIrāqī’s view.¹² However, Chittick emphasized that ʿIrāqī intentionally selected the term “love” as a substitute for *wujūd*. While ʿIrāqī equated love with *wujūd*, he conceived it as a comprehensive energy that unified the two aspects of love as an attribute of God.¹³ By emphasizing the privileged status of love as the fundamental act, ʿIrāqī offers a distinct approach to understanding existence that differs from the preferred discourse on existence within the Ibn al-ʿArabī school.

3. The Discussion of Love in *Lamaʿāt*

As mentioned, ʿIrāqī’s *Lamaʿāt* is significantly influenced by the Persian Sufi discourse

and record anecdotes associated with him. However, it is important to note that the “Rūzbihān” introduced by Ibn al-ʿArabī and Jāmī may have been transmitted with the erroneous identities of Rūzbihān al-Wazzān al-Miṣrī, who was a member of the Suhrawardī order at the time, and Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, who is still confused with the former. For instance, Jāmī’s *Nafaḥāt al-Uns* makes reference to Rūzbihān. However, given the description of his studies under Abū Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 1168) in Alexandria, it is hypothesized that there has been an error in identification, and that Rūzbihān al-Wazzān al-Miṣrī, a member of the Suhrawardī order, is instead the intended subject. However, ʿIrāqī unmistakably acknowledged and alluded to Rūzbihān Baqlī as one of the so-called “Lovers of God.” In his *Ushshāq-Nāma*, ʿIrāqī presents Rūzbihān as the master of Shīrāz. Given al-ʿIrāqī’s characterization of Rūzbihān as “the king of lovers,” it is evident that Rūzbihān’s discourses on love captured al-ʿIrāqī’s interest. Thus, Rūzbihān’s philosophy on love has widely attracted the attention of Sufis within the Ibn al-ʿArabī school, particularly ʿIrāqī. While ʿIrāqī’s own discourse on love is clearly inspired by the works of Ahmad al-Ghazālī, it also draws from the discourse on love developed by Rūzbihān. See Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī, *Kullīyāt-i Dīvān-i Shaykh Fakhr al-Dīn Ibrāhīm Hamadānī Mutakhallif bi ʿIrāqī*, ed. by Saʿīd Nafīsī (s.l.: Sāzimān-i Intishārāt-i Jāvīdān, 1994/1995), 374, and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-Uns min Ḥaḍarāt al-Quds*, ed. Maḥmūd ʿĀbidī (Tehrān, Intishārāt-i Sukhan, 2015), 261-263.

12 Chittick, *Divine Flashes*, 5.

13 Ibid. 45.

on love, which is derived from the teachings of Ghazālī. This discourse posits that love, the lover, and the beloved are one in nature: “It is the lover, the beloved, and also Love itself. This is because the lover and the beloved are derived from Love.”¹⁴

ʿIrāqī began the first chapter of *Lamaʿāt* with a quotation from Ghazālī (underlined text).¹⁵ Nevertheless, while Ghazālī did not place significant emphasis on the phenomenon of derivation, arguing that after derivation occurs, things settle into true oneness (*yegānegī*), ʿIrāqī interpreted this “derivation” as representing the self-manifestation of love (i.e., *wujūd*) and explained it as follows:

The lover (*āshiq*) and the beloved (*maʾshūq*) are derived from Love. Love, in its place of origin, is immune to actualization (*taʾayyun*), and its essence (*ʿayn*) itself is sacred from within, and therefore everything that appears from it is also sacred. However, for the same reason, all complete manifestations of love are also the essence of love itself and its attributes. Love reveals itself in the mirror of the lover and the beloved, exposing its own beauty to its own eyes. Thus, the names “lover” and “beloved” become clear to the seer and the seen. And the attributes of the seeker and the sought become apparent.¹⁶

As indicated, according to ʿIrāqī, the process by which the lover (A) and the beloved (B) are derived from love (X) signifies that X, which is not subject to any segmentation or substantializing, is divided into the subject (the one who sees) and the object (the one who is seen) by exposing itself to its eyes. Here, the subject is distinguished as the “lover,” while the object is the “beloved.” Consequently, the lover has the attributes of the seeker, while

14 Emphasis by author. Aḥmad Ghazālī, *Sawāniḥ*, ed. Naṣr al-Allāh Pūrjawādī (Tehrān: Intishārāt-i Bunyād-i Farhang-i Īrān, 1980), 10.

15 ʿIrāqī, *Lamaʿāt*, 45.

