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# On the Origin of Human Souls: The Case of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Mullah Sadra (Sadraddin Shirazi)

***Abstract***

*Subscribing to the Platonic concept of the immaterial soul, both Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Sadraddin Shirazi (Mulla Sadra) accept the idea that human beings possess something beyond the material bodies that represent them in the physical world. However, there are significant differences between their concepts of the soul. One of these differences relates to the origination of the human soul. This paper examines these Muslim philosophers' approaches to the issue of the soul's origination. They both consider human souls to be originated, but they differ significantly in terms of the nature of the soul at its origination. Ibn Sina, in line with other Muslim thinkers and defenders of the Platonic soul concept, views it as an immaterial entity upon its coming into existence. However, Mulla Sadra believes that the soul is corporeal at the beginning of its earthly existence. Beyond the issue of the soul's nature, they also hold different views on how the soul comes into being or is created. Avicenna, as an absolute dualist, believes that the soul is created externally to the body and then added to it, whereas Mulla Sadra holds that it emerges within the body through the evolutionary substantial movement of the latter. Given the variations in these philosophers' theories on the matter, the paper concludes with the claim that, despite their agreement on the denial of the soul's pre-existence, there are essential differences between their theories of origination. Ibn Sina appears to be a dualist, while Mulla Sadra leans toward monism.*

***Keywords:*** *Ibn Sina, Sadraddin Shirazi, soul and body, philosophical psychology, human souls*

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# İnsan Ruhlarının Kökenine Dair: İbn Sina (Avicenna) ve Molla Sadra (Sadreddin Şirazi) Örneğinde

***Öz***

*Hem İbn Sina hem de Sadreddin Şirazi (Molla Sadra), Platoncu gayrimaddi ruh kavramına bağlı kalarak, insanların kendilerini fiziksel dünyada temsil eden maddi bedenlerin ötesinde bir şeye sahip oldukları fikrini kabul eder. Bununla birlikte, ruh kavramları arasında önemli farklılıklar vardır. Bu farklılıklardan biri insan ruhunun kökeni ile ilgilidir. Bu makale, söz konusu Müslüman filozofların nefsin hudûsu meselesine yaklaşımlarını incelemektedir. Her iki filozof da insan nefsinin hudûsunu kabul etmekle birlikte, nefsin hudûsundaki doğası bakımından önemli farklılıklar gösterirler. İbn Sina, diğer Müslüman düşünürler ve Platoncu nefs kavramının savunucuları ile aynı doğrultuda, nefsi varlığa geldiği anda maddi olmayan bir varlık olarak görür. Ancak Molla Sadra, ruhun dünyevi varlığının başlangıcında cisimsel olduğuna inanmaktadır. Ruhun doğası meselesinin ötesinde, ruhun nasıl meydana geldiği veya yaratıldığı konusunda da farklı görüşlere sahiptirler. Mutlak bir düalist olarak İbn Sînâ nefsin bedenin dışında yaratıldığına ve daha sonra ona eklendiğine inanırken, Molla Sadra nefsin bedenin evrimsel cevher hareketi yoluyla bedenin içinde ortaya çıktığını savunur. Bu filozofların konuyla ilgili teorilerindeki farklılıklar göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, makale, nefsin önceden varoluşunu inkâr etme konusunda hemfikir olmalarına rağmen, hudus teorileri arasında temel farklılıklar olduğu iddiasıyla sona ermektedir. İbn Sina bir düalist olarak görünürken, Molla Sadra monizme meyletmektedir.*

***Anahtar Kelimeler:*** *İbn Sina, Sadreddin Şirazi, ruh ve beden, felsefi psikoloji, insan ruhları*

## Introduction

It is a well-established fact that Islamic philosophy emerged following the translation movement that occurred during the 8th-9th centuries, through which most of the Greek philosophical and scientific heritage was translated into Arabic and became accessible to Muslims. Since their sources of philosophical knowledge were Greek philosophers, Muslim philosophers inherited their views on many philosophical questions, including those related to psychology. In the psychology of Greek philosophers, there were two main theories on the nature of the human being: one was the theory of Plato, and the other that of Aristotle. According to Plato, the human being is comprised of two distinct substances, mainly the soul and the body, which have completely opposite characteristics. Thus, the former is spiritual, having nothing to do with matter and materiality, is capable of independent existence, and is therefore immortal (Plato, 1993; Lorenz, 2024). The latter, however, is material and destined for corruption and death. Aristotle, however, denied the idea of an immaterial soul (Aritoteles, 2019). In his opinion, the soul is the actuality of the body. Its relation to the body is that of the substantial form to primary matter, nothing more.

