

# Theoretical Discourse of the Correlation between Love and the Existential Meaning of Life

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## ABSTRACT

Human beings have the capability for love. However, it requires more than the ability to obtain love and to be loved. It is crucial to align this ability with an awareness of this sentiment's roots and impact. In childhood, children tend to be self-centered, but for healthy development, it is better for an individual to have the ability confine this character – when needed – as one grows up. The current research aims to draw and discuss the theoretical framework of the correlation between love and the existential meaning of life. The approach followed was an analytical deductive approach that combines Islamic literature and Western literature. The importance of research stems from the need to have a meaning that helps individuals to cope with rapid, sometimes painful, and severe fluctuations of life. During the current pandemic, an existential question has aroused and started this paper: What is in life that we want to live for? It is partially derived from Frankl's Man's search for meaning. The author concludes that each of us carries a meaning that helps us emanate from and face life's difficulties based on it; however, researcher wondered about the formation of this meaning. Findings of this paper revolve around love as a fundamental pillar in humans' life and as a substantial experience that links an individual to the core of humanity and extracts the best out of the individual. Moreover, jurists of the Islamic world discuss love as an emotion that drives a person to live the experience of existence and consider it that the basis of actualizing Servitude "Ubudiyyah" relies on love that is the mandate of every Muslim.

**Key words:** Love, existential meaning of life, psychological well-being

What cannot be denied or concealed is the fact that Arab societies in recent years have witnessed a set of rapid and successive changes in cultural, intellectual, social, and economic aspect. The inability of people to confront and adapt to the changes, as well as the difficulty of controlling or predicting their expected negative effects leads to obscure the meaning of human life caused partially from the disturbance of the system of values governing the behavior and resulting in their inability to communicate with others, hence the inability to achieve self-actualizing (Khalifa, 2003). As Adler, Maslow and other psychologists point out that a human beings are obliged to draw a goal for their movements in life, to give life meaning that continuously and actively puts

an individual in movement and that the absence of the goal prints life with feelings of monotony, boredom, and meaninglessness that create conflict, stress, depression, anxiety, and various negative psychological symptoms.<sup>[1]</sup> The meaning of life is not a ready-to-use concept but rather a discovery reached by a person through a search process that begins with the existence of human beings.

Accordingly, when the individual feels a lack of meaning and realizes the ambiguity of the goal; the individual suffers from what Frankl called the "Existential Vacuum" as a normal result.<sup>[2]</sup> Frankl used this term to explain that an individual discovers his life is free from the most valuable goals, then falls prey to despair, and depression. This is, as had been explained, the feature of modern man, because of all the rapid

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changes that happen around him and the collapses that destroy all the ready-made molds that are usual for him.<sup>[3]</sup> What we witness today during Coronavirus Disease 19 pandemic is not so far from this conception. All the unpredictable events face the man of today with old questions that need to be answered honestly in a new way such as what are we doing in this world and how can we survive? Frankl stresses that a person has the responsibility to discover the meaning of his or her life by the efforts and from a unique perspective, also he believes that the sources of acquiring the meaning of life may differ, but the meaning never ceases to exist.<sup>[4]</sup> According to the theories presented by Frankl and Fromm consider love has been considered as an answer that fills the void in which man lives and a reaction against anxiety and isolation.<sup>[5]</sup> From another angle, the concept of Servitude “Ubudiyah” for a Muslim reveals the ultimate aim, yet to fruit, it needs a journey that differs from an individual to another. In addition, the concept of servitude “Ubudiyah” was richly interpreted by Muslim scholars, one of the famous interpretations is Ibn Taymiyyah’s commentary as “a name that combines what Allah loves and approves of from the apparent and hidden sayings and deeds,” thus, love has been undoubtedly regarded as a basic and an important pillar of a living soul that lives harmoniously with the existence.<sup>[6]</sup> Muslim scholars such as: Al Dhaheri *et al.* regardless of their different doctrines, perceive love as a state of spiritual transcendence that means a constant attempt of prioritizing the soul - as the eternal and authentic essence of man - over the matter that appears in the form of the mortal body.<sup>[7]</sup> Thus, the desire to conform what the beloved says is the frame that surrounds the relationship of the slave with his Creator, which is the infinite relation. Hence, a human’s attempt to exceed himself to something greater than the limits of his being, his time, and his place, is the experience of love at its highest forms as Ibn Al-Qayyim express.<sup>[8]</sup> In other words, love has been a necessary experience since the dawn of human existence that raises man to the point of touching his full humanity and its characteristics, as Sartre says that only love can give us the feeling that our existence is real, and explained that is, “To be is to belong.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Considering the above, it is worth analyzing the theoretical framework that correlates love and the existential meaning of life which in turn impacts the mental health of an individual, and this is the aim of this paper.

## DISCUSSION

Numerous studies and scientific research have indicated that love is related to several positive impacts. It has been found that satisfying the love need is positively related to the positive view of life and the world, which makes it the basis for positive psychology.<sup>[10]</sup> Further research has also pointed out that love is the most important source of happiness and that the ability to love is an essential component of positive relationships that naturally leads to mental health. Moreover,

those who belong to loving families are more compatible, stable, and more successful in their social relationships than the children of authoritarian families.<sup>[11]</sup> Furthermore, there is a relationship between love, social relations, and intimate friendship, and the individual who does not satisfy his need for love fails to establish social relationships, emotional relationships, love, and cooperation with others.<sup>[12]</sup> On the contrary, people who have satiated their need for belonging and love have positive perceptive feelings toward themselves and their lives. The role of love in upbringing differently appears between the sexes in their behavior, emotional abilities, and social interaction.<sup>[13]</sup> Further, the deprivation of the need for love is far from satisfaction, closer to pessimism, weak concern, sadness, unhappiness, hostility, sometimes rebellion against others, hate situations, and the weak ability to establish friendly relations with others. Although many studies are conducted on the positive impact of love on individuals’ mental health, limited researchers are revolving around its relationship with the existential meaning of life.<sup>[14]</sup>

Since the Arab World is facing greater problems of depression compared to the rest of the World,<sup>[15]</sup> solutions that come from introspection are needed as much as external ones. Love is a joyful, yet useful, activity that encompasses wellness and feelings of well-being, also love has been an indicator of strong healthy relationships which, in turn, strengthens happiness.<sup>[10]</sup> As has been published in a study conducted at Harvard University follows 724 participants as part of the longest-running study on human development in history; the research is done to figure out what makes an individual happy. The research examines every aspect of physical and psychological characteristics to social life and IQ. Findings from the research are published in *Triumphs of Practice* published in 2012, with vivid demonstrations that satisfaction and well-being are not the product of money, success, or hard work, but rather from relationships.<sup>[16]</sup> Therefore, due to the undeniable advantage of love on the individual as a whole, a closer examination on its nature and its relation to the meaning of life is necessary, especially in societies that had stigmatized it as a dangerous zone for a long time.

When a person is born, he comes out with a limited state, limited by instincts to an unlimited, uncertain, and open state, that is, there is no certainty except the uncertainty itself.<sup>[5]</sup> Time goes and the little child starts to develop self-awareness as an autonomous subject, then by the time, the child reaches an awareness of the breadth of his short life, the awareness that he was born without his will and will die against his will, an awareness that he will die in front of those who love him or that those who love him will die in front of him, awareness of his unity and separation, an awareness of his helplessness in front of the forces of nature; all that make his separate and disjointed existence an unbearable prison, and he may become mad if he cannot free himself from this prison and proceeds, uniting himself with people from the outside world.

Although Fromm has distinguished unity in different forms, whether through removing differences – as the calls of today to equalize women and men – or through becoming immersed in work or standardization and unification of people, he has concluded that the unity achieved in productive work is not a unity among people, the unity achieved in the energetic integration is a temporary unit, and the unity achieved in the way of compliance is only a false unity; thus, it is only a partial solution to the problem of existence.<sup>[5]</sup> Furthermore, all the mentioned types of unity seem nothing more than a good relationship among machines' gears when they are in the correct position and fully functioning. Despite the good relationship between the two gears, each one remains separate; each gear in the machine complements the other and helps it to rotate and move kindly and politely, yet at the end of the day, both are still disconnected, just like a person that is associated in various relations then closes the door to face a psychological alienation and isolation.

Fortunately, this societal image of the isolated social bonds seems far from what Prophet Muhammad has portrayed; he said: "The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion, and sympathy are just like one body. When one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever."<sup>[17]</sup> The bond of faith and love is interconnected, so no one becomes a true believer until he likes for his brother what he likes for himself, as Prophet Muhammad also mentions.<sup>[17]</sup> It is as if the meaning of the life and the ultimate aim will not be perfectly actualized unless a person learns how to love and merge with another person. Further interpretations are said by Ibn Taymiyyah that every movement in the upper and lower world is the origin of love, meaning that the origin of every action and movement in the world is of love and will, as they are the origin and principle of every action, to the extent that a person can do what he hates for the sake of love, like drinking a bitter medicine, for the sake of loving health, and wellness.<sup>[18]</sup> This love is demonstrated by Ibn Taymiyyah as the source of the existence, from which one derives his only certainty in the world, and without this love, a person's faith is lost, his certainty is lost, and his reason for being in life is lost.

