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## Mystic Intoxication (Mastī) and the Meaning of Life: Fayḍ Kāshānī’s Mystic Poetry through the Lens of John Cottingham’s Philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

Adopting a hermeneutic approach and horizontal and vertical interpretation methods, this study primarily explores the metaphysical concept of love-induced mystic intoxication in the Iranian polymath Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī’s mystic poetry. Secondly, it discusses the implications of mystic intoxication in the meaning of life. Furthermore, the paper briefly positions Fayḍ Kāshānī’s account in the contemporary categories of the meaning of life: supernaturalism, naturalism, and nihilism. Additionally, elucidating the perspectives of the contemporary philosopher John Cottingham, the paper examines Kāshānī’s view through Cottingham’s philosophy. Central to Kāshānī’s poetry, ignited by divine love, the spiritual seeker transcends their self, getting absorbed into the Divine to the point where they become unaware of their self. This epistemic unawareness is mastī (intoxication) or bikhudī (selflessness)—which, for Kāshānī, has profound implications on life’s meaning. Unlike the “extreme God-centric” view—which situates the purpose of life solely in fulfilling God’s purpose—Kāshānī’s “moderate God-soul-centric supernaturalist” view recognizes that while divine love, intoxication, and knowledge infuse more profound depth to the meaning of life, other aspects also add to the meaning in life—like the simpler forms of piety and everyday existence. A framework in which morality is instrumental. Similarly, for Cottingham, life has value and meaning beyond solely fulfilling God’s purpose. Nevertheless, while basic pleasures and desires might independently exist and have meaning, higher elements like moral virtue, crucial to life’s meaning, are contingent on God’s purpose.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1091/1681 H/CE) was a prominent figure in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Iran, born in Kāshān. Despite being strangely less well-known in the West, Kāshānī significantly impacted the intellectual and religious landscapes during the Safavid period. As a Twelver-Imam Shī'a Muslim, Kāshānī's expertise spanned multiple disciplines: philosophy, mysticism, poetry, jurisprudence, and Quranic exegesis. Kāshānī's formative years were influenced by eminent mentors like Shaykh Bahā'ī, Mullā Ṣadrā, Mīr Findiriskī, Mīr Dāmād, and Allāmah Muḥammad Taqī Majlesī, associating him with the illustrious Isfahan school, celebrated for its Sadrain "transcendental theosophy."<sup>1</sup> His works reveal an interdisciplinary approach, intertwining Scripture with reflection and encouraging seekers to pair religious texts with personal introspection and faith-building exercises.<sup>2</sup>

Let us first clarify some critical terms. "*Mastī*," or "intoxication," in Persian mystical literature refers to a spiritual state in which an individual becomes so immersed in the Divine that they lose awareness of their self. This "epistemic unawareness" is also described as "*bīkhudī*" or "selflessness" in the same literary context (to elaborate).

Coming to another significant term, exploring the "meaning of life," we enter the existential domain, often a philosophical and theological discourse subject, to determine human existence's objective "ultimate meaning." It tackles questions like "Why do we exist?" with various interpretations from different cultures, religions, and philosophical schools. Some view the meaning of life as fulfilling a divine goal, while others see it as seeking knowledge or happiness. Shifting the focus to a more personal perspective, the "meaning in life" pertains to the individual's discovery of purpose, significance, or value in life. This concept is subjective, emphasizing factors that lend worth and satisfaction to one's everyday life. People may find this meaning through relationships, careers, achievements, or hobbies, essentially concerning what gives personal significance to one's life. This paper primarily explores the meaning "of" life and secondarily examines the meaning "in" life.

### 1.2. Research's Significance, Objectives, and Thesis

This study explores the concept of love-induced mystic intoxication, *mastī* in Farsi, through the poetry of Fayḍ Kāshānī. Secondly, it discusses the implications of *mastī* in the meaning of life. Furthermore, the paper positions Kāshānī's account in the contemporary categories of the meaning of life: supernaturalism, naturalism, and nihilism. Additionally, the study examines Kāshānī's view through the lens of the contemporary philosopher John Cottingham's philosophy, drawing parallels and contrasts and exploring the potential for mutual enrichment between their viewpoints on the meaning of life.

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive study on the Isfahan school, refer to Nasr's work (Nasr & et al., 2006, 209-259).

<sup>2</sup> For further information about Kāshānī's biography in English, see (Algar, 1999).

Exploring life's meaning revitalizes philosophical discussions from their mere abstraction. This inquiry's significance and complexity persist, as Cottingham articulates in *On the Meaning of Life*, stating that "the problem does not go away; the search for life's meaning, confused or not, retains as powerful a hold on us as ever" (Cottingham, 2003, 2). This raises a pivotal question: What do we truly aim to comprehend in seeking life's meaning? Cottingham, there suggests, "Partly, it seems, we are asking about our relationship with the rest of the universe—who we are and how we came to be here." Like Cottingham, to Kāshānī, the meaning of life is chiefly about our connection with God and our ties with the universe. Cottingham, a contemporary expert on this subject, offers substantial contributions. Equally, Fayḍ Kāshānī, paralleling mystic Persian poets like Rūmī, is notable for his emphasis on divine love and intoxication, rendering his insights highly relevant to this study.

The paper's thesis posits that Kāshānī's Eastern and Cottingham's Western perspectives complement each other and enrich our understanding of the meaning of life. Kāshānī's perspective helps Cottingham with the complexities of spirituality and its relationship to the meaning of life. Cottingham's broader view of spirituality provides a more comprehensive context for Kāshānī's focus on mysticism, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the spiritual journey across cultures and religions. Kāshānī's view is that divine love adds a profound depth to the meaning of life, leading to mystic intoxication and selflessness and culminating in divine enlightenment and unity. Unlike the "extreme God-centric" view, which places meaning solely on fulfilling God's purpose for human creation, Kāshānī's "moderate God-soul-centric supernaturalist" view recognizes that although divine love, intoxication, and knowledge add more profound depth to the meaning of life, more superficial forms of piety and everyday existence also contribute to the meaning in life. In Kāshānī's framework, morality is instrumental to realizing life's meaning. Similarly, for Cottingham, life has meaning beyond fulfilling God's purpose. However, while basic pleasures and desires might have independent meanings, higher elements like moral virtue, crucial to life's meaning, are contingent on God's purpose.