In their philosophical psychology, Muslim philosophers in general merged these two Greek thinkers' views on this matter. In other words, they defined the soul as the actuality of the body, even though they considered it a self-sustaining immaterial entity, as Plato did. However, Islamic philosophers in general, and Avicenna and Mulla Sadra in particular, did not fully accept Plato's concept of the soul. Plato believed that the soul is not only immortal but also unoriginated. In fact, he proved the soul's immortality based on its pre-existence. Thanks to its pre-existence to the body and independence from it, in his view, the soul continues to exist even when the body ceases to exist. Apparently, both philosophers whose views are the subject of this paper denied Plato's idea favoring the soul's pre-existence. According to them, the human soul, or the individual human soul, is created or originated. However, there are some fundamental differences between their views regarding the origination of human souls. Before presenting the differences between their thoughts, in the following pages, I will first discuss their general views on the soul.

**1.The concept of the soul**

When considering Islamic philosophers' concepts of the soul, they seem to be very Aristotelian in structure. From al-Kindi to Mulla Sadra, almost all major Muslim philosophers defined the soul as the actuality (entelechy) of the body, as did Aristotle. As is known, according to the definition of the soul given by Aristotle in his famous *De Anima* (On the Soul), the soul is the actualization of a natural organic body that has potential life (Aritoteles, 2019). Avicenna also defines the soul similarly. According to his definition in *Compendium on the Soul*, the soul is the perfection of a natural organic body; more precisely, it is the first perfection of a natural organic body that potentially has life (Avicenna, 1906, pp. 28-30). His accounts of the soul in his other works also agree with this definition. With regard to the definition of the soul, it is quite obvious that Avicenna follows in the footsteps of his Greek predecessor.

Similar to Aristotle, Avicenna categorizes the soul into three distinct types: the vegetative, the animal, and the rational. In this classification, the vegetative soul represents the primary actuality or perfection of a natural organic body, relating to functions such as growth, nutrition, and reproduction. In contrast, the animal and rational souls are considered the perfections of the natural organic body in terms of their abilities to comprehend particular instances, engage in locomotion or voluntary movement, and possess the capacity for judgment and understanding universals, respectively (Avicenna, 1982, p. 197; 1952, p. 58). Despite the fact that Avicenna follows Aristotle and defines the soul as the perfection of a natural body, he may mean something different with "perfection" from what Aristotle meant by the term entelechy. That

is, Aristotle's soul is not something capable of independent existence, while Avicenna's is a self-subsistent entity that continues to exist after the death of the physical body. For Avicenna believes that the soul and the body are two substantially different beings. The soul, in his opinion, is immaterial. His argument to prove its immateriality is grounded in the idea that human beings comprehend universal notions, which require immaterial substrata. Because we understand universals, our souls are not material and are therefore immaterial (Avicenna, 1906, p. 83). Thus, he supports dualism. His dualism, as well, is grounded in the traditional view that reasoning is immaterial in nature (Kaukua, 2015, p. 44). In short, although Avicenna accepts Aristotle's definition of the soul, he departs from the Aristotelian view of the soul, at least in terms of the human soul, by considering it an immaterial, self-sustained being.

In addition, the consideration of immateriality and self-subsistence for the soul raises another issue: the immortality of the soul. According to Avicenna, the soul is immortal, and the foundation of his argument for the immortality of the soul is its self-subsistent independent being (Goodman, 1992, p. 163). He argues that being independent of the body in its existence makes the soul unaffected by the absence of the body. He does not believe in a substantial causal relation between the human soul and its body. That is, the body is not the real cause of the soul. He does not even consider the body the cause of the soul in any sense suggested by Aristotle's theory of causality. In his opinion, if there were a real causal relation between the two, neither body nor soul would have been an independent substance (Davidson, 1992, p. 107), which is the case. Both the body and the soul are independent substances.

