

A Philosophical Account of the Possibility of Love's Transcendence from the Perspective of Sadrian Theosophy

Mahdi Bakherad¹ , Amir Rastin Toroghi² , Seyyed Mortaza Hosseini Shahrudi³ 

1. M.A. in Islamic Philosophy and Theology, Department of Islamic Philosophy, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. Email: emre.bakh@gmail.com

2. *Corresponding Author*, Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Philosophy and Theosophy, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. Email: arastin@um.ac.ir

3. Professor, Department of Islamic Philosophy and Theosophy, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. Email: shahrudi@um.ac.ir

Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received 03 July 2025 Received in revised form 17 August 2025 Accepted 06 September 2025 Available online 22 June 2026 Keywords: metaphorical love (‘ishq-i majazi), true love (‘ishq-i haqiqi), Mulla Sadra, substantial motion (al-haraka al-jawhariyya), unity of existence (wahdat al-wujud)	One of the most significant topics in Islamic philosophy of ethics, mysticism, and spirituality concerns the relationship between majāzī (metaphorical) love and ḥaqīqī (true) love—a question that returns to the possibility, modality, and criterion of love's sublimation (ta‘ālī) from the sensible domain to the intelligible and divine order. Ṣadrian theosophy (al-ḥikma al-muta‘ālīya), by virtue of its foundational principles—including substantial motion (al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya), gradational being (tashkīk), the union of intellect and intelligible (ittiḥād al-‘āqil wa-l-ma‘qūl), and personal unity of existence (waḥda shakhsīyya al-wujūd)—affords a comprehensive explanatory framework for the possibility of love's sublimation; a trajectory that commences with metaphorical love and, through the existential journey (sulūk) of the soul, culminates in divine love and annihilation (fanā‘) in the Absolute Beauty. Employing a philosophical-conceptual method of analysis, this study extracts and analyzes three distinct models of the possibility of love's sublimation within Ṣadrian theosophy: the first model is grounded in substantial motion and the soul's intensifying (ishtidādī) course; the second is based upon imaginal (mithālī) and intellectual (‘aqlī) perceptions; and the third is founded upon the unity of existence and divine vision (shuhūd). Subsequently, these three models are compared along axes such as their compatibility with empirical approaches to love, the role of human volition in the sublimation of love, the boundary between metaphorical and true love, and the spiritual function of love. The findings indicate that these explanations, despite their conceptual differences, are reconcilable within the framework of the transcendent theosophy and may be regarded as complementary levels of a single philosophical-spiritual system concerning love.

Cite this article: Bakherad, M., Rastin Toroghi, A., & Hosseini Shahrudi, S. M. (2026). A Philosophical Account of the Possibility of Love's Transcendence from the Perspective of Sadrian Theosophy. *Theology Journal*, 13(1), 3-25. <https://doi.org/10.22034/pke.2025.21967.2029>

1. Introduction

One of the most central and enduring questions in philosophical inquiries into love concerns whether human love—and particularly metaphorical (*majāzī*) love—can occupy a legitimate and effective position within the trajectory of spiritual sublimation and the attainment of true (*ḥaqīqī*) and divine love. If such sublimation is indeed possible, then what are the mechanisms and criteria that govern this transformative ascent? This question has acquired renewed and heightened significance in the contemporary period, particularly with the proliferation of reductionist perspectives and exclusively empirical approaches to love. Such approaches tend to reduce love to biological, psychological, or neurological functions, thereby neglecting its meaning-oriented, ethical, and theological dimensions. In stark contrast to these reductive frameworks, the transcendent theosophy (*al-ḥikma al-muta‘āliya*) of Mullā Ṣadrā offers uniquely robust philosophical resources for defending the possibility of love's sublimation and for explicating the relationship between metaphorical and true love. By virtue of its integrated metaphysical system—which encompasses substantial motion, gradational being, the union of intellect and intelligible, and the personal unity of existence—Ṣadrian philosophy provides a comprehensive framework within which love's ascent from the sensible to the divine can be coherently articulated and rigorously defended.

2. Methodology

This research has been organized employing a philosophical method of analysis, utilizing library-based sources and primary textual materials. The investigative process proceeds through the following sequential stages: First, the binary distinction between true and metaphorical love is delineated from the perspective of Ṣadrian theosophy. Second, through systematic consultation of Mullā Ṣadrā's corpus and the foundational principles of the transcendent theosophy—including substantial motion (*al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*), gradational being (*tashkīk al-wujūd*), the union of intellect and intelligible (*ittiḥād al-‘āqil wa-l-ma‘qūl*), and the personal unity of existence (*al-waḥda al-shakhṣiyya li-l-wujūd*)—three distinct models of the possibility of love's sublimation are systematically extracted and formulated. Subsequently, through a comparative analysis of these three models, their respective capacities, limitations, and points of interconnection are elucidated.

3. Findings

Based upon the foundational principles of Ṣadrian theosophy, this article introduces three principal models for explaining the sublimation of love:

Model One: Corporeal Origination and the Intensifying Motion of Love, Lover, and Beloved

In this model, love is explicated through its intimate connection with existence (*wujūd*). Since the reality of being is gradational (*mushakkak*) and comprises

multiple ontological levels, love too possesses a gradational character. Consequently, metaphorical and true love do not differ in their essential nature but rather in their ontological rank and object of attachment. The human soul, in accordance with the doctrine of substantial motion, commences from corporeal origination (*ḥudūth jismānī*) and progressively moves toward imaginal (*mithālī*) and intellectual (*‘aqlī*) immateriality. Human love accompanies the soul throughout this existential journey; in other words, love, lover, and beloved together undergo an intensifying (*ishtidādī*) course of sublimation, transforming from the corporeal level to the spiritual, and from the lower degrees of spirituality to its higher and divine stations. The element of volition (*irāda*) plays a pivotal role in this process, for the ascent of love toward higher levels is attainable only through conscious volition and rational spiritual wayfaring (*sulūk-i ‘aqlānī*).