This paper contributes to comparative studies and presents contemporary individuals with a transcendental meaning of life. It presents a fiery love, inducing a mystical intoxication that eases life's challenges and offers a glimpse of transcendental realms of existence.

### **1.3. Methodology**

This paper adopts a hermeneutic approach and intercultural and intracultural contextualization methods, placing Fayḍ Kāshānī's thought in the context of Persian, Islamic, Neoplatonic, ancient Greek, and contemporary Western contexts. The interpretive methodology of this exploration consists of horizontal and vertical interpretations. Horizontal interpretation clarifies specific terms and expressions in the poems and highlights references to the Quran and *ḥadīth*. Vertical interpretation, on the other hand, goes deeper into the meanings of the texts by connecting the

findings from the horizontal phase to the author's entire body of work, as well as the originating and other traditions.

#### 1.4. Literature Review

Let us start with Fayḍ Kāshānī's works. A testament to Kāshānī's prolificacy is the extensive list of his writings, which totals 116, addressing topics from philosophy and gnosticism to poetry and religious studies. In philosophy and gnosticism/mysticism (*'irfān*), Kāshānī's contributions stand out. He elucidates the spiritual journey's foundational principles in *Zād al-Sālik*. His work, *ʿIlm al-Yaqīn*, draws upon the Quran, *Sunnah*, and the narratives of *Ahl al-Bayt* (PBUT). Conversely, *ʿAyn al-Yaqīn* delves deeper into philosophical and technical aspects. His poetic expressions, exemplified in his Ghazals, illuminate deep philosophical and mystical themes, often echoing the gradational unity of existence championed by the Sadrian theosophy. Kāshānī's extensive commentary on the Quran and contribution to *ḥadīth* are particularly noteworthy. Some of his distinguished works include *Tafsīr aṣ-Ṣāfi* and *al-Wāfi*, as a Quranic commentary and Shīʿī *ḥadīth* collection, respectively. Additionally, his theological writings, such as *Muḥajja al-Bayḍāʾ fī Iḥyāʾ al-ʿIḥyāʾ*, which revises al-Ghazālī's *al-ʿIḥyāʾ al-ʿUlūm al-Dīn*. Fayḍ Kāshānī's multifaceted contributions have left an indelible mark on Islamic scholarship, rendering him a pivotal figure in the annals of Shīʿa intellectual history.

Farsi literature on Fayḍ Kāshānī, while not abundant, offers valuable insights into his works. Mostafā Fayḍ Kāshānī (2002b) provides a comprehensive overview of Kāshānī's life and works in four volumes. Rasoul Jafarian (Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1992a) has edited ten treatises by Kāshānī, adding depth to our understanding of his intellectual realm. Ibrahim Dinani's (2018) detailed study of Kāshānī's mystical treatise, *al-Kalimāt al-Maknūna*, is noteworthy. Additionally, Mohammad Sadeq Kamelan (2008) delves into Kāshānī's unique philosophical approach, rooted in Islamic traditions and compared with thinkers like Mullā Ṣadrā and Suhrawardī.

The English literature on Fayḍ Kāshānī is less abundant. Lewisohn (2007, 63-134) discusses the perspectives of ʿAbd al-Razzāq Lāhījī and Fayḍ Kāshānī on *taṣawwuf*, *ḥikmat*, and *'irfān*. Rahbari Ghazani and Davoodi Kahaki (2024) examine love, attraction (*jadhbe*), and selflessness (*bīkhudī*) in Fayḍ Kāshānī's mystic poetry, and respond to Lewisohn's criticisms of Fayḍ Kāshānī's stance toward Sufism. Henry Corbin (1977, 176-179) offers insights into Kāshānī's view of the "intermediate world" connecting the physical and spiritual realms. Ahmadvand and Naqibi (2011) present a collection from a conference about Kāshānī, covering topics like jurisprudence, mysticism, and poetry. Zargar's (2014) piece evaluates four of Kāshānī's mystical writings, highlighting the influence of *al-Kalimāt al-Maknūna* on the rest. This work also outlines Kāshānī's engagement with Islamic sources and philosophical discussions.

#### 1.5. Subsequent Sections' Overview

In the following sections, beginning with an in-depth analysis of Kāshānī's works, the paper examines his interpretation of love-induced mystic intoxication and its role in understanding life's

profound meaning. This exploration extends to a comparative study with Cottingham's Western philosophical viewpoints, specifically focusing on the role of spirituality and religion in comprehending life's essence.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Fayḍ Kāshānī: An Intoxicated Journey to the Meaning of Life

#### 2.1.1. The Metaphor of Wine

The *sharāb* or "wine," a frequent metaphor in Persian mystical literature referring to divine love and knowledge, is central to the spiritual progression. Fayḍ Kāshānī's work, particularly *Dīwān* (G.462:9 and G.544:3),<sup>1</sup> contrasts the effects of "earthly grape wine" with a "spiritual divine wine." Unlike grape wine, he asserts, spiritual wine grants closeness to the Divine. This wine emulates spiritual enlightenment, guiding the seeker towards truth and freeing them from worldly bindings. As Kāshānī describes (*Dīwān*, G.318:4), the divine wine is so potent that it illuminates the heart, acting as a conduit of divine Light.<sup>2</sup>

ساغری ساقی ارواح فرستاد از غیب      نشأه‌اش بیخودئی داد که هشیار شدیم

From Unseen, the Saqi of souls, a cup did he bequeath,  
Its potion brought selflessness and awakened us from slumber, beneath. (*Dīwān*,  
G.605:5).<sup>3</sup>

Kāshānī (*Dīwān*, G.349) suggests that only those who have tasted divine love, symbolized by wine, attain genuine awareness. Aligning with his poetic verses, in his treatise, *Mashwāq*, Kāshānī (1992b, 252) clarifies that this wine embodies a combination of taste, ecstasy, and transformative state. This experience brings intoxication and disrupts logical thinking, marking a profound spiritual transition.