16 ʿIrāqī, *Lamaʿāt*, 45.

the beloved has the attributes of the sought. Derived from non-segmented love (X), the relationship between the “lover” (A), who seeks, and the “beloved” (B), who is sought, is understood as a relationship of love from A to B; that is, “A desires B.” However, ‘Irāqī explained that these two entities did not correspond to the standard subject-object relationship:

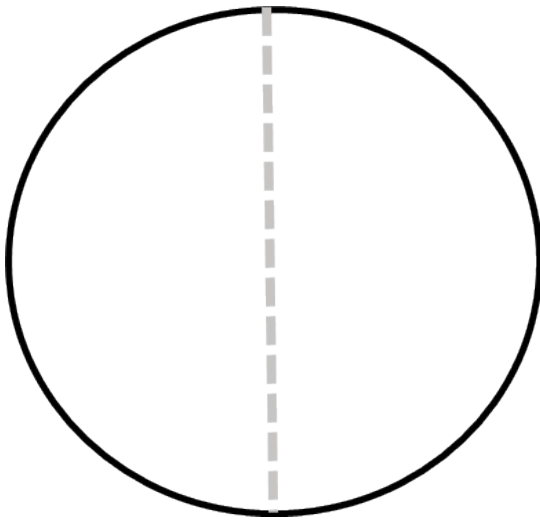


Figure 1

Imagine a circle divided into two bow-shaped arcs by a single line, representing the lover (*muḥibb*) and the beloved (*maḥbūb*).¹⁷ This line appears to exist, yet it also appears not to exist. When the line

17 Regarding the terminology of love, ‘Irāqī states in the preface to *Lama’āt* that “whether the name is *ḥubb* or *‘ishq*, there would be no disagreement about [the use of] the word.” Hence, in *Lama’āt*, *ḥubb* and *‘ishq* are interchangeable. Both terms emerged as a means of expressing the profound connection between God and humankind, a concept that gained popularity from the mid-8th century. However, initially, several Sufis avoided the term *‘ishq* in reference to God because it evoked carnal love. Subsequently, with the emergence of prominent figures, such as Daylāmī and Abu Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, who conceptualized *‘ishq* as the ultimate stage within *maḥabba*, there was a gradual increase in the interchangeability between *‘ishq* and *maḥabba*. See Naṣr Allāh Pūrjawādī, *Bāda-i ‘Ishq: Pazhūheshī dar Ma’nā-i Bāda dar Shi’r-‘Irfān-i Fārsī* (Tehrān: Nashr-i Kārnāma, 2008), 29.

disappears as the beloved descends toward the lover, the circle appears as it should be—that is, as a single circle.¹⁸

According to ‘Irāqī, the lover and the beloved constitute a unified entity, delineated by a subtle boundary that could exist or not exist. Hence, the lover and the beloved are not sharply opposed as “I” and “you;” instead, they are one entity who appears to be divided.

“Love” generally refers to a one- or two-way intention from one thing to another ($A \rightarrow B$).¹⁹ In other words, it necessarily has an object. In Persian Sufi thought, “love” is often used symbolically; however, this basic attitude ($A \rightarrow B$) is maintained. In Ghazālī’s *Sawāniḥ*, which ‘Irāqī referenced, love is expressed as a tendency of A toward B, as follows:



Figure 2: Normal structure of love.

The Supreme God said, “God loves them, and they love God.”²⁰

Love emerged from nothingness (*‘adam*) as existence (*wujūd*) for me.

What love sought in this world was me.²¹

18 ‘Irāqī, *Lama’āt*, 80. Figure 1 is by author.

19 See Figure 2. Figure 2 is by author.

20 Q 5:54.

21 Ghazālī, *Sawāniḥ*, 3.

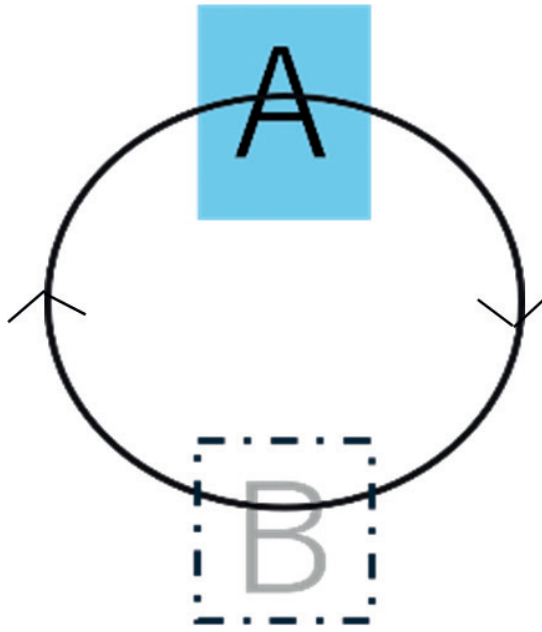


Figure 3: The structure of recursive love.