Model Two: The Beloved as Imaginal and Intellectual Realities

This model is grounded in the theory of imaginal and intellectual perceptions (*idrākāt-i mithālī wa ‘aqlī*). According to Mullā Ṣadrā's formulation—and particularly as elaborated by ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī—encountering sensible objects in fact provides the occasion for the soul's connection to their imaginal or intellectual Forms (*ṣuwar*), which exist at a higher, immaterial level of reality. From this perspective, love for a material beloved is in truth love for that beloved's imaginal or intellectual reality, and the human faculty of imagination (*khayāl*) or intellect (*‘aql*) becomes united with that reality. Thus, the sublimation of love is not merely the outcome of ethical volition but rather an inherent requirement of the soul's perceptual structure and a necessity arising from it; for every sensory perception constitutes a bridge toward engagement with higher realities. This explanation is intimately connected with the doctrine of the union of intellect and intelligible (*ittiḥād al-‘āqil wa-l-ma‘qūl*), demonstrating that the union of lover and beloved is in reality the very union of perception at the imaginal and intellectual levels.

Model Three: The One Divine Beloved

In this model, which is founded upon the personal unity of existence (*al-waḥda al-shakṣiyya li-l-wujūd*) and Mullā Ṣadrā's distinctive perspective, metaphorical love is essentially denied any independent reality and acquires meaning only in relation to Absolute Reality. On the basis of the personal unity of existence, every love is ultimately love for God, even if it appears outwardly to be directed toward a finite existent. From this standpoint, the boundary between metaphor and reality is purely conventional (*i‘tibārī*), for all things are modes (*shu‘ūnāt*) and manifestations (*tajalliyāt*) of Absolute Existence. The sublimation of love here signifies the unveiling (*kashf*) of this very truth and the direct vision (*shuhūd*) of the Absolute Beloved behind all phenomenal manifestations. This explanation, rather than

emphasizing a gradual process or an epistemic refinement, is grounded in mystical vision and inward spiritual transformation.

Comparative Synthesis

The comparative analysis of these three models reveals the following key points: **Compatibility with Empirical Approaches:** The first model—unlike the other two—demonstrates significant compatibility with empirical and evolutionary approaches to love. According to this explanation, love at its lower levels (animal love) is a natural and biological phenomenon that, through the existential transformation of the soul, can be elevated to divine love. This model thus enables a meaningful connection between scientific and spiritual accounts of love, preventing reductive interpretations that favor materialism in love while excluding its spiritual dimensions.

The Union of Lover and Beloved: Regarding the question of the union of lover and beloved, the second model understands this union as resulting from the direct vision (shuhūd) of the imaginal or intellectual reality of the beloved, while the third model grounds it in existential and essential unity. The first model, however, emphasizes the soul's creative capacity in constructing the image of the beloved within itself, thereby offering a more dynamic and living portrayal of union.

The Role of Human Volition: In the third model, human volition is subsumed under the universal will and sovereign agency of God, and love is more a manifestation of an essential existential relation than a voluntary matter. In the second model, although the epistemic dimension is prominent, the role of volition in transcending the sensory level to reach the imaginal and intellectual levels remains operative. In the first model, however, the role of volition is particularly pronounced, for the soul's substantial motion entails gradual actualization through choice, cultivation (tarbiya), and spiritual vigilance (murāqaba).

The Boundary between Metaphorical and True Love: In the first model, the boundary between metaphorical and true love is an intensifying and gradual one; that is, although human love in its origination has a corporeal and natural source, in its continuation and existential course it progressively traverses the levels of spirituality and draws nearer to the reality of love and true love. In the second explanation, this boundary is defined in terms of the differing existential levels of the beloved's object (material, imaginal, intellectual). In the third model, however, the distinction between true and metaphorical love becomes effectively meaningless, for every love is in its inward reality a manifestation of divine love, even if the lover remains unaware of this fact.

The Spiritual Function of Love: In the first model, love, through focusing upon a single Form (ṣūrat), purifying the faculties, and liberating from multiplicity, prepares the ground for spiritual wayfaring. In the second model, engagement with the higher levels of the beloved (imaginal or intellectual)

prepares the ground for the soul's immaterialization and the sublimation of its perceptions and attentions. In the third model, however, love is itself identical with spiritual wayfaring, for everything in existence is a manifestation of the one true Beloved, and love enables the disclosure (inkishāf) of this truth.

4. Conclusion

Despite the differences noted above, all three Ṣadrian models are reconcilable within the framework of the transcendent theosophy and may be regarded as different interpretive levels of the single unified process of love's sublimation. These levels range from the cultivation of the soul and the purification of desire, through the higher stages of imaginal and intellectual perceptions, and culminating in the vision of the unity of existence and the immediate disclosure of the true Beloved in all manifestations. This demonstrates that Ṣadrian theosophy possesses the capacity both to defend meaning-oriented approaches to love and to facilitate engagement with empirical approaches, while simultaneously opening a path for the spiritual and theological reconstruction of the concept of love in the contemporary world.

Declarations

Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to this work.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The authors have no acknowledgments to express to any individual or institution.

Ethical Considerations: The authors have observed all ethical principles in conducting and publishing this scientific research, and this has been confirmed by all of them.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest: According to the authors' declaration, this article has no conflict of interest.

Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies Statement: The authors have not used artificial intelligence at any stage of writing this article.