In sum, for Kāshānī, divine love, symbolized by wine, signifies an awakening and enlightenment in the spiritual realm.

#### 2.1.2. Divine Attraction and Intoxication

The quest for unity with the Divine is prominently showcased in Persian literature, with mystic scholars using metaphors, allegories, and poetry to illustrate the spiritual odyssey. Kāshānī's *Dīwān* stands out as it vividly narrates the soul's progression, navigating between reason and love, and self-awareness and selflessness, climaxing in a deep connection with the Divine. To our poet, the

<sup>1</sup> For Ghazals 318, 349, and 570, references come from (Fayḍ Kāshānī, n.d.). For other Kāshānī poems, unless specified, the source is (Fayḍ Kāshānī, 2002a). The publication year will be omitted for brevity, and only ghazal, denoted by "G," and line numbers will be cited. For instance, the in-text citation (G.744:1-5) means ghazal 744, lines 1-5.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, but less frequently, Kāshānī mentions the intoxicating allure of divine "manifestation" (G.206:5), the "wine of unity" (G.432:16), and the "vision of His Eye" (G.415:4, G.631:4) intoxicate the beholder."

<sup>3</sup> All translations of the poems are ours; however, to avoid redundancy, "own translation" is omitted in the references.

meaning of life is closely linked with the soul's intoxicated journey toward achieving unity with the Divine. Kāshānī's poetry implies that the purpose of human life is to attain divine love and knowledge, which leads to divine unity. This section delves into Kāshānī's portrayal of this spiritual passage, its phases, and the profound moments defining each, emphasizing the synergy of knowledge<sup>1</sup> and divine intoxication in achieving ultimate union with the Divine.

In his *Dīwān* (G.744:1-5), Kāshānī delineates a comprehensive journey toward divine attraction, self-transcendence, and unity with the Divine. The voyage is initiated with reflection, understanding the limitations of reason, and then consistently contemplating God. This harmonious blend of reason and mysticism culminates in *muḥabbat*—an elementary state of divine love. As this love deepens, an overpowering attraction or *jadhbe*—an intensified divine love—surfaces in the seeker's heart. This compelling force leads to “selflessness” (*bīkḥudī*) and union with the Divine.<sup>2</sup> This attraction signifies the profound relationship between human souls and the Divine, elevating life's meaning beyond the mundane.

Divine attraction transcends mere thought, manifesting as an intense, unconditional ecstasy characterized by sensations of purity and cleanliness. This experience resembles the transformation of a once-muddy glass into a state of clarity, evoking a luminous and pristine feeling “in” the heart. Accompanying this is a profound, meditative calmness and concentration akin to a deep absorption that brings one closer to God. Often, this state leads to a temporary diminishment of the five senses, comparable to sensations felt when awakening from sleep (Rahbari Ghazani and Davoodi Kahaki, 2024, 13).

Attraction is foundational to Kāshānī's mysticism, as exemplified in *Dīwān* (G.744:1-5). Preceding attraction is the experience of *wajd*, or “ecstasy,” which designates brief flashes of attraction.

Here, Dāwūd Qayṣarī (Qayṣarī, 1978, 9) can elucidate Kāshānī's perspective on selflessness. The spiritual journey oscillates between *maḥw* (selflessness) and *ṣaḥw* (sobriety). While *maḥw* represents a state of intoxication bestowed by divine Grace, *ṣaḥw* epitomizes the sober reawakening from *maḥw*. As the father of Sufism, Ibn 'Arabī points out, following the “annihilation of the will,” or *fanā'-i irāda*—in which the seeker's will aligns with the divine Will—the pinnacle of *maḥw* manifests during “annihilation of the attributes,” or *fanā'-i ṣifāt*, where one transition from human attributes to divine traits yet preserving the individual's reality (Ibn 'Arabī, 2004, 36; Yasrebi, 1991, 450-459). The annihilation of will and attributes are often collectively termed “annihilation

<sup>1</sup> Pursuing knowledge is central to Islamic thought. For instance, according to al-Fārābī, the ultimate goal and meaning of human life is attaining happiness (*sa'āda*), which emerges through achieving initial perfection in the material world and subsequent perfection in the afterlife (Fārābī, 1991, 37). Human perfection is contingent upon acquiring virtues founded on knowledge and ethical living (Fārābī, 1992, 119). This synthesis emphasizes the interdependence of knowledge, moral existence, and the pursuit of ultimate well-being. It underscores knowledge's foundational role in achieving worldly and spiritual fulfillment.

<sup>2</sup> The pinnacle of the spiritual path, as Kāshānī emphasizes (*Dīwān*, G.744), is a transformative self-transcendence after attraction, where one's ego dissolves, leading to a profound shift in one's being.

in God,” or *fanā*’-i *fi-llāh*. Notably, in the *fanā*’, the human self and attributes do *not* essentially perish; instead, the individual is absorbed into the Divine to the point where they become “unaware” of their self. This “epistemic unawareness”—contrary to the misnomer: “ontological perishing”—is termed in Persian mystical literature as *mastī* (intoxication) or *bīkḥudī* (selflessness).

هر جا دلی که عشق تو در وی کند نزول      هوشش رباید و خردش مست می کند

Any heart where your love finds its dwelling place,

Its awareness and reason are swept away, intoxicated in love’s embrace.

(Kāshānī, *Dīwān*, G.356:2)

In *Dīwān-e Shams Tabrīzī*, Rūmī echoes a similar sentiment:

آن لحظه باخود آیم کز محو بیخود آیم      شش دانگ آن گهم که بیرون ز پنج و چارم

When from the *maḥw*, selfless I emerge, to myself I solemnly return,

Beyond senses and reason, in full consciousness, I discern. (Rūmī 1997,

*Ghazaliyāt*, G.1693:8)

### 2.1.3. Primordial Covenant and Intoxication

Like Rūmī’s work (1997, *Ghazaliyāt*, G.204:8), Kāshānī’s poems frequently assert that love’s intoxication started in the “Primordial Covenant,” or *Alast* Day,<sup>1</sup> alluding to the Creation where God asked humans, “‘Am I not your Lord?’ they said, ‘Yea, we bear witness’ ...” (Quran, 7:172).<sup>2</sup> Two exemplifying verses where Kāshānī links this intoxication to *Alast* and Creation are as follows.

از باده روز الست گشتند جانها جمله مست      لیک از خمار آن شراب در سینه‌ها غم‌هاستی

From the wine of *Alast*’s Day, all souls drunken,

Yet, from that drink’s haze all hearts by a sorrow haunted. (Kāshānī, *Dīwān*,

G.879:4)<sup>3</sup>

دیده از خواب عدم نگشوده گردیدند مست      چون ندای «کن» بگوش انس و جان انداختی

In non-existence’s slumber deep, to intoxication they’d fall,

When “Be!” the divine Decree, echoed to human and soul, enthralled. (Kāshānī,

*Dīwān*, G.930:7)

<sup>1</sup> The term comes from the Arabic word *Alastu*, which means “Am I not?”

<sup>2</sup> This paper draws its Quranic references from Nasr et al. (2015), *The Study Quran*. The citations include only the chapter and verse numbers, omitting the publication year.

<sup>3</sup> The “sorrow” mentioned here alludes to the pain of separation, where the soul, already in oneness with the Divine, was separated and sent to the material world.

As mentioned in the above poem, the “Be” decree alludes to a Quranic verse (2:117) discussing God’s Creation: “When He decrees a thing, He only says to it, ‘Be!’ and it is.” With this verse in mind, let us examine the love theme in this poem more closely. The theme links to Islamic mysticism, where love initiates Creation. This perspective stems from a prophetic *ḥadīth* where God, the “Hidden Treasure,” yearns to be recognized, leading to the universe’s genesis. The *ḥadīth* states, “I was a Hidden Treasure; I loved to be recognized, so I created the creatures to be recognized.” This *ḥadīth* suggests a “love” in God to be known. This thought intimates a “knowledge” distribution fundamentally rooted in love: God loves to endow knowledge upon Creation. Thus, Creation is the product of God’s love and inclination to share knowledge.

When viewed through the prism of this *ḥadīth* and Quranic verse, the underlying message in Kāshānī’s verse becomes apparent. He contends that divine love imbued the created beings through the Command “Be,” intoxicating them and propelling them toward acquiring divine knowledge—and, ultimately, divine unity.

Kāshānī underscores that the very essence of life is rooted in God’s intrinsic yearning to be acknowledged, which places love and knowledge as its central themes. This perspective goes beyond a shallow life, urging us to actively seek, recognize, and love the Divine. In doing so, we deepen our understanding and connection with the Divine. Kāshānī cites the Primordial Covenant to accentuate the innate bond between humans and the Divine. Through this reference, he conveys that each life is divinely ordained with a purpose deeply embedded in pursuing love and knowledge—two factors that chiefly correlate to the meaning of life.

#### 2.1.4. Perfection Through Love and ‘*irfān*

Diving into the intricacies of love’s impact on the spiritual journey requires examining the inner dimension of Islamic spirituality, which can be referred to through various terms. The most prevalent one is “Sufism,” or *taṣawwuf*, often linked with Sunnism, while ‘*irfān*, usually translated as “Gnosticism” or “Mysticism,” is a more inclusive term, though frequently associated with Shī‘ī Islam. Given the extensive scope of ‘*irfān*, covering both Sunnism and Shi‘ism—and considering Kāshānī’s Shī‘ī orientation—this paper opts for ‘*irfān* over *taṣawwuf*.

In this discussion, Ja‘farī Tabrīzī’s groundbreaking work, ‘*Irfān-i Islāmī*, is indispensable. According to Ja‘farī (2022, 29), ‘*Irfān* begins with an “awakening” from purely natural life, a realization that one’s existence is on a trajectory towards goodness and perfection, passing through “intelligible life” and striving “to be in the attraction of absolute perfection,” culminating in *liqā’ Allāh* (beatific vision; *vision Dei*). Ja‘farī, there, defines ‘*irfān* as “the expansion and encompassing of the ‘human I’ in the cosmos by situating the ‘I’ on the path of absolute perfection’s attraction, culminating in the *liqā’ Allāh*.”

As described by Qayṣarī (1978, 28-31), after the initial “awakening,” referred to as *yaqza*, one turns away from the *Maqām-i nafs*—i.e., the station characterized by animalistic human aspects such as lust, anger, and greed—turning towards God, and through ascetic practices, progresses to



the illumination of the heart and spirit, referred to as *maqām-i qalb* and *maqām-i rūh*, where they receive intuition and divine knowledge.

As the intellect and heart are perfected, the human self transitions from the “natural I” to the “celestial (*malakūtī*) I,” unlocking their potential and enabling them to expand, encompassing the cosmos (Ja‘farī Tabrizī, 2022, 33). Ibn Sīnā discusses such individuals in *al-Ishārāt* (*Namaṭ* 8; *Tanbīh* 13), where he (2013, 354) points out that the *‘urafā* (plural of *‘ārif*, a practitioner of *‘irfān*) are cleansed from the desires and animalistic lusts, freed from the worldly distractions, and turned entirely to the realm of divine and bliss, receive highest of perfections, reaching spiritual constitution and the greatest pleasures. This state greatly influences the meaning of life. *‘Irfān*, in bringing about the greatest pleasures—as Ibn Sīnā points out—results in freedom from worldly desires, thereby allowing for a life filled with profound meaning and a continuous journey toward perfection.

Returning to the concept of love, its relationship with *‘irfān* becomes apparent. Love, characterized by a desire for perfection and an inclination towards divine Beauty, sets the seeker on a path of absolute perfection, with *‘irfān* serving as a knowledge-based and practical guide along this path. This shared relationship highlights that love and *‘irfān* are mutually complementary, guiding one towards perfection in their journey towards the Divine (Ja‘farī Tabrizī, 2022, 61).<sup>1</sup>

#### **2.1.5. Kāshānī’s Portrayal of Intoxication and the Quest for Meaning**

Kāshānī’s poems portray the intoxicated person as living beyond the bounds of conventional morality and religious formalities; they dwell in a perpetual divine bliss created by divine love (*Dīwān*, G.128:4; G.147:2, G.892:9). Kāshānī’s portrayal suggests that a true understanding of life’s essence may exist beyond superficial righteousness or religiosity. Genuine meaning is transcendent and rooted in a profound spiritual connection with the Divine. Kāshānī neither dismisses morality nor piety; he fervently practiced and wrote about them. Here, he is only challenging superficial perceptions.

Kāshānī (G.420:1-5) further portrays the divine wine’s intoxication as a heart cleanser and a path towards justice and fairness. The divine elixir’s arrival is marked by the metaphor of a mythical bird descending from a mountain. The poem emphasizes how spiritual intoxication has different impacts on the spiritual lover and the pious. It brings empty boasting to the latter but self-transcendence to the former. The pure wine leaves no heart untouched, leaving nothing but the heart’s name behind, making them signless—i.e., making the journeyer transcend their self.

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<sup>1</sup> On the spiritual journey, as Mullā Aḥmad Narāqī (1245/1829–1830 H/CE) points out (2012, 711), the most profound love should be reserved for God, as none but He truly merits such devotion. Love for others is justified only by their connection to God. Any affection stemming from different reasons reveals ignorance about God. Thus, humans should love all created beings as arrays of the Absolute Existence’s Light. In Islamic mystical texts, this generic affection is termed “metaphorical love,” distinguishing it from the “real love” one has toward God. This all-encompassing love enriches life’s meaning, leading one to show affection and compassion to all the created realms—humans, animals, and the environment.

However, the pious only understands the superficial traits of this wine, unaware of its inner transformative powers.

Thus, Fayḍ Kāshānī adds a profound layer to the meaning of life by highlighting the transformative power of intoxication and portraying the heart's role as a transformative vessel, making clear that receiving divine truth requires internal purification. By embracing divine love, not only does one's heart undergo cleansing, but it also directs the individual toward justice. This underscores each person's indispensable personal journey to fathom life's meaning. Kāshānī lays out spiritual stages that offer a structured lens through which one can discern life's meaning—an evolution guiding one towards self-transcendence and intoxication. Kāshānī's representation of this love-induced intoxication epitomizes a metaphysical journey that beckons one to address life's most profound queries. Such an experience intimates that the true meaning of life surpasses mere earthly bounds, touching the divine realm.

### **2.1.6. Weaving Kāshānī's Insights into a Picture of Meaning**

Fayḍ Kāshānī's works offer a nuanced perspective on the meaning of life, presenting it as a journey toward divine unity deeply rooted in love, intoxication, knowledge, and transcendence. In his poetry, Kāshānī eloquently depicts a transformative journey where the seeker cultivates a deep and intimate connection with the Divine. Employing intoxication metaphors, he illustrates how this relationship transcends conventional understanding, infusing life with a deeper, more meaningful dimension.

Kāshānī challenges individuals to transcend superficial notions of religiosity, urging them to seek a more profound connection with the Divine. He contends that true spirituality surpasses mere outward expressions of piety, advocating for a transformative love for the Divine that can lead to a richer, more fulfilling existence. His works portray life as a metaphysical journey, a quest for divine knowledge and unity, intertwining the Creation narrative with themes of love and intoxication. This portrayal presents life as an opportunity to transcend the self and embrace a grand, divine reality.

Centering on Shī'ī *'irfān*, Fayḍ Kāshānī's poetry emphasizes the inner spiritual journey toward achieving divine knowledge and unity. This journey necessitates transcending human animalistic traits, perfecting intellect and heart, and cultivating a life of perfection. Kāshānī depicts divine love as a transformative force capable of purifying the heart, inspiring justice and fairness, and deepening the understanding of life's purpose. This spiritual awakening empowers individuals to shed worldly desires and pursue a relentless quest for perfection. This inspired justice imbues life with significance and depth, guiding individuals toward moral and just behavior. Additionally, religious perspectives suggest that justice extends into the afterlife, offering hope and infusing life with purpose. This belief motivates righteous conduct and deters immoral actions, fostering humane, ethical, and just societies.

Furthermore, Fayḍ Kāshānī advocates for a universal love and compassion that extends beyond the individual to encompass all creation. This all-encompassing love enhances life's significance, encouraging a collective existence marked by affection and empathy toward all living beings and the environment. Kāshānī's works contribute profoundly to our understanding of the meaning of life.

Along with his poems, Fayḍ Kāshānī's (1992c, 211) discourse, as presented in his treatise *Ulfat Nāme* or *The Book of Companionship*, spans various domains of life, including social, religious, political, ethical, psychological, and spiritual spheres, offering a practical approach to meaning *in* life. He stresses the importance of developing brotherhoods in pursuing God's pleasure and advocates for unity through spiritual and ethical bonds. This unity is actualized in the communal ties that foster social harmony and collective well-being.

Fayḍ Kāshānī urges seekers to cultivate mutual affection. This is achieved by adorning themselves with qualities such as congeniality, graciousness, and the ability to overlook each other's faults. He suggests that such interactions could gradually evolve into natural affection, strengthening over time. By doing so, individuals embody the spirit of *ukhuwwat*, or brotherhood, enhancing their social, religious, psychological, political, and spiritual lives (Kāshānī, 1992c, 212).