The word love and its various derivatives are mentioned in the Holy Quran more than 80 times, which indicate the sublime position that the Holy Qur'an places for this sentiment and that its uses differ according to varying degrees: the love of Allah Almighty – the ultimate aim, the moral love such as love of justice, benevolence, goodness and piety, the material love such as the love of money and children, and the mutual love between a man and a woman.<sup>[7]</sup> Each type has its position, paths to walk in, and ways to deal with; therefore, an Islamic look toward love is more comprehensive and has the ability to realistically deal with it without diminishing its luster, keeping in mind that most of who had written on love are the jurists. The jurists' writing about love exceeds the utopian view of it and recognizes its impact while framing it

within the limits of permissible and forbidden. This, in turn, transfers love from abstract poems and songs to the area of responsibility that requires movement in the soul and body, as Ibn al-Qayyim mentions<sup>[8]</sup> that when Caliphs were told that when one's son is in love, they replied: "All praises are due to Allah, now his heart is soft; his words are kind; his movements are balanced, and he will stick to the good and leave the ugly." In short, the philosophical and moral concepts of love according to Ibn Hazm and Ibn al-Qayyim are affected by what has been stipulated in the Sharia of the ugliness of disobedience and the preference for chastity in love. Each has been keen to emphasize that love is not excessive, that is, it does not exceed the limit of moderation, and does not fall into sin. Rather, Ibn al-Qayyim has gone further when he has linked love to the divine will that created the world so that the world would have existed with love, and for its sake, the whole world moves with its spheres, suns, planets, angels, human beings, and animals. Nevertheless, the impact of Greek philosophy, especially Plato's, regarding the theory of love occurrence, the divided souls, and the tripartite division of the soul in their writings cannot be overlooked.<sup>[19]</sup>

Theories of love types continue to emerge and merge including Maslow theory that classified it as a need.<sup>[20]</sup> Maslow divides love into two types: First, D-Love pattern: Defensive love that means neurotic love, which is shown as a result of a lack of contentment that, in turn, leads to selfishness. Second, The B-Love pattern: The love of others, which tends toward weakness of selfishness, stability, spontaneity, minimal anxiety, hostility, and effective defenses.<sup>[21]</sup> In other words, this type reflects affection, based on the other person's utter appreciation. In B-love, one loves the other purely because of who they are and not because of what they can do for them. B-love is, surely, seen as a safer and more natural form of love.<sup>[22]</sup> To drive this point home, human love can be a double-edged sword as it can be the heaven or the misery in itself, and this return to the state of the people in love, time, place, and their previous experiences.<sup>[23]</sup> The first conception of love for a person is his family; therefore, giving love to a child is important as an essential condition for achieving a healthy personality and that without satisfying the basic needs of the child and without love, security, and feelings of respect, the child will face difficulty in growing and actualizing himself.<sup>[24]</sup> Similarly, referring to the Motivation Theory, love is a need for motivation and a factor to achieve this increase in motivation and that it is not only a basic and important need but it is also one of the processes that leads to the fulfillment of the same individual.<sup>[25]</sup>

However, no one is ignorant to the degree that he is not aware of the illnesses and negative feelings caused by love. Furthermore, a small survey gives the hint that love is correlated with suffering more than happiness, recent study claims that love is the underlying problem, and when one does

not seek assistance or is unable to cope with the situation, love becomes mostly risky, because love is considered to be lethal, a result of which suicide may be attempted, thereby dramatizing the old statement that love can be fatal, as in the famous love story of Romeo and Juliet.<sup>[26]</sup> The story tackles the real folly of love and the anguish that the two young, infatuated lovers feel. When Romeo considers his lover to be dead, he thinks of surviving without his true love with overwhelming sorrow and despair that leads him to take his own life. Juliet, too, is overwhelmed by grief after waking and seeing his dead body besides her, so she could not stand the pain and chooses to end her life. One might argue that a glimpse of all widespread stories of love and real-world cases gives enough evidence that love cannot be related to health; instead it is related to disorders, such as lovesickness and obsessive love disorders.

Ironically enough, the weakness of this argument lies in its evidence. In the modern world, people are accustomed to defining love as “a deep feeling of attraction, admiration, and intense attachment,” but through talking to many husbands and wives, it turns out that this concept is completely far from love.<sup>[27]</sup> The word “love,” which expresses a momentary feeling, attachment, or ecstasy, is a misleading feeling that hides the truth and essence of love as effective inner life, so to love is to feel the love from within and to live according to this deep feeling. Furthermore, Tallis (2005) a clinical psychologist, who has worked for several years with patients suffering from what is called lovesickness, demonstrates that romantic love beliefs are inherently irrational since the values synonymous with romantic love do not suit reality.<sup>[28]</sup> It is important to shed light on this claim and deeply analyze the source that most people derive their conception of love from. Some researchers argue that most of the public’s conception of love is constructed through media just like the concepts of beauty, happiness.<sup>[29]</sup> The widespread conception of love as seen in *Shakespeare’s* Romeo and Juliet is destructive and unhealthy, meaning that when an individual searches for love and attempts to live it, his trials will end mostly by error because he has a false conception of it, love is an art that like any art needs to be educated.<sup>[30]</sup> Moreover, the wrong conception of love also result from deficient attachment with parents. It is well known that the first recognizable love is that of parents: When they love the child unconditionally. Yet, when the child feels that there is no love and he is not accepted, he may be exposed to many psychological and social problems at a later stage, since he has not experienced the loss of self-centeredness, appreciate the other’s existence to be loved and nurtured for what he is without benefits or requirements. The essence of mental illness is the crash of human relations to the degree that returns a person to his first state of self-centeredness as a child, so he suffers a psychological death through his social death.<sup>[30]</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, the Pakistani philosopher believes that the solution lies in the experience of the authentic love, as it frees the person

from the chains of matter that captures him, and gives the efficacy and courage to a person,<sup>[31]</sup> just as Plato expresses “love is the way out from non- existence to existence.”<sup>[32]</sup>

Indeed, a proper conception of love is only given by the movement of the surrendered soul to the one who created it; thus, Muslim thinkers have been interested in searching for the essence of love, its causes, signs, and attributes, and their understandings regarding this varied between the Sufi concept that is directed toward divine love, and the philosophical concept that focuses on human love. An example of the philosophical concept is what Ibn Hazm explains that the cause of love is stillness, and the reason for the stillness is the connection that one’s soul finds in its other resembled soul.<sup>[33]</sup> He mentions that if love starts for a reason, it will end with this reason the vanished. Hence, Ibn Hazm’s conception of real and healthy love is the one that is related to knowledge and active movement toward the better, as he explains it as the knowledge that penetrates all the crusts and layers surrounding the essence, to reach the knowledge of love. This kind of knowledge does not come to a man unless he strips himself of his interests and is able to be in the other’s shoes. This kind of human love is nothing but an energetic and active feeling that penetrates the walls and barriers that stand between humans, and it is the energy that unites this person with others while keeping himself distinct and independent. With love, a person overcomes his feelings of isolation, alienation, and separation, and allows himself to be a sincere human being with others. Finally, the philosophical and ethical concept of love in Islamic thought does not only focus on the passion of love between a man and a woman but also the general concept under which many types of love fall. Therefore, Ibn al-Qayyim describes his view of love as fit for all classes of people, as it is an aid and an aim.<sup>[34]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The heritage of Islamic thought and literature includes encyclopedic books that revolve around love in all its forms; jurists have a fundamental role in their approach and various forms of handling it. This rich intellectual production helps representing social life and understanding human relations, which has the paramount impact on the individual and Islamic society. Today, we need to use these references in reviving the literary memory of contemporary generations and shedding light on the most important literary books in the Islamic civilization regarding the culture of love in an attempt to achieve a psychological and societal benefit for the contemporary generations of youth.

In addition, since a family is the first block of human development and growth, guidance about its responsibilities and impact should be provided. Parents should be encouraged to adopt a healthy parenting style, to provide love and care, and to avoid negligence and cruelty in dealing with their

children. Each member of the family should be fully aware that the healthy construction of emotions inside the family enables the individual to properly function in society and to be able to form satisfying relationships, and it also has a profound impact on creating the meaning of life for the child. Besides, urging teachers to embrace an approach of tenderness and kindness with children, emphasizing that their teaching will not be effective unless accompanied by love, makes the learner learning more likely to learn actively and efficiently, keeping in mind the mutual impact of the teacher-student relationship. Moreover, instead of letting the youth be victims of misleading media that constructs many core concepts based on its benefit, such crucial concepts as love should be open to be discussed and examined due to their significance to the individual's well-being.

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