Ghazālī started *Sawānīh* with the Qurʾānic verse, “God loves them, and they love Him.” This indicated that the book’s theme was God’s love for humanity and vice versa. Hence, Ghazālī regarded the orientation of love as flowing from A to B and B to A. In contrast, ʿIrāqī’s love is characterized by its recursive and circular nature. In other words, the love of A for A is love itself.²² This is because the essence of Love appears to the lover as the mirror reflecting the face of the beloved, in order to seek the beloved’s own beauty and to see its own names and attributes within the mirror.²³

22 See Figure 3. Figure 3 is by author.

23 ʿIrāqī, *Lamaʾāt*, 46. Corbin explains Ibn al-ʿArabī’s concept of divine self-love using the *hadith* of the “hidden treasure”: This passion of God, His desire to reveal Himself and to be known by humanity through existence, serves as the underlying motive of the entire divine plan, that is, the eternal theory of cosmic creation. This theory of cosmic creation cannot be categorized as a Neoplatonic “emanation” or a creation from nothing. Instead, it is a continuous manifestation of existence brought about by increasing light within the originally indistinguishable divine, and a continuous manifestation of God. See Corbin *L’imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d’Ibn ʿArabī* (Paris: Entrelacs. 2023), 133–

In other words, the beloved (i.e., God) A, driven by the desire for self-exploration, requires the lover B as a mirror to reflect Himself. Hence, if B is merely a mirror reflecting A, then A is objectifying Itself. Therefore, regarding the interpretation of Qurʾān 5:54, “God loves them, and they love Him,” which Ghazālī interpreted as an A→B structure, ʿIrāqī provides the following explanation:

The moon is merely a mirror of the sun. Therefore, just as in the relationship between a lover and a beloved, the essence of the sun is not completely contained in the moon. In the same way, within the essence of Love, there is nothing other than Love. Just as the light of the sun relates to the moon, the form of the beloved is added to the lover. Similarly, waves come in many shapes and forms, but that does not mean that there are many seas. When we look at a single named thing from all angles, we do not consider it to be many. When the sea breathes, it is called vapor, and when vapor gathers, it is called clouds. When it falls from the clouds, it is called rain. Rain gathers and returns to the sea once more, and this way of being is called “the sea.”²⁴

Here, ʿIrāqī compares the beloved and the lover to waves in the sea. Although each wave has a unique and different appearance, its essence remains the same as that of the sea. Similarly, vapor rises from the sea, becoming clouds. Rain falls from these clouds and flows over the earth before returning to the sea. Though the vapor changes freely into clouds and rain, it returns to its original source, the sea. Hence, the sea encompasses these various forms, which, in their entirety, can be called the “sea.” The beloved and the lover described by ʿIrāqī are not perceived as a relationship defined by the emotion of love. Instead, they

134. However, ʿIrāqī does not employ this *hadith* in *Lamaʾāt*, and it is possible that he did not do it as the motive for divine self-love in his discussion.

24 ʿIrāqī, *Lamaʾāt*, 51–52.

are conceptualized as flows of vital energy, understood from a more meta-level perspective. This aspect bears a resemblance to the role played by *wujūd* in the so-called doctrine of the *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (unity of existence).

By conceiving of love in this circular manner, the “complete autonomy” (*istighnā*) and “soleness” (*mutafarriḍ*) of God—the beloved—are guaranteed.²⁵ However, this view negates the typical approach to the culmination of the divine-human relationship in Sufism: the disappearance of the mystic’s humanity within God (*fanā*, or union), or the ascent through the mystical stations toward God (*maqāmāt*), a B→A activity. Indeed, ‘Irāqī criticized this traditional path to unity, stating, “The beloved, Love, and the lover are three in one, and this does not include reaching God (*waṣl*).”²⁶

Those whose thirst has been quenched believe that it is because they have reached God. They believe they have achieved their goal and reached their final destination, as stated in the Qur’anic verse: “You will return to Him” (2:28). But beware! The stages of the path to God are endless. Therefore, “returning” does not mean going somewhere else but rather returning to the starting point. If that is the case, when does the journey end? Where does this path end? Since the place of return is the same as the place of departure, what is the point of going back and forth?²⁷

The concept of love is commonly believed to reach its ideal form through a process known as A→B, which refers to the movement of the lover, or practitioner, towards the ultimate union with the beloved, or God. Indeed, those who love the Lord believe that their spiritual thirst is quenched by reaching that divine being. However, ‘Irāqī’s emphasis in

this text is on the circular structure of love’s inherent movement: A→(B)→A. In a circular structure, there is no beginning or end; only a never-ending flow exists. Therefore, the typical relationships in Sufism, such as practices aimed at approaching God, lose their positive meaning in this structure. Instead, ‘Irāqī values “separation” from God in a circular structure:

No, rather, we must love separation (*firāq*) more than arrival. For separation is closer than proximity, and separation is more useful than arrival. This is because proximity and arrival express one’s own desires, while distance and separation express the desires of the beloved. The separation desired by the beloved is a thousand times sweeter than attainment. In attainment, I am my own servant, but in separation, there are master and servant. The ultimate of attainment lies precisely in distance, but few know this.²⁸

This shows that ‘Irāqī’s low evaluation of reaching and unity with God is due to the excessive objectification of “I-ness” (B→A). Instead, it is advisable for B to separate from its B-ness, or depart from the ego, so as not to destroy A’s circular structure and fulfill its role as a reflective mirror. The beloved B is nil—a transparent B—which is the ideal state. As ‘Irāqī said, “The lover is the shadow of the beloved.”²⁹ For example, the shadow of a hand must follow the movement of the hand. Deriving its substance from the hand, the shadow itself is non-existent (*nīst*).³⁰

Indeed, ‘Irāqī delineates the state of being completely imbued with the divine color—a state in which the self is entirely extinguished—as the ideal existence of God’s chosen ones, such as the prophets and saints, as follows:

25 ‘Irāqī, *Lama’āt*, 41.

26 Ibid. 50.

27 Ibid. 91.

28 ‘Irāqī, *Lama’āt*, 103.

29 Ibid. 83.

30 Ibid. 85.

When the beloved seeks to raise the lover to his own level, he first strips the lover of all the worldly garments he has worn, and in their place clothes him in his own attributes. Then [God] calls him by his own names and seats him in his own place. And he either keeps the lover there or sends him back to this world. This is in order to complete all imperfections. If he is sent back, God does not clothe him in the worldly colors that were taken from him, but in His own colors. When the beloved looks at his own clothing, he realizes that he is of a different color. And he is perplexed: “What is this beautiful color? What is this garment of uniqueness?”³¹

The uniqueness of ʿIrāqī’s discussion of love lies in its recursive circular structure. Such a discussion differs from the emotion-based discussion of love, which is based on the subject-object relationship between the lover and the beloved, and somewhat from the ontology of Ibn al-ʿArabī, which posits the *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* through the emanation of the one into the many.³² Instead, it is argued that

31 Ibid. 115.

32 In addition, a divergence emerges in ʿIrāqī’s discourse on love when compared to that of Ibn al-ʿArabī. Ibn al-ʿArabī’s discourse on love is particularly renowned in chapter 178 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*, though references to love are consistently found throughout his entire body of work. However, it is crucial to note that Ibn al-ʿArabī classified love into four levels: *ḥubb*, *wadd*, *ishq*, and *hawā*. He regarded *ishq* as a more intense form of love and did not use the term *ishq* very frequently (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*, ed. Nawāf al-Jarrāḥ, (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ṣādir, n.d.), IX: 293). In the philosophical framework of Ibn al-ʿArabī, the concept of love emerges as a consequence of the manifestation of beauty in this world, arising from God’s self-revelation through the Name “the Beautiful.” The concept of love is thus discussed in a derivative manner, grounded solely in a structure of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. Zargar points out that Ibn al-ʿArabī states that the human form itself, as the image of God, is the object of beauty, and that no object of beauty evokes greater joy or love than the human form (Cyrus Ali Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love, and the Human Form in the Writings of Ibn ʿArabī and ʿIrāqī*, (Columbia: University of

ʿIrāqī’s discussion of love, with its incorporation of the concept of the circle, reveals an affinity with Oriental thought.

In ʿIrāqī’s argument, the relationship between God and creation is not described primarily as one of unity and multiplicity. Instead, the pivotal point is that within the recursive act of the One God, God and creation move in unison, akin to the sun and its shadow. Within the circular structure of love described by ʿIrāqī, all phenomena are perceived as manifestations of a divine act of recursion. Consequently, the fundamental mode of being for the created is one that does not obstruct God’s action—that is, to be a mirror of God in the most thorough sense. From this perspective, the relationship between God and creation, as conceptualized by ʿIrāqī, is characterized by an asymmetrical and static nature. In the context of a universe that is said to ultimately reduce to God’s recursive act alone, the task of finding meaning within each individual human existence becomes increasingly challenging. Moreover, does the dynamism attributed to God’s act of creation imply a static conception of God reflecting upon Himself? In the subsequent chapter, in order to address the aforementioned inquiries, I will be citing the arguments of the Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida. To this end, this study will focus on two aspects of Nishida’s discussion—his tendency to view the relationship between God and creation more symmetrically, and his attempt to understand the flow of the circular structure dynamically. By doing so, it will provide a means for more clearly grasping the discussion of love inherent in ʿIrāqī’s thought.

South Carolina Press, 2011), 66). Accordingly, within the intellectual system of Ibn al-ʿArabī, beauty and love are pivotal concepts for understanding the distinction between humans, created in God’s Image, and other creatures that are not (William C. Chittick, *Ibn ʿArabī, Heir to the Prophets*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 35). As previously stated, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, love is conceptualized as an “emotion” evoked by divine beauty, thereby highlighting a notable distinction from ʿIrāqī’s conception of love.

4. Kitarō Nishida and the Debate on Love

Kitarō Nishida (d. 1945) was born in Japan during the Meiji period and died shortly after the end of World War II. He was a leading philosopher during the pre-war and wartime periods in Japan. He became a professor at Kyoto Imperial University (now Kyoto University) in 1910, serving as a professor of philosophy from 1914 onward. Nishida's corpus encompasses a diverse array of subjects, including philosophy and religion. While his work is grounded in Buddhist thought, he had numerous writings on Christianity. Since he influenced several thinkers, he is considered a leading figure of the early Kyoto School, a unique Japanese philosophical movement.³³

Nishida defined God as “the fundamental principle of the universe” and its sole reality.³⁴ However, he argued that the relationship between God and the universe should not be understood as that between a creator and created being. Instead, it is the relationship between an unchanging essence and its “manifestation” that emerges from that essence:

The relationship between God and the universe is not like that between an artist and his work, but rather like that between a substance and its phenomena. The universe is not God's creation, but rather God's manifestation. Everything, from the movements of the sun, moon, and stars to the subtleties of the human heart, is nothing but God's manifestation.³⁵

According to Nishida, the universe is the partial manifestation of the sole reality; therefore, everything that exists in this phe-

nomenal world is a partial manifestation of God. God and humanity are not bound by a master-servant relationship through the act of creation; instead, they exist in a relationship of the macrocosm and the microcosm—as the sole source and its manifestation and reflection. The individual things in the phenomenal world “appear as if they were independent existences, distinguished from the unified whole,”³⁶ yet their source is one. Nishida's philosophical stance, which has been referenced by Toshihiko Izutsu—a renowned scholar of Ibn al-‘Arabī's *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*—also exhibits several notable similarities with the doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*.

Although individual existences are distinguished from the One, it is possible for us, as an individual existence, to perceive that they are properly included in the flow of the “unifying force,”³⁷ which is the divine rhythm unifying individual existences without distinction. For instance, the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees; however, we cannot see or hear the principle itself. Nevertheless, the principle firmly exists. Similarly, if we are touched deeply by a painting, we try to identify which part of the painting moved us. However, we never arrive at an accurate answer and grasp the rhythm of the whole painting.³⁸

Despite the difficulty of grasping the divine rhythm and unifying force, they are firmly present and cannot be denied. Hence, we are distinguished from the sole reality of God while existing within the divine rhythm and being subjected to the unifying force. According to the doctrine, individual existences are characterized by two fundamental aspects: infinite conflict and infinite unity.³⁹

33 James W. Maraldo, “Kitaro Nishida,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nishida-kitaro/>.

34 Kitaro Nishida, *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965), I: 96, 173.

35 Nishida, *Zenshu*, I: 178.

36 Ibid. I: 90.

37 Nishida, *Zenshu*, I: 179.

38 Ibid. I: 99–100.

39 Ibid. I: 90.

The former is the dispersive action of segmentation and individualization from God, while the latter is the integrative action toward God.

Nishida argued that the processes of segmentation and unification of reality were one and the same and should not be regarded as two separate entities. Unification on one side implied segmentation on the other side.⁴⁰ This suggested that Oneness, which was initially posited of God and the world, was established as duality amidst conflict and unification.

All conscious phenomena are, in their state of “direct experience,” a single activity. However, when considered as objects of knowledge, their content is subjected to analysis and differentiation through various lenses. When considering the developmental process, an initial activity that appears impulsive is subsequently reflected upon and differentiated through contradiction and conflict. In this context, it is inevitable to recall the words of Jakob Böhme. He claims that the God prior to manifestation, which can be described as the will without an object, reflects upon itself—that is, by establishing itself as a mirror. This process leads to the separation of subject and object, thereby contributing to the development of both God and the world.⁴¹

As illustrated by the aforementioned quotation, the act of self-reflection, or “self-awareness,” on the part of the subject, signifies a separation from the divine source. Initially, all phenomena manifested as a unified activity. However, through careful examination of its contents, it becomes evident that these phenomena are, in fact, distinguishable entities. This process is also understood as God reflecting upon itself through a mirror, a process of differentiation into the seer and the seen. The separation of a singular God into

the seer and the seen can also be regarded as the evolution of the universe as God.

Hence, regarding the relationship between human beings and the divine from this perspective, it can be concluded that individual entities serve as reflections of God, losing their fundamental significance from the beginning. Nishida responded to the question, “If all things are manifestations of God and only God is true reality, should we consider our individuality to be a false appearance, like foam, completely meaningless?” with, “I do not necessarily think so,” and continued as follows:⁴²

In its fundamental sense, there is no such thing as individuality that is independent of God. However, this does not imply that our individuality is entirely illusory. Rather, our individuality can be seen as part of God’s development—or more specifically, as part of the process of differentiation. The development of each individual is considered to be the culmination of a divine being.⁴³

As described above, Nishida portrays the relationship between God and each individual human being as cooperative and supportive. He further draws a parallel between the relationship between God and the individual, likening it to a tree and the various parts that constitute it. He states that this is similar to a tree, where the flowers and leaves are distinct entities, yet, as a whole, these elements collectively embody the tree’s essence.⁴⁴

Therefore, the development of the parts fully manifests God as a complete being. Simultaneously, we, the parts, exist as reflections of God because God exists.

In regard to the intricate relationship between the whole that is God and the individual as a

40 Ibid. I: 191.

41 Nishida, *Zenshu*, I: 191.

42 Ibid. I: 193.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid. I: 191.

part, the subsequent explanation by Nishitani Keiji (d. 1990) is a valuable addition to the discussion. Nishitani, akin to Nishida, was a member of the Kyoto School and a disciple of Nishida Kitarō, making his perspective particularly insightful.

Fundamental to the world is the notion that each and every being occupies its “proper place.” (...) It is an inherent characteristic of all things that they possess a self-sufficient character at the root of their “existence.” ... This “place” is the thoroughgoing limitation of each thing’s existence yet simultaneously constitutes a particular locality of the world itself.⁴⁵

The relationship between A and B can be more clearly understood by referring to the following explanation using the example of a room.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the existence of Room A is only possible if its boundaries as Room A are clearly defined. It can be posited that the entity known as Room A is only able to exist as Room A due to the delineation of its boundaries by its constituent elements—namely, the ceiling, walls, and floor of Room A.

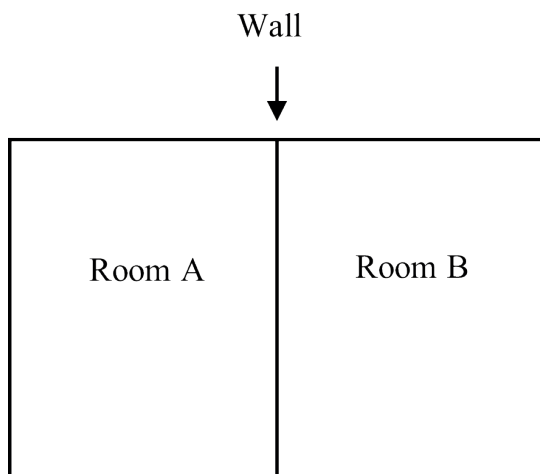


Figure 4

However, it is noteworthy that the walls, ceiling, and floor of Room A can also be considered constituent elements of the neighboring Room B. This suggests that Room B expresses its distinct identity (i.e., its “Room B-ness”) precisely through its relationship with Room A, as manifested through its walls. If this is the case, then A is precisely B,⁴⁶ and the fact that A and B exist as distinct rooms simultaneously signifies that A and B are unified within a single building (e.g., Hotel X).

Nishitani further points out that the relationship between rooms A and B extends infinitely, linking endlessly to rooms C, D, E, and so on. It is evident that if the interdependent relationship between rooms is conceived of as extending infinitely, then ultimately, there is no essence belonging solely to Room A. A similar conclusion can be drawn for Rooms B, C, D, E, and so forth. In essence, the fundamental qualities of each room—A, B, C, and so on—are wholly negated. The rooms are not characterized by the presence of essential elements; rather, they embody a state of pure nothingness.

Nevertheless, Room A persists in its existence, and its self-identity as Room A is an aspect that cannot be neglected. It can be posited that the “existence” of Room A is predicated on its inherent self-identity as well as its absence of self-identity as Room A. Moreover, given that Room A is constituted by Room B, as well as Rooms C, D, and so forth, it is possible to express all rooms, in the final analysis, as one.⁴⁷

In this manner, the concepts of created beings and the Supreme Being are distinguished from one another by established limits. However, these very boundaries are also crossed, resulting in a state of interconnectedness and one-

45 Keiji Nishitani, “Ku to Soku (All Is Vanity),” in *Koza Bukkyo Shiso (Lectures on Buddhist Thought)*, (Tokyo: Risosha, 1982), V: 46-47.

46 Keiji Nishitani and Seiichi Yagi, *Chokusetu Keiken (Direct Experience)*, (Tokyo: Shunjyūsha, 1989), 274.

47 Nishitani and Yagi, *Chokusetu Keiken*, 280-284.

ness. The phenomenon under examination occurs precisely within the flow of differentiation from the source and the flow of unification toward the source, within the very midst of the relationship itself. It is within this context that both human beings and the Supreme Being can exist. Consequently, we are destined to travel on a journey of disconnecting from the divine and reconnection with the divine.

Nishida stated that the desire for “unity” with the divine source was an act of “love,” which he defined as “the union of two personalities into One.”⁴⁸ As a reflection of the macrocosm (God), humans—who “share the same foundation as God”⁴⁹—are caught up in this desire for unity with the divine as a complete being. The aspiration for unity that we (microcosm) experience internally originates from the pursuit of a greater “unity.” Upon achieving unity with the macrocosm, we are overwhelmed with supreme joy.⁵⁰ However, if we consider the premise that the source of humanity, which is a reflection of God, is God himself, then what truly remains is God’s self-love.

In its primordial state, love is an emotion oriented toward unity. The demand for self-unity is equivalent to self-love, and the demand for unity with others is equivalent to love for others. According to Eckhart’s doctrine, God’s unifying action—which is the fundamental basis for the unification of all existence—is directly equivalent to the unifying action of all beings. Consequently, God’s love for others is considered to be identical to His self-love. In a manner similar to our affection for our own hands and feet, God cherishes all existences.⁵¹

Hence, if we assume that love is the desire for unity—that is, the desire to return to the divine source—then only God’s self-love

remains. This is because God is the source of all existence; thus, human love becomes love for God, and, for God, love for others is simply self-love. Adopting this perspective inevitably leads to the realization of ultimate unity—that is true love—when individuals abandon their ego, the very foundation of their individuality, and recognize their inherent connections to the divine. This process of abandoning individuality is theorized to facilitate the reflection of the divine source that was originally present within the individual. Consequently, the ultimate form of love and unity is only achieved through the dissolution of the ego. The ultimate unity achieved through love thus brings about the dissolution of the individual. Consequently, the inevitable consequence of love for the individual is “death.”

However, this death should be regarded as “returning to God, which, from one perspective, seems to be losing oneself, but from another perspective, is the very cause of gaining [real] oneself.”⁵² “True love is the affirmation of oneself through the negation of oneself. It is to live in others by dying to oneself.”⁵³

Hence, the part can only live within the whole by dying. Death means life. The true nature of the human being, who is a part, is realized in the state of death.⁵⁴ As the hadith, which the Sufis often use, states: “Die before you die” (*mūtū qabla an tamūtū*).⁵⁵ The only way for human beings to truly live is by dying.

52 Ibid. I: 174.

53 Ibid. VI: 288.

54 In his later works, Nishida referred to this as “reverse correspondence” (*Gyaku-taiou*), using the term to signify the idea of connecting with God through self-negation. For details on reverse correspondence, see Motonori Kita, *Shishite Ikiru Tetsugaku (The Philosophy of Living Through Death)* (Tokyo: Koyo Shobo, 2025), 107-133.

55 This is a hadith frequently cited by Sufis and is quoted in Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*, see Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī, *Maṣnawī-i Ma’nawī*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Tehran: Hirmis, 2011), 946.

48 Nishida, *Zenshu*, I: 176.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid. I: 100–101.

51 Nishida, *Zenshu*, I: 185.

5. Conclusion

The concept of love in ‘Irāqī’s thought is characterized by the absence of the fundamental duality that is inherent in the phenomenon of love. That is, love is devoid of an object which is the recipient of the subject in the form of A→B. In Persian Sufism, “love” is frequently utilized as a symbolic expression. However, it is commonly employed to signify the act of love directed from the lover to the beloved. In contrast, ‘Irāqī’s concept of love is divine self-love. As ‘Irāqī articulated, “Love flows through all things and is inevitably [Love] itself. Since nothing exists in existence except Love, how can one deny it?”⁵⁶ Therefore, his discussion of love differs from the Persian Sufi tradition⁵⁷ and is an elaboration of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s argument.

This formulation suggests that love is not a relational phenomenon between two distinct entities, but rather a metaphysical current that permeates all existence. This phenomenon is not determined by longing, absence, or desire; rather, it is an ontological affirmation of unity. In this sense, ‘Irāqī’s love is not a path toward God; rather, it is the very substance of being, the pulse of divine reality manifesting itself through creation. This perspective challenges the anthropocentric orientation of numerous mystical traditions, which frequently emphasize the soul’s journey toward divine union. Instead, ‘Irāqī’s vision dissolves the boundaries between lover and beloved, subject and object, affirming that all differentiation is illusory within the encompassing reality of Love itself.

Moreover, it is evident that the “separation” alluded to by ‘Irāqī in this context does not

signify a disconnection from the original state of being, wherein the beloved and the lover were in unison, or a lamentation for such a state.

It has been stated that in Konya, Rūmī and ‘Irāqī communicate with one another. With regard to the notion of “separation” from God, as expressed in *Mathnawī*, through the lament of a reed flute cut from its root, Rūmī interpreted it as a state of sorrow. In contrast, ‘Irāqī regarded the separation from God as a desirable state, conceptualizing it as the fundamental essence of our existence. He viewed us as created as a mirror reflecting God.

His relatively exclusive perspective on humanity—focusing human value as lovers exclusively on God’s chosen ones, such as the Perfect Human—rather suggests a proximity to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theory of the Perfect Human.

To comprehend ‘Irāqī’s concept of love as a universal energy that penetrates all phenomena, it is essential to refer to Kitarō Nishida, as he offers a comprehensive framework for understanding this concept. Nishida conceptualizes the relationship between the universe (which he equates with God) and individual entities as a duality of forces: segmentation and unification. Segmentation signifies the process of diverging from a singular, unified source, such as God, and becoming individual entities. In contrast, unification represents the force of integration that leads back to the original source. This unifying force is the divine rhythm that traverses the universe, playing a role similar to *wujūd* in the Ibn al-‘Arabī school of thought.

The phenomenon of simultaneous diffusion and unification is the rotational movement centered on God. The perpetual circular flow is driven by the two forces of dispersion and unification, which act in opposite directions.

This phenomenon, characterized by its cyclical nature, is not merely a metaphysical

56 ‘Irāqī, *Lama’āt*, 62.

57 In his scholarly work on Aḥmad Ghazālī, Lombard also points out that ‘Irāqī is ideologically closer to Ibn al-‘Arabī or Qūnawī than to Aḥmad Ghazālī. See Joseph Lombard, *Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Remembrance, and the Metaphysics of Love* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), 163.

abstraction but rather a lived rhythm that profoundly influences the structure of mystical consciousness. This concept reflects a cosmology in which movement itself is considered sacred, and the divine is not static but rather perpetually unfolding through the dialectic of manifestation and return. Nishida's emphasis on dynamic becoming parallels the Sufi understanding of creation as a continuous act of divine self-manifestation, where each moment is a renewal of being.

The complexity of situating the human species within the context of ʿIrāqī's discourse on love is noteworthy. In ʿIrāqī's discussion, the role of the lover as a mirror is emphasized—that is, the non-existence of the lover. Evidently, the phenomenon of love can only be comprehended through the perspectives of the lover and the beloved. Consequently, the presence of both the lover and the beloved is indispensable for the conception of God's love.⁵⁸

ʿIrāqī delineated the concept of love as a recursive phenomenon, illustrated by the sequence of actions from A to (B) to A. According to this conceptualization of reflexive love, the attainment or union with God, expressed as B→A, is inferior due to its non-essential orientation. This can be attributed to the inherent nature of love, which is characterized by its non-essential existence. This non-essential existence is universal and does not necessitate the positing of any particular object.

However, when considered in relation to the immense power of love, the existence of human beings appears to be fragile. This viewpoint is further elaborated by Nishida. Nishida's philosophy posits that individual existence emerges from the fragmentation of a supreme entity, God, into distinct entities. Hence, the progression of every part corresponds to the development of the whole, representing a concept of God. The true

nature of the parts is revealed through their service to the perfect whole. However, from this perspective, death is indispensable for the parts. Nonetheless, this death is life itself in the sense that it is life within the perfect whole. This paradoxical affirmation—that death is not the negation of life but its deepest realization—echoes the Sufi notion of *fanāʾ*, where the annihilation of the self becomes the gateway to divine subsistence (*baqāʾ*). In both traditions, the dissolution of individuality is not a loss but a return to the source, a reabsorption into the rhythm of the Real. According to ʿIrāqī, the notion of separation from God, as opposed to union with God, assumes greater significance. This viewpoint can be interpreted as follows: the separation from God is a necessary condition that leads to unity. As previously discussed, ʿIrāqī's discourse on love employs a cyclical structure, exhibiting characteristics that diverge from both traditional discourses on love within Persian Sufism and the structure of Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. By adopting a circular structure, ʿIrāqī's thought achieves harmony with Oriental philosophy, opening the door to a broad perspective and potentially wide-ranging discussion. This paper specifically examines a comparative analysis between the philosophy of Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō and ʿIrāqī's discourse on love. In the context of Sufism studies in Japan, particularly with regard to research on Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Ibn al-ʿArabī school, has been traditionally transmitted through a line of scholars. Prominent figures in this tradition include Toshihiko Izutsu, who has been instrumental in shaping the direction of this research. One potential explanation for this phenomenon is the doctrine of the *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*, which posits a particular perspective on plurality. Additionally, there is the possibility of identifying partial affinity with the conceptual framework of the *Waḥdat*

58 Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 31–32.

al-Wujūd in the philosophical works of Kitarō Nishida, a concept that Toshihiko Izutsu is believed to have referred to. With respect to the Japanese understanding of the doctrine of the *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*, it can be argued that the role played by the Ibn al-‘Arabī school, beginning with ‘Irāqī, may have been more significant than previously thought.

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