To ensure the efficacy of this brotherhood, Kāshānī (1992c, 210-216) prescribes establishing a community with a fixed number of brethren governed by principles aligned with both the *Sharī'a* and the spiritual path. Kāshānī calls seekers to carefully select a group whose hearts possess a certain purity and spiritual affinity and establish a brotherhood bond among them, as the Prophet (PBUH) did among his companions. Kāshānī's point suggests that not everyone is suited for such brotherhood; the brethren should be spiritually and ethically prepared and committed. Members are to set ground rules and hold each other accountable to the principles, thereby habituating themselves to virtuous behaviors. Such disciplines include refraining from gossiping, lying, sinning, safeguarding each other's secrets, honoring commitments, and engaging with kindness and patience.

In his brotherhood discussion, Kāshānī (1992c, 216) uses the Persian term *ulfat*, or "affinity," encompassing affection, love, and fondness in friendship. He delineates three degrees of affinities: "most exclusive affinity" (*ulfat-i akhaṣṣ*) is possible only between two individuals, "special affinity" (*ulfat-i khāṣṣ*) is suitable among five or six persons, and "general affinity" (*ulfat-i 'ālam*) that can encompass an entire community. Each level carries its responsibilities, though differing in scope. Additional obligations may be determined among the brethren to further this interconnectedness.

In his *Dīwān*, specifically Ghazal 612, Kāshānī (2002b) poetically encapsulates the essence of *Ulfat Nāme* treatise, illustrating the depth of companionship where individuals are not only friends and confidants but also supporters and healers to one another. They stand united, sharing joy and sorrow, wisdom and folly, and are collectively resilient against hardships.

In Kāshānī's *Ulfat Nāme*, coupled with the expressive verses of his ghazal, a model is presented where the search for meaning *in* life is deeply rooted in community engagement. This community is not merely a social grouping but one designed with the threads of divine guidance, weaving its members into a tapestry of shared purpose and unity. Within this community, individuals work collectively to eliminate negative traits and cultivate virtues; they serve as the healers of difficulties and the facilitators of divine proximity for one another. This model shifts the focus from the isolation of individualism to the rich yields of a communal existence.

## **2.2. John Cottingham: Meaning of Life**

Understanding the meaning of life requires contemplating profound questions about human existence and place in the cosmos. Born in 1943, a preeminent figure in religious studies, philosophy of religion, moral philosophy, and early-modern philosophy, John Cottingham delves into these existential inquiries in his book *On the Meaning of Life*. Cottingham explores our relationship with the universe, seeking to unravel the mysteries of who we are and the meaning of our lives. His insights offer a valuable perspective for assessing the thoughts of other philosophical figures, such as Kāshānī, and their interpretations of life's meaning.

### **2.2.1. Religion as a Frame for Life's Meaning**

In his book *On the Meaning of Life*, John Cottingham (2003, 2-11) asserts that religion provides a framework for understanding the meaning of life. According to him, religion transcends individual or cultural perspectives and proposes that a divine or cosmic plan might bestow life with inherent purpose. The pursuit of the meaning of life transcends mere existential inquiry—it taps into our fundamental connection with the universe, our self, and our origin. Cottingham highlights that our relentless search for meaning persists despite its enigmatic nature. This quest often collides with the boundaries of scientific explanation, which, while “aims to provide as complete and comprehensive a description as it can of the universe, no matter how successful and unified the theory it ends up with, it cannot explain why there should be a universe there to be explained” (Cottingham, 2003, 7-8). The profound philosophical question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” suggests that if they exist, answers would be outside space and time, potentially inaccessible and indefinable within our conventional frameworks.

As Cottingham (2003, 8-11) puts it, while science may reach its limits in explaining why there is existence rather than non-existence, religious language stretches to express what science cannot: it attempts to convey the inexpressible and to reveal the unobservable, seeking to endow the universe and human existence with meaning. This spiritual paradigm does not offer a scientific resolution to the existential riddle; however, it can mitigate the existential discomfort of struggling with the bare enigma of being. By positing our destiny as a union with a divine creator, religious belief fosters a sense of security and purpose, countering the fear of insignificance and offering solace in the conviction that our lives hold intrinsic worth within a more extensive, meaningful framework.

In his discourse on religion's role in providing life's meaning, Cottingham (2003, 71-73) examines the challenges of finding purpose within a purely secular framework. He argues that viewing human nature simply as a result of evolutionary processes leaves us without a firm foundation for consistently pursuing goodness. It lacks the normative force to elevate our actions beyond mere survival instincts. In contrast, religion offers a transformative lens. The virtues of a morally good life may be justified without religion; however, religion situates human nature within a broader, divine context. This framework imbues our nature and actions with greater significance, envisaging them as aligned with the desires of a benevolent higher being. This alignment not only lends weight to our moral pursuits but also instills a hopeful resilience. In the face of life's adversities and moral challenges, religion maintains that our efforts contribute to a larger cosmic moral order, thus offering buoyancy to the human spirit in its quest for goodness.

As Alizamani and Daryaniasl put it (2010, 106), adopting a religion and believing in God can give more meaning to life by explaining the universe's creation, suggesting that humans are not a product of chance or purposeless explosion but rather the outcome of a deliberate and meaningful process. This belief offers comfort and peace, acknowledging a spiritual realm that imbues the physical world with meaning and posits a harmonious connection between our existence and a higher reality. It promotes an optimistic view where good ultimately triumphs over evil, and a universal justice exists to compensate for suffering and penalize wrongdoers. Additionally, religion offers a moral foundation—even in its basic form—encouraging ethical behavior motivated by the promise of divine retribution or reward, answering, "Why should we live morally?"

### **2.2.2. Exploring Spirituality's Role in Personal Transformation and Life's Meaning**

John Cottingham (2003, 77-80) examines spirituality's significant impact on bestowing life with meaning and fostering personal change. He emphasizes spirituality's role in catalyzing inner growth. This shift reorients us from material pursuits to valuing existence as a significant gift, promoting a transformation in our perception of life as a blessing and a path to enhanced insight and fulfillment. This shift hinges not solely on beliefs in an afterlife but on valuing virtue and righteousness for their own sake.

According to Cottingham, a meaningful life necessitates a profound internal shift, a new perspective on the universe and human existence, and spiritual journeying. This path to meaningfulness requires adopting, recognizing, and embracing religious beliefs, which enables us to justify life's challenges, typically viewed as barriers to meaning, and achieve tranquility. This awareness-based peace is significant to life (Alizamani and Daryaniasl, 2010, 107).

Notably, Cottingham (2003, 86-88) distinguishes between doctrines and practice, asserting that spirituality's crux lies in actively "practicing" religious tenets over merely "accepting doctrines." This preference for praxis implies that spiritual life's essence embodies religious principles, deepening our connection and understanding of the divine.

Furthermore, Cottingham (2003, 92-97) discusses how spiritual practices can cultivate faith, even without initial doctrinal agreement. He suggests faith develops as a response to the limitations of human rationality and knowledge, acknowledging the need for transcendence. This view recognizes that while rational knowledge is finite, faith and spirituality offer a more expansive route to comprehension and life's significance.

In summary, Cottingham portrays spirituality as a transformative inner journey surpassing mere intellectual agreement with religious doctrines. This path enriches our appreciation of life's meaning, nurturing a bond with something beyond ourselves and leading to an impactful experience of faith and understanding.

### **2.3. Comparative Analysis of Fayḍ Kāshānī and Cottingham on the Meaning of Life**

#### **2.3.1. Similarities and Differences**

Kāshānī and Cottingham's works provide rich insights into the meaning of life, yet their perspectives reveal notable similarities and differences, ultimately forming a complementary view. Both authors emphasize spirituality and transcendence, suggesting that addressing existential questions that lie beyond the realms of science and secular reasoning—where religion and religious language provide an essential framework. They challenge conventional views: Kāshānī criticizes superficial perceptions of morality and piety, while Cottingham questions secular frameworks' adequacy in fully grasping life's meaning. Additionally, they both underscore the importance of inner transformation, with Kāshānī emphasizing the purification of the heart and Cottingham highlighting spirituality's role in catalyzing inner growth. Moreover, they acknowledge human limitations in fully comprehending the essence of life and the mysteries of the universe. Both authors's works highlight the importance of praxis in spirituality—advocating for active engagement in religious practices over mere theoretical engagement—a domain reigned by love in Kāshānī's mysticism.

However, their approaches diverge in certain aspects. Kāshānī's views are deeply anchored in Islamic mysticism, whereas Cottingham's perspective, while recognizing religion's role, leans towards a more general spiritual framework. Moreover, their writings' cultural and philosophical contexts are distinct, with Kāshānī's ideas being shaped by Persian and Islamic traditions and Cottingham's by Western philosophical thought—with Kāshānī's perspective being more mystical, but Cottingham's more philosophical. Cottingham's philosophy can provide a more structured harmony to Kāshānī's emotive and poetic expressions.

Kāshānī would concur with Cottingham's view endorsing a spiritual approach—though, of course, harmonizing it with Tradition (Quran and *ḥadīth*). Notably, while recognizing religion's role in shaping the meaning of life, Cottingham's exploration does not thoroughly portray the complex interplay between spirituality and life's meaning. Specifically, he does not sufficiently explore spirituality's various depths and stages and how they specifically relate to understanding

life's significance. Here, Kāshānī's mystical perspective can fill the void. Let us examine the relationship between spirituality and life's meaning more explicitly.

### 2.3.2. Spirituality-Meaning Relationship

Practicing religion's outward aspects, individuals generally gain a self-oriented meaning *in* life, essentially trading actions for rewards or avoiding punishments in the afterlife. This "transactional" view aligns with Ibn Sīnā's characterization in *Ishārāt* (2013, *Namaṭ* 9, 439–61) of the *zāhid* or ascetic, who gives up worldly desires for the hereafter. In contrast, religion's inner dimensions offer more profound meaning. The journey involves adhering to outward practices and moral norms with greater dedication to attain ultimate divine unity. The highest stage in religion, as noted by Ibn Sīnā, is that of the *'arif* or mystic, who focuses solely on God, reaching divine illumination of the heart. This path requires constant self-monitoring, self-criticism, and self-improvement—akin to a sculptor constantly refining a statue, as famously illustrated by Plotinus in the *Enneads* (2018, I.6.9). This constant watchfulness and amelioration makes the journeyer an ever-perfecting being.

Progressing through spiritual stages, the self-oriented life diminishes, culminating in self-transcendence and unity with the Divine. In contrast to trading worldly pleasures for heavenly rewards, the spiritual journeyer—dominated and intoxicated by the "God-sent love-madness" Plato (1997, 244a-245b) discusses in *Phaedrus*—trades "everything" for the divine Beloved. Rūmī in *Dīwān-i Shams Tabrīzī* echoes this sentiment, likening it to a gambler losing everything yet yearning for another chance:

خُنْک آن قماربازی که بباخت آن چه بودش      بَنَمَاند هیچشِ اِلا هوسِ قمارِ دیگر

Acclaimed is the gambler, his fortune all spent,  
Left with nothing but a craving for the dice's next descent. (Rūmī, 1997,  
G.1085:5)

From Kāshānī's lens, divine knowledge, love, and selfless intoxication add a profound meaning to life. Before reaching the pinnacle of intoxication, the individual engaged in religious and moral actions remains aware of their selfhood. However, upon attaining this stage, the individual's awareness of their identity dissolves, leading them to act purely out of love, acting for the Beloved and with the Beloved (thanks to the unity achieved)—a divine love symphony. As the Dominican Meister Eckhart (2009, 124-125) expresses it potently in his sermons, "He who has abandoned self and all things, who seeks not his own in anything and does all he does without why and in love, that man being dead to all the world is alive in God and God in him." It is precisely this intoxicated selflessness that unites the seeker with the divine Beloved, imbuing life with a transcendental meaning.

The complementarity of Kāshānī and Cottingham's views lies in enriching the understanding of life's meaning. Kāshānī's perspective elaborates on Cottingham's, portraying the intricacies of spirituality, which provides a lens through which spirituality's relationship to the meaning of life

becomes more apparent. Cottingham's broader view of spirituality, on the other hand, provides a holistic context to Kāshānī's focus on Islamic mysticism, offering a more comprehensive view of the spiritual journey across various cultures and religions. Integrating Kāshānī's Eastern insights with Cottingham's Western approach leads to a richer, more diverse understanding of spirituality and life's meaning.

### 2.3.3. God-Soul-Centric Supernaturalism

Turning the lens to another aspect of the subject, philosophical debates center on how God's purpose might distinctively confer meaning on human lives, with a prevailing view that *only* God's purpose can establish unchanging moral rules or objective values essential for making our lives meaningful. As Metz (2023, 11) highlights, this extreme God-centric interpretation posits that life's meaning is *exclusively* derived from fulfilling God's specific plan for the universe. In this context, an individual's contribution to actualizing God's plan, potentially in a way God envisions, gives life significance.

Cottingham (2005, 37-57) suggests that life gains profound meaning when human will and actions are aligned with God's inherently good and moral nature. He argues that if this alignment is disturbed, a solid foundation for objective values and moral rules would also be harmed, resulting in lives devoid of deep meaning and moral worth. Thus, failing to fulfill God's designated purpose would undermine the meaningfulness of existence. In this view, unlike the extreme God-centric view outlined above by Metz, life beyond fulfilling God's purpose also has value and meaning. Nevertheless, while basic pleasures and desires might independently exist and have meaning, higher elements like moral virtue, crucial to life's meaning, are contingent on God's purpose.

Kāshānī would concur with Cottingham that God's purpose imparts meaning to human lives—albeit with minor differences. In the *Dīwān* (G.9:1-13),<sup>1</sup> Kāshānī introduces servitude and worship as the purpose in human existence. According to Kāshānī, this servitude is not just an act of duty but the essence of life itself, criticizing the value of a life devoid of such servitude. Individuals can ignite a fervent love for the Divine through a spiritual journey that begins with servitude to God and progresses toward knowledge. Kāshānī views this journey as a transformative process orchestrated by God, leading from obedience to knowledge and finally to divine love (*Dīwān*, G.9:2). This, he implies, is how fulfilling God's purpose imbues life with true meaning. Notably, for Kāshānī, the ultimate purpose is not servitude—this obedience is a medium for achieving divine knowledge and love (G.9:2). This point is also confirmed when Kāshānī states that a love-

<sup>1</sup> Fayḍ Kāshānī (*Dīwān*, G.9:1-3; 13):

از معرفت بریز شرابی بکام ما	یارب تهی مکن زمی عشق جام ما
از بندگیت دانه و دنیات دام ما	از بهر بندگیت بدنیا فتاده‌ایم
از باده چون تهیست چه حاصل زمام ما	چون بندگی نباشد از زندگی چه سود
دل می‌نواز تا که شود پخته جام ما	از بندگی بمعرفت و معرفت بعشق



intoxicated person lives beyond the bounds of conventional morality and religious formalities, dwelling in a perpetual divine bliss created by divine love (*Dīwān*, G.128:4; G.147:2, G.892:9). This view suggests that true understanding of life's essence may exist beyond superficial righteousness or religiosity, having a transcendental root in spiritual connection with the Divine. Importantly, in this trajectory, morality serves as a means to achieve this meaning rather than being the end goal itself—morality facilitates the realization of life's purposes in the spiritual path of perfection.

Fayḍ Kāshānī's perspective significantly differs from that of nihilists, who perceive life as devoid of meaning, and naturalists, who attribute life's meaning solely to material aspects. He adopts a "moderate God-soul-centric supernaturalist" stance. Following Islamic metaphysics, Kāshānī views the purpose of life as obtaining divine knowledge and love—accomplished through the soul's journey—leading to the ultimate purpose: unity with the divine Beloved. Nevertheless, he would recognize that meaning also exists in simpler forms, though in a more elementary form. As Cottingham (2016, 132-135) points out—and Kāshānī would whole-heartedly concur—a finite life encompassing elements such as the good, the true, and the beautiful inherently possesses some meaning. This sense of meaning would be significantly amplified if such a life perpetually exhibited these higher values, encompassing an eternal relationship with God.

In the discourse on life's meaning, some God-centered supernaturalists neglect or deny the soul's existence, focusing solely on God, while some soul-centered supernaturalists overlook or dismiss God, concentrating exclusively on the soul. However, despite differences, both Cottingham and Kāshānī represent a distinct category that acknowledges both God and the soul. They advocate a perspective where the soul embarks on a spiritual journey toward a divinely bestowed meaning and, ultimately, divine unity.

### **3. Conclusion**

This article has navigated the mystic expanse of Fayḍ Kāshānī and the philosophical breadth of John Cottingham, unveiling a multifaceted perspective on the meaning of life. It posits that the interplay between Kāshānī's Eastern and Cottingham's Western viewpoints enriches the discourse on life's meaning, highlighting the relationship between spirituality and the quest for understanding existence. Kāshānī's focus on divine love as a path to mystic intoxication and ultimate unity with the Divine elaborates on the intricacies of spirituality, offering a lens through which the meaning of life is examined. Contrarily, Cottingham's broader interpretation of spirituality provides a holistic context across cultures and religions.

Kāshānī's moderate God-soul-centric supernaturalist view and Cottingham's philosophical approach converge on the notion that life's value is not solely predicated on fulfilling a divine Will. Instead, they argue for a richer tapestry of meaning woven from the extraordinary experiences of divine love and enlightenment and the everyday occurrences of piety and moral virtue. This comprehensive exploration suggests that life's significance extends beyond the confines of rigid

dogma, embracing a spectrum of spiritual experiences that contribute to a transcendent understanding of existence.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of integrating diverse philosophical and mystical perspectives to comprehend life's meaning. By drawing from Kāshānī's mysticism and Cottingham's philosophy, it offers a broader view of the spiritual journey, inviting contemporary individuals to embrace a fiery love that not only eases life's challenges but also unveils the transcendental realms of existence. This contribution to comparative studies illuminates the path toward a deeper, more enriched appreciation of life's profound purpose and the eternal quest for divine union.

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