However, Avicenna believes that the fact that there are no real causal relations between the body and the soul does not mean that the body has no role to play in the existence of the soul. The emanation of the soul from the active intellect occurs through the presence of the material body ready to accept the soul. The body is the accidental cause of the soul. However, the absence of an accidental cause does not necessitate the absence of the result. Therefore, the soul will not cease to exist after the death of the body, according to Avicenna (Davidson, 1992, p. 108). The very fact about Avicenna's psychology that the human soul is self-subsistent and therefore immortal demonstrates how it is Neo-Platonic.

Mulla Sadra, who consistently draws upon Avicenna in the discussion of the majority of philosophical issues, also agrees with him on various issues regarding the soul. In fact, the majority of the arguments he provides in his writings on the issue are Avicennian; even in many cases, textual similarities are apparent. However, unlike Avicenna and other previous Islamic philosophers, Mulla Sadra sees psychology as a branch of metaphysics. His entire metaphysics is built upon an all-inclusive notion of being. His holistic metaphysical worldview enables him

to see the entire universe as an organized structure, cosmos, rather than a disorderly contingent chaos (Haq, 1970, p. 173). Therefore, he tries to analyze existence not based on its extrinsic appearances but based on its metaphysical and ontological reality.

To get into details, Mulla Sadra also states Aristotle's definition of the soul: "the first perfection of a natural organic body that has life potentially" (Shirazi, 1382, pp. 10-15). It seems that Sadra, like Avicenna, accepts this Aristotelian definition. In *Asfar*, as he discusses and analyzes this definition, for the most part, he appears to be in accordance with both Aristotle and Avicenna. However, by interpreting the organs ascribed to the body in the definition as the faculties of the soul, he seemingly finds himself in conflict with them. He claims that the organs in the definition do not refer to different body parts; thus, this definition does not solely define the human soul but rather encompasses human, animal, and plant souls:

*"... and this definition how we say '(the soul) is the first perfection of a natural organic body (which functions through certain tools)' includes all souls. For the organs in the definition are not meant to be bodily organs; on the contrary, they are faculties like nutrition, motion, and reproduction in the vegetative soul, and imagination, perception, and desire in the animal soul, as opposed to being stomach, kidney, heart, brain, or other (physical organs)"* (Shirazi, 1382, p. 15).

As is known, Aristotle considered organs to be part of the body, and to him, the soul was an actuality of, or if it is possible to say, the functionality of the body. Despite his acceptance of the Aristotelian definition of the soul, by attempting to interpret organs as the faculties of the soul, Mulla Sadra, according to Fazlur Rahman (1975), radically departs from him. However, as far as the definition is concerned, Mulla Sadra appears to be more Aristotelian than Avicenna because the latter does not consider this definition an absolute definition of the soul but a relative or relational one. That is, according to Avicenna, defining the soul as an actuality or perfection of the body does not refer to its real independent nature, which is a self-subsisting immaterial substance, but explains it in relation to the body and therefore is relational. Mulla Sadra, however, thinks that this definition is real. In his opinion, at the initial stages of its existence, the soul is not an immaterial entity that is capable and competent of living on its own. Therefore, one can see him as more of an Aristotelian than Avicenna.

On the other hand, from Mulla Sadra's perspective, this is not the full definition of the soul. Not because it does not cover the true nature of the soul; in fact, he thinks, as is already mentioned, quite the opposite: it describes the soul as it is. However, this definition only covers the soul's relational existence, which is the only reality of the soul at the beginning of its

existence. The soul, according to Mulla Sadra, is an evolutionary, ever-changing being. It comes into existence as a material form, then, thanks to its intrinsic, ever-changing reality, becomes an immaterial spirit. However, this immaterial spirit is not actually available in the beginning but potentially. Therefore, from Sadra's perspective, this definition is not full but, as some have put forward (Salavati, 1389, p. 134), a historic definition of the soul.

The immateriality of the soul is a matter that is closely related to the origination of the soul, and I am going to cover it in the coming section of this paper. What I want to touch on here is that, although Mulla Sadra denies the immateriality of the soul while coming into existence, he believes it to be spiritual eventually. Thus, Mulla Sadra too thinks that there is an immaterial soul that is capable of independent existence following the death of the physical body, as does Avicenna, and he widely discusses this issue in his writings, presenting dozens of arguments in favor of the immateriality of the soul, many of which are from Avicenna. Moreover, the rationale behind their claims is quite similar.

Ultimately, one could argue that both philosophers share a common perspective on the idea that humans consist of two distinct substances: a physical body and a spiritual soul. This perspective, known as substance dualism, may accurately represent Avicenna's viewpoint. However, Mulla Sadra's position appears to be incompatible with dualism. Although he occasionally refers to the body and soul as components of human existence, he does not view them as separate entities in terms of their existence. Instead, he sees them as two levels of a singular existential reality, which he describes as gradational. Consequently, his understanding of the soul leans more toward a monist interpretation rather than a dualist one. In this regard, Mulla Sadra aligns more closely with figures like Suhrawardy or Ibn Arabi, who are representatives of the non-peripatetic tradition, than with Avicenna and other Peripatetic philosophers.

## 2.Origination of the soul

The originatedness of human souls, a view shared by almost all Islamic philosophers, is one that does not find many supporters among the inventors of the idea of an immaterial soul in ancient Greece. In the cradle of philosophy, ancient Greece, those who thought of the soul as an immaterial substance, namely Plato and other Neo-Platonic thinkers, regarded it as unoriginated. According to Plato, the soul preexists the body and, beyond being tied to a particular body in its entire existence, transmigrates from one body to another. In fact, one of his main arguments for the immortality of the soul or its subsequent existence is its presence before entering the body. In Islamic philosophy, however, the Platonic concept that implies the temporal non-originatedness of the soul did not resonate with many philosophers who accepted

the soul's immateriality. Avicenna and Mulla Sadra are among the philosophers who rejected this view. Nevertheless, despite their endorsing the same position concerning the origination of the soul, that is, its temporal originatedness, they proposed quite different theories for the soul's origination.

To start with Avicenna, as already mentioned, he denied the Platonic idea concerning the soul's preexistence. According to him, the soul is created by a separate cause when a body suitable for it becomes available (Rahman, 1952, p. 57), and its previous existence is impossible (Avicenna, 1982, p. 222). His argument for the temporal origination of the soul is based on the impossibility of its existence before the body. The argument goes like this: "If they existed before the body, they would either be multiple entities or one single entity. But it is impossible for them to be either the one or the other… therefore it is impossible for them to exist before the body" (Rahman, 1952, p. 56). According to the first premise of the argument, two possibilities arise if the pre-existence of individual human souls is supposed: either they are one or many. There is no other alternative. The second premise rejects both assumptions as inconceivable. The gist of Avicenna's account of the inconceivability of the souls being many or single before the body is that, first of all, they cannot be many due to the fact that the soul is immaterial, and multiplicity or the existence of individual souls requires matter, which the soul lacks. In other words, as the soul is immaterial, it cannot be many. Likewise, assuming it to be single is also logically implausible. For when, say, two bodies come into being, they possess souls. If a single soul already existed before the bodies, then the souls in the newly created bodies would either be parts of that single soul or the very single soul. The first is false because the soul is immaterial and therefore indivisible. The second is even more easily refutable due to the fact that, in that case, two different people would have the same soul, which is not the case. Thus, the souls that supposedly existed before the body could neither be many nor be single. As there is no other possibility for the souls to exist before the body, they did not exist before the bodies. Therefore, the soul comes into existence together with the body.

By this argument, Avicenna proves that human souls did not exist prior to their bodies, which implies their temporal origination. Then the question that arises is: how does the soul, being an immaterial substance, come into being? Avicenna's answer to this question is that the soul is created together with the body. Earlier in this paper, it was mentioned that, according to him, body and soul are of distinct natures. The soul is immaterial, and the body is material. So, there is no necessary relationship between the two concerning their existence, and the body is not the cause of the soul in any real sense related to causality. The cause of the soul is separate

(active intellect), and "when the matter of a body suitable to become the instrument of the soul and its proper subject comes into existence" (Rahman, 1952, p. 59), the soul originates from its cause and attaches to the body. Thus, Avicenna believes that the human soul and its body originate simultaneously. In other words, there is no pre-existing soul that enters or attaches to the newly created body.

Traditional research on Avicenna agrees that his theory regarding the creation of human beings is that of the simultaneous creation of the soul and the body (Marmura, 1960; Davidson, 1992; Goodman, 1992). However, this conviction about Avicenna's view on the temporal origination of the soul has been criticized lately. Given that, simultaneous creation or "co-origination" is ambiguous (Mousavian & Mostafavi, 2017) and does not clearly state the condition of the body at the time of the soul's attachment. That is, it is unclear whether the body is fully organized or partially so at the time it accepts the soul. However, for the purposes of this research, it does not make a significant difference. The point I want to emphasize is that Avicenna believes the soul is originated. It comes into existence when a body, whether partially or fully formed, is available for it. Consequently, regarding Avicenna's theory of the temporal origination of the soul, one can maintain that, for Avicenna, the soul and the body are completely distinct entities, both cause-wise and substance-wise. Although the soul emanates from the separate cause when a body is formed, it is a completely independent, immaterial being and has no dependence on the body existentially. Although they are together, they are separate beings. The body only bestows individuality upon the soul, after which the soul is on its own and has no need for the former. Mulla Sadra, however, presents an astonishingly different account of the soul's origination.

To delve into the details, as already mentioned, Sadra holds the same view as Avicenna concerning the human soul's origination: human souls are originated. However, it should also be noted that before Sadra, almost all Islamic philosophers agreed that the soul is originated, so there is nothing astonishing about this. What is astonishing is that Mulla Sadra rejected another conventional assertion about the soul that was a matter of consensus among Muslim philosophers and beyond up until his time: the immateriality of the soul. As shown earlier, Avicenna, although denying the pre-existence of the soul, asserted its immateriality. Sadra, however, claims that the soul is material when it comes into existence. Thus, Mulla Sadra denies both the pre-existence of the soul and its immateriality in the early stages of its existence.

In terms of the soul's pre-existence before the body, Mulla Sadra argues that it is problematic in several respects. Firstly, if the soul exists on its own before joining the body, then it means it is a perfect substance existentially. To be perfect means that it has no

shortcomings and is complete. If the soul is perfect and has no deficiencies or need for anything else, then it should not require faculties such as vegetative, animal, or rational ones (Shirazi, 1382, p. 385). To put it another way, the soul requires the body to complete its perfection; if the soul is perfect, why does it require the body to do so? This fact shows that it is not perfect and, therefore, not pre-existent. Moreover, if the soul is unoriginated, then it is simple, which requires it to be one of a kind. Simplicity refuses multiplicity. However, human souls are multiple. Thus, this argument disproves the pre-existence of individual human souls (Shirazi, 1382, p. 385). Avicenna's view that the soul is originated but immaterial is also contradictory, according to Sadra. In his opinion, originatedness is incompatible with immateriality (Shirazi, 1382, p. 399). That is because, if something non-existent becomes existent, then it had the potential to exist. This, in turn, requires matter as the carrier of that potential. And the actualization of that potential requires form. Hence, when we say the soul originates, we accept that it consists of matter and form. This fact, that it is composed of matter and form, contradicts simplicity (Tahiri, 1393, p. 144). Therefore, if the soul originates, it is not a simple being. Apart from this, according to Sadra, the supporters of this claim face the same problem as the proponents of the soul's pre-existence. That is, the soul's immateriality, which requires it to be a simple, perfect being, is incompatible with its existence alongside the body. Furthermore, the soul's immateriality necessitates its oneness, which is at odds with the commonplace fact of multiplicity (Shirazi, p. 399). Therefore, Mulla Sadra believes that the soul is not immaterial in its origination.

According to Mulla Sadra's theory of origination, human souls are material when they come into existence. His thesis concerning the origination of human souls is famously phrased as "corporeal in its origination, spiritual in its subsistence." As his theory suggests, the human soul is a corporeal substance at the initial stages of its life. However, its material being is only temporary. Through the substantial motion, which the soul intrinsically possesses, this material entity actualizes its potentialities and, at the end of its journey, evolves into a spiritual being (Shirazi, 2022, p. 48). Thus, it seems that Mulla Sadra and Avicenna agree that the soul is temporally originated. Avicenna believes that the soul and the body are separate from the beginning: the soul is spiritual, but the body is material. Sadra, