

Article

The Limits of Discourse: Rethinking Rūmī's Epistemology in *Fīhi Mā Fīhi*—Does Language Truly Mirror Reality?

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Abstract

This article offers a fresh reconstruction of the theory of knowledge embedded within Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's prose collection *Fīhi Ma Fīhi* or "It Is What It Is" (in English), focusing specifically on how the text treats language, meaning, and truth. Popular and academic attention to Rūmī has concentrated overwhelmingly on his poetic achievement and his standing as a towering figure of *Sufi* devotion, however, this paper argues that his recorded discourses contain a coherent, if never formally systematized. An objection to what may be called *linguistic representationalism*: the widely held philosophical assumption that language is capable of mirroring reality accurately. The study examines passages from *Fīhi Ma Fīhi* in which Rūmī by using a hermeneutic method of close reading, takes up questions about the nature of words, the boundaries of meaning, and the preconditions for spiritual insight. The analysis shows that Rūmī treats language consistently as a symbolic device rather than as a direct canal to truth: words operate as signs that point the seeker toward reality while remaining structurally unable to deliver the immediacy of lived, embodied, and spiritual experience. Rūmī views truth is not something linguistic representation can exhaust; rather, it is realized through existential engagement and direct experiential knowing (inner knowledge), which the Islamic mystical tradition terms *ma'rifah*. The article contends that Rūmī's view foreshadowed modern Western philosophy of language, linking his thought within ongoing discourses on religious epistemology and the philosophy of mysticism.

Keywords: Rūmī, *Fīhi Ma Fīhi*, linguistic representationalism, philosophy of language, hermeneutics, Sufism

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Introduction

One of the most durable convictions running through the history of Western philosophy holds that language functions as a mirror of the world. This conviction can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle, who in *De Interpretatione* described spoken words as symbols standing for mental experiences, themselves taken to reflect real things. It reaches a modern culmination in the Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), whose so-called picture theory holds that a meaningful proposition shares a logical structure with the fact it depicts. Across this long lineage, language has repeatedly been imagined as a transparent medium: a vehicle through which the world is delivered, more or less faithfully, to the mind. Under this assumption which can be labeled, broadly, *linguistic representationalism*, the task of language is correspondence, and truth is simply the degree of fit between statement and state of affairs. The implicit corollary is optimistic: the finer and more exact our linguistic tools become, the nearer we should come to truth itself.

Yet this assumption, ancient and prestigious as it is, has hardly gone unquestioned. Over the course of the twentieth century, several distinct intellectual movements i.e. *phenomenology*, *philosophical hermeneutics*, the later Wittgenstein, Heideggerian *thought on Being*, and Derridean *deconstruction* arrived independently at a common misgiving: that language may not be capable of serving as an untainted mirror of reality, and perhaps never could be. Each of these traditions, working from its own vocabulary and concerns, tried to show where representational language breaks down and to make room again for forms of experience that resist being captured in propositions.

What tends to be overlooked, however, is that an argument with a remarkably similar shape had already been worked out centuries before, in a wholly different civilizational and religious setting, by the thirteenth-century Persian poet and mystic Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273). Rūmī is known globally as a poet of love and as one of the great exemplars of Sufi devotion, yet the prose discourses gathered by his students under the title *Fihi Ma Fihi*, rendered variously as or “It Is What It Is” contain an extended and philosophically serious meditation on what language can and cannot do. This article maintains that these reflections, taken together, constitute an implicit yet internally coherent critique of linguistic representationalism, one that in certain respects anticipates, and even exceeds in scope, the corresponding critiques later developed within modern Western philosophy.

Accordingly, the present study undertakes what is best described as a reconstruction of Rūmī's epistemology as it concerns language, meaning, and truth. The choice of the term “reconstruction” is deliberate and worth dwelling on. Rūmī left behind no systematic philosophical treatise in the manner of, say, Avicenna or al-Ghazālī; his discourses are occasional, dialogical, and saturated with metaphor,

addressed to particular audiences on particular occasions. To speak, therefore, of Rūmī's "epistemology" already involves an interpretive labor: the assembling and rendering explicit of a framework that remains largely tacit in the original material. This reconstructive undertaking should not be mistaken either for an anachronistic imposition of foreign categories onto Rūmī's teaching or for a distortion of what he meant to convey. It is, rather, an interpretive project that aims to draw out the philosophical commitments already latent in his teaching and to bring them into productive conversation with the wider history of the philosophy of language.

The relevance of this inquiry can be traced across several distinct domains. First, from the vantage point of comparative philosophy, recognizing that a pre-modern, non-Western thinker independently arrived at a critique of representationalism unsettles the still-common narrative that treats the critique of language as a peculiarly modern and Western accomplishment. If, as this article contends, Rūmī's discourses genuinely anticipate insights later associated with Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Ricoeur, then the history of the philosophy of language needs to be widened to include voices that have too often been dismissed as merely "mystical" or "poetic" and therefore not properly philosophical at all (Izutsu, 1983; Nasr, 2006).

Second, at the level of religious epistemology, Rūmī's framework provides a sophisticated account of how religious discourse actually functions. If, as Rūmī insists, divine reality is infinite while language remains finite, then religious speech in general has to be understood as symbolic and approximate rather than literal and complete. This carries substantial implications for how sacred texts, theological claims, and mystical testimony ought to be interpreted. It suggests, further, that the long-running dispute between literalist and metaphorical readers of scripture may in fact rest on a shared but mistaken *representationalism* assumption—namely, that religious language is meant to function descriptively in the first place (Soskice, 1985; Alston, 1989).

Third, within contemporary philosophy of language, Rūmī's claim that truth is apprehended through existential participation rather than propositional correspondence resonates strongly with *pragmatism*, *phenomenological*, and *enactivism* (cognition arises through interaction between an acting organism and its settings) accounts of meaning. In an intellectual climate that is increasingly attentive to embodiment, situated practice, and the limitations of purely computational or representational pictures of the mind, Rūmī's emphasis on *ma'rifah* (knowledge) understood as direct, transformative experience, takes on a fresh relevance (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Gallagher, 2017).

Finally, at a broader cultural and hermeneutic level, the extraordinary and sustained popularity of Rūmī's poetry—he is routinely cited as among the best-

selling poets in the contemporary United States—sits uneasily alongside the comparative neglect of his philosophical depth. Much of the popular reception of Rūmī compresses his thought into a generalized spirituality of love, shorn of its rigorous intellectual and theological substance (Ernst, 2011). By reconstructing the epistemological architecture that underlies his teaching, this study seeks to recover the philosophical seriousness of a thinker who is too frequently sentimentalized.

The body of scholarship bearing on this inquiry can be organized into several overlapping streams. The first stream consists of foundational work on Rūmī's biography, literary output, and intellectual milieu. Franklin Lewis's expansive study *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (2000) remains the standard biographical and literary reference, situating Rūmī carefully within his historical, cultural, and religious context. Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975) and her focused study *The Triumphal Sun* (1978) offer indispensable readings of Rūmī's mystical thought and his use of symbolic language. Recent contributions such as Zarrabi-Zadeh's (2016) comparative study of contemplative practice in Rūmī and Zen Buddhism, and Ridgeon's (2015) edited volume on Rūmī's contested legacies, extend this literature further, though this first stream, taken as a whole, remains oriented chiefly toward literary, biographical, and devotional questions rather than toward a systematic account of Rūmī's philosophy of language.

The second stream concerns the wider tradition of Sufi epistemology, within which Rūmī's own thought must be situated. William Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (1989) and *The Sufi Path of Love* (1983) provide rigorous treatments of the epistemological categories at work in Sufi thought generally, including the pivotal distinction between *'ilm*—acquired, propositional knowledge—and *ma'rifah*—direct, experiential gnosis. Toshihiko Izutsu's comparative studies, especially *Sufism and Taoism* (1983), demonstrate how philosophically sophisticated Islamic mystical epistemology can be and how amenable it is to cross-traditional comparison. Corbin's (1969) study of Ibn 'Arabī's creative imagination and Nasr's (2006) survey of Islamic philosophy further situate the epistemological vocabulary—heart-knowledge (*qalb*), unveiling (*kashf*), presence (*ḥudūr*)—that Rūmī inherits and redeploys.

The third stream comprises scholarship on the limits of language within mystical traditions more generally, extending beyond the Islamic context. Michael Sells's *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (1994) develops the influential notion of "apophasis," describing a distinctive linguistic strategy in which mystical authors assert and then immediately retract their own statements in an effort to gesture toward a reality that cannot properly be named. Wayne Proudfoot's *Religious Experience* (1985) offers a critical treatment of the concept of ineffability and its role in claims about mystical knowledge, while more recent contributions such as Gāb's

(2024) *nonconceptual theory of mystical ineffability* and the collection edited by Hüsch and colleagues (2020) on “*negative knowledge*” show that debates over whether and how mystical content can be linguistically conveyed remain very much alive within analytic philosophy of religion (Alston, 1956; Hick, 2000; Ho, 2006).

The fourth stream is made up of the primary and secondary literature on the twentieth-century Western philosophers against whom Rūmī will be compared in this article. On the Wittgenstein side, this includes the *Tractatus* (1921) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), together with Ray Monk’s authoritative biography (1990) and interpretive commentary on Wittgenstein’s philosophical development. On the Heidegger side, the relevant texts include *Being and Time* (1927), *On the Way to Language* (1959), and *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971), alongside Hubert Dreyfus’s influential commentary (1991) and Caputo’s (1986) *study of the mystical strand running through Heidegger’s thought*. A further comparative resource is Paul Ricoeur’s *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975), which theorizes the distinctive cognitive surplus generated by metaphorical language, and which will prove central to the analysis.

A fifth, smaller stream, worth noting because it bears on the theoretical vocabulary used throughout this article, addresses the general critique of representationalism within twentieth-century Anglo-American and Continental philosophy independent of any mystical context: Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Donald Davidson’s essay *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme* (1974), and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) all, in different ways, dispute the idea that language’s primary task is to mirror an independently existing reality. These works supply useful conceptual vocabulary i.e. *mirroring, conceptual scheme, embodied cognition* that this article draws upon when characterizing the representationalist position Rūmī is read as contesting.

While Rūmī is widely studied as a poet and mystic, scholarship has yet to reconstruct his philosophy of language as a coherent critique of representationalism. Comparative literature typically favors metaphysics such as comparing *wahdat al-wujūd* to Heidegger, while studies touching on language often treat his insights as incidental to his mysticism. Even recent epistemological analyses (e.g., Bashir, 2018; 2023; 2025) fail to address his rejection of the *representationalism* thesis. This article fills this gap by demonstrating that *Fihi Ma Fihi* contains a systematic critique of representationalism alongside a positive, coherent epistemological alternative. This study is guided by five driving questions:

1. How does Rūmī actually define language, meaning, and truth in *Fihi Ma Fihi*?
2. Why does he reject the idea that words simply mirror reality?
3. What is his alternative explanation for how we gain knowledge?
4. How do his ideas compare to modern philosophers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger?

5. Why does his view on language still matter for philosophy and religion today?"

Method

This study adopts a qualitative, hermeneutic method suited to the interpretation of philosophically dense and metaphorically rich religious texts. The hermeneutic approach, as it has been developed within the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics associated above all with Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960/2004), fits the present inquiry especially well because it foregrounds the interpretive encounter between the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text. Rather than treating *Fihī Ma Fihī* as a list of separate facts to organize, we must view it as a complete work. This requires understanding its rich metaphors, persuasive style, and teaching goals (Grondin, 2003; Palmer, 1969).

The aim is to identify structural analogies and instructive points of contrast that illuminate each position more clearly than either could be understood in isolation. This approach can be called a 'dialogical' (conversational) rather than a 'genealogical' (historical) way of comparing ideas. This distinction is crucial in cross-cultural philosophy, helping scholars avoid two extremes: assuming different traditions are exactly the same, or claiming they are too different to ever be compared (Mou, 2010; Ma & van Brakel, 2016). This study mainly relies on the text of *Fihī Ma Fihī*, using the English translations by A. J. Arberry (1961, *Discourses of Rūmī*) and Wheeler M. Thackston (1994, *Signs of the Unseen*). It also references Rūmī's *Masnavi*, primarily using Jawid Mojaddedi's (2004) translation. Coleman Barks's popular translations (1995) are used only to show how Rūmī's work is received by the public, not as primary evidence, because they are less literal.

The analysis followed three stages. First, I systematically read *Fihī Ma Fihī* to identify all passages about language, meaning, silence, and knowledge. Second, I analyzed these passages closely, focusing on their metaphors, arguments, and role in Rūmī's broader teachings. Third, I compared Rūmī's views with the works of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, as well as secondary research on the philosophy of language, religious knowledge, and Sufism. Throughout, I aimed to explain Rūmī's philosophical ideas clearly while staying true to his original style—a difficult balance that always requires some interpretive compromise (Chittick, 2000).

Result and Discussion

Rūmī's Conception of Language Reconstructed

The bedrock claim of Rūmī's philosophy of language, which recurs throughout *Fihī Ma Fihī*, is that a word is never identical with the thing it names. This observation, deceptively simple on its surface, carries substantial consequences once its

implications are traced out. For Rūmī, language operates at the level of the sign (*ishāra*), and a sign points beyond itself toward something it is not. To mistake the sign for the reality it signifies—treating a word as though it contains or exhausts its referent—is the fundamental epistemic error his teaching aims to correct.

Rūmī illustrates this point with characteristic vividness. In one well-known passage, he likens the words of the saints to a bathhouse furnace: the furnace exists to heat the bathwater, not to be lingered over. Remaining beside the stove burns a person, whereas proceeding into the bath brings refreshment (Arberry, 1961). The comparison is precise. Language is instrumental and directional: its purpose is to guide the seeker toward an experience rather than to substitute for it. Anyone who lingers over words, mistaking verbal knowledge for truth itself, has misunderstood what language is for.

This directional conception of language can be clarified through the modern metaphor of the map and the territory, popularized by Alfred Korzybski's dictum that "the map is not the territory" (Korzybski, 1933). A map indicates direction and orients a traveller; it is useful, even indispensable, for the journey. Yet the map remains distinct from the actual landscape it depicts. No degree of cartographic detail can turn a map into the terrain itself. In the same way, for Rūmī, language can orient the seeker toward reality without ever becoming that reality, and without ever delivering it whole.

The Problem of Mediation

A second major component of Rūmī's critique concerns what can be called the problem of mediation. On Rūmī's perspective, any experience translated into words undergoes a reduction that cannot be reversed. When a spiritual experience is put into language, some essential dimension of its immediacy is inevitably lost. Language, functioning as a system of mediation, cannot reproduce the direct presence characteristic of lived experience. Rūmī states this with particular force in the prologue to the first book of the *Masnavi*, where, attempting to describe love, he admits that whatever he manages to say by way of exposition and explanation leaves him ashamed once he returns to *Love itself* (Mojaddedi, 2004). This is not simply a gesture of rhetorical modesty. It expresses a structural insight: the very act of putting something into words impoverishes the reality that the words are meant to convey. An ineliminable gap therefore opens up between three distinct terms: the experience itself, its linguistic articulation, and the reality toward which both are directed.

This insight resonates powerfully with William James's account, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), of mystical states as ineffable. James observes that the person undergoing such a state will typically say at once that it defies expression, and that no adequate report of its content can be given in words. For both Rūmī and James, this ineffability is not a temporary failure of vocabulary that a richer lexicon might eventually correct; it is instead a constitutive feature of the relationship between direct

experience and its subsequent verbal mediation. Sebastian Gäb's (2024) recent "nonconceptual theory" of mystical ineffability arrives at an interestingly similar conclusion:

Certain experiences resist linguistic expression not because suitable words are lacking but because the experience itself is not structured conceptually, and language, as a conceptually structured medium, simply has no purchase on it.

Rūmī's concern is not semantic. He is not suggesting that words like "love or "God" are merely vague in the way that words like "heap" possess blurry boundaries—a problem that careful stipulation could resolve. His concern is ontological: language, however precisely deployed, remains structurally inadequate to the immediacy and infinity of the realities it attempts to express. Rūmī is not calling for sharper definitions; he denies that definitional sharpness could ever close the gap between word and reality.

The Metaphysical Argument from Finitude and Infinity

Underlying Rūmī's scattered reflections on language is a metaphysical argument that can be reconstructed, for the sake of clarity, in an explicit premise-and-conclusion form.

Premise 1. Language is finite, constrained by human cognition and the particular culture.

Premise 2. Divine reality is infinite, transcending all categorical limitations.

Premise 3. What is finite cannot fully contain or express what is infinite.

Conclusion. Language, therefore, cannot fully disclose divine reality.

The force of this argument lies chiefly in its second premise, reflecting the theological cast of Rūmī's thought. For Rūmī, and the Sufi tradition, ultimate reality is God, whose infinitude places Him beyond finite representation. Consequently, all religious language must be understood as symbolic and approximate rather than literal and exhaustive, a view central to ongoing debates in the philosophy of religion about the nature of religious language (Soskice, 1985; Alston, 1989).

This argument situates Rūmī within the long tradition of apophatic, or negative, theology, associated with figures like Meister Eckhart in the Christian West and the Islamic doctrine of *tanzīh* (divine transcendence) (Turner, 1995; Sells, 1994). Michael Sells's analysis of the "mystical languages of unsaying" is illuminating here: apophatic discourse asserts something and then negates it, turning language against itself to prevent treating God as a fixed conceptual object. Rūmī's use of paradox and his insistence on the ultimate superiority of silence over speech exemplify this strategy. In *Fihī Ma Fihī*, he calls silence "the ocean" and speech "a river" flowing into it. Here, silence is not a mere absence of words, but a positive fullness exceeding what speech

can hold (Thackston, 1994). Similar apophatic strategies appear across traditions, including classical Daoist and Buddhist sources (Ho, 2006, 2017). This suggests that the finitude-infinity argument is not unique to one tradition, but is a recurring structure in mystical epistemology.

The Positive Alternative: An Epistemology of *Ma'rifah*

If language is structurally incapable of delivering ultimate truth on its own, an urgent question follows: how, then, is truth to be known at all? Rūmī's answer centers on *ma'rifah*, a term rooted in the Arabic root *-r-f*, denoting intimate and direct acquaintance, and standardly distinguished within the Sufi tradition from *'ilm*, which denotes acquired, propositional knowledge (Chittick, 1989). Rūmī's epistemology can be reconstructed as a three-level hierarchy of knowledge, corresponding to a classical Sufi gradation elaborated at length by al-Ghazālī:

1. Verbal knowledge (*'ilm al-yaqīn*, "the knowledge of certainty"), acquired through words, texts, and testimony.
2. Rational knowledge (*'ayn al-yaqīn*, "the eye of certainty"), attained through reasoning and inference.
3. Existential knowledge (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, "the truth of certainty"), realized through direct experience and inner transformation.

This tripartite schema, worked out in al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and analyzed by Chittick (1983, 1989) and Nasr (2006), is indispensable for understanding Rūmī's position. Crucially, Rūmī does not reject the first two levels outright. Verbal and rational knowledge are genuine and necessary; the spiritual seeker cannot simply dispense with them. What Rūmī refuses is elevating these subordinate modes into the final goal. Treating propositional knowledge as the terminus of inquiry is akin to studying a map indefinitely while never actually setting out on the journey it describes.

Ma'rifah, by contrast, is not knowledge about reality but a transformed mode of being in relation to it. It is attained through participation, "taste" (*dhawq*), and direct presence (*ḥuḍūr*). Rūmī's epistemology decisively subordinates the representational to the participatory: truth is not a property of propositions corresponding to facts, but a condition achieved by a knower who has undergone existential transformation. Recent studies of Rūmī's epistemology (2023, 2025) arrive at similar conclusions, emphasizing love (*'ishq*), the heart (*qalb*), and unveiling (*kashf*) as complementary elements of this transformative, non-propositional knowing.

The Paradox of Language and Its Pedagogical Function

A crucial paradox now comes into view at the center of Rūmī's thought and literary practice. If language is incapable of delivering ultimate truth, why did Rūmī produce one of the most voluminous and celebrated bodies of poetry in the Islamic tradition?

Why speak at all, if speech is structurally inadequate to its highest subject matter?

The resolution lies in recognizing that, for Rūmī:

Language possesses a pedagogical rather than a representational function. Language is not the dwelling place of truth, but the door leading toward it. Its purpose is not to contain reality, but to orient, provoke, and ultimately transform the consciousness of the listener.

This explains why Rūmī's preferred instruments are not definitions and syllogisms, but stories, poetry, metaphor, humor, and paradox. These forms operate not by asserting propositions in the manner of a textbook, but by moving the listener—dislodging habitual conceptual attachments and awakening a desire for direct experience that correct doctrine alone cannot produce.

Paul Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, developed in *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975/1977), is illuminating here. Ricoeur argues that a living metaphor is never a mere ornament, substitutable by a literal paraphrase; it is a genuine cognitive event disclosing a "surplus of meaning" inaccessible to literal discourse. Metaphor, in Ricoeur's phrase, "re-describes reality", opening dimensions of significance that propositional language cannot reach. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) cognitive account of metaphor as a fundamental structuring device of thought supports this reading, suggesting that Rūmī's reliance on figurative language is constitutive of how his teaching communicates. Rūmī's metaphors do not decorate a message that could be stated more plainly; they are the vehicle of a disclosure that plain statement could never accomplish alone (Keshavarz, 1998).

Rūmī and Wittgenstein in Comparative Perspective

The comparison with Wittgenstein must be handled carefully, because Wittgenstein's own position on language underwent a profound transformation over the course of his academic life, and any comparison risks flattening that development.

The early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* (1921) represents the high point of representationalism in twentieth-century philosophy: the picture theory holds that a meaningful proposition shares a logical form with the fact it depicts. Yet, here, a striking convergence with Rūmī emerges. At the boundary of what can be said, the early Wittgenstein locates those matters that mattered to him most—ethics, aesthetics, and "the mystical" and consigns them to what can only be shown, never said. His famous closing proposition, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent", names a limit of language remarkably reminiscent of Rūmī's position. Both acknowledge, from within very different frameworks, that the highest realities lie beyond propositional language.

The later Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) converges with Rūmī along a different axis. In abandoning the picture theory for the view that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language", the later Wittgenstein effectively

dismantles representationalism from within. Meaning is no longer a matter of correspondence between proposition and fact but a matter of practice, embedded within “forms of life” (*Lebensformen*). This anti-representationalist turn, with its conception of philosophy as a “therapeutic” activity aimed at dissolving conceptual confusion rather than constructing theories, bears a structural affinity to Rūmī’s understanding of language as a practice-embedded, transformative instrument rather than a mirror of reality.

The divergence between the two thinkers is nonetheless decisive. For Wittgenstein, recognizing language’s limits issues in silence, a disciplined refusal to trespass beyond what can properly be said. His *Tractatus* simply ends where speech ends. For Rūmī, the limit of language is not a terminus but a threshold. Where Wittgenstein falls silent, Rūmī passes through silence into the positive fullness of mystical experience. The boundary of language marks the precise point at which a higher mode of knowing, *ma’rifah*, begins. Wittgenstein’s silence is negative and cautionary; Rūmī’s silence is positive and, in his own image, the “ocean” from which speech flows.

Rūmī and Heidegger in Comparative Perspective

The comparison with Heidegger reveals what is perhaps the deepest structural affinity in this study, alongside characteristic and equally important differences of framework. Heidegger’s critique of the Western metaphysical tradition centers on what he calls the forgetting of Being (*Seinsvergessenheit*): the tendency of metaphysics, from Plato onward, to reduce Being to a conceptual object, an entity among other entities, thereby obscuring the primordial mystery of existence itself. Technical, representational language is, for Heidegger, deeply complicit in this concealment. In its place, Heidegger calls for a return to a more originary relation to language, famously declaring that “language is the house of Being” and giving privileged status to the language of poets, above all *Hölderlin*, as language that discloses rather than merely objectifies what it names (Heidegger, 1971a, 1971b).

Rūmī’s critique runs along a structurally parallel path. Where Heidegger warns against the reduction of Being to a conceptual object, Rūmī warns against the reduction of living spiritual reality to fixed doctrine, definition, and creedal formula. Both thinkers diagnose the same characteristic human tendency to substitute a conceptual token for the living reality it stands for, and both seek to recover a more primordial, pre-conceptual relation to the ultimate. Both, moreover, give privileged status to poetic language as uniquely capable of achieving this recovery. Heidegger’s *Dichtung* and Rūmī’s *shi’r* alike function not to describe reality from the outside but to let reality disclose itself, to gather and preserve precisely what conceptual, calculative language tends to disperse and flatten out (Caputo, 1986).

The convergence is profound, yet a fundamental divergence remains.

Heidegger's project is resolutely ontological and post-metaphysical; his "Being" is not the God of theism. Rūmī's project, by contrast, is unambiguously theistic and devotional: the reality exceeding language is the personal, infinite God of Islam, and the goal is *fanā*, the annihilation of the ego—culminating in union with the Beloved. Where Heidegger's poetic thinking issues in a meditative *Gelassenheit* (releasement), Rūmī's issues in *dhikr* (remembrance), love, and mystical realization.

Synthesis and Dialogue

The reconstruction advanced in this article both builds upon and extends existing scholarship in several ways. It affirms Chittick's (1983, 1989) analysis of the *'ilm/ma'rifah* distinction as central to Sufi epistemology, but it deploys that distinction specifically in the service of a critique of representationalism, a use to which it has not previously been systematically put. It likewise affirms Schimmel's (1975, 1978) sensitivity to the symbolic character of Rūmī's language, while recasting that symbolism as the expression of a coherent epistemological position rather than treating it merely as a stylistic feature of mystical writing.

With respect to the comparative literature, this study departs from the dominant tendency to compare Sufi thought with Western philosophy chiefly at the level of metaphysics, the familiar comparison between *waḥdat al-wujūd* and Heideggerian ontology (Almond, 2004; Shah-Kazemi, 2006) and relocates the comparison instead at the level of the philosophy of language. In doing so, it aligns with Sells's (1994) analysis of apophysis as a linguistic strategy, while extending that analysis beyond the Christian and Akbarian materials on which Sells principally focuses to the discourses of Rūmī. It also engages more directly than most existing Rūmī scholarship with contemporary analytic debates over ineffability (Alston, 1956; Hick, 2000; Ho, 2006, 2017; Gäb, 2024), suggesting that Rūmī's discourses can serve as a rich, underused case study for philosophers of religion today. The distinction between semantic vagueness and ontological limitation proves crucial to this synthesis, sharpening the comparative analysis and guarding against category errors that often undermine cross-traditional dialogue (Mou, 2010).

Conclusion

This study has reconstructed, from *Fihī Ma Fihī*, a coherent epistemological framework that implicitly critiques linguistic representationalism. Rūmī treats language as a finite, pedagogical medium: a sign that orients the seeker toward reality without containing it. His critique rests on the incommensurability of finite language and infinite reality, offering a positive alternative: the epistemology of *ma'rifah*, where truth is realized through existential participation rather than

propositional correspondence. Placed in comparative dialogue, Rūmī's critique reveals structural affinities with both Wittgenstein and Heidegger regarding the limits of representational language and the disclosive power of poetic discourse. Yet their divergences are instructive: where Wittgenstein halts at silence and Heidegger gestures toward the impersonal Being, Rūmī passes through silence toward mystical union with a personal God. This reconstruction demonstrates that the critique of representationalism is not an exclusively modern Western achievement. Future research might extend this inquiry toward Derrida's deconstruction, enactivist cognitive science, or Daoist and Buddhist philosophies of language. Above all, this study invites a renewed appreciation of Rūmī not merely as a poet of love, but as a serious philosopher of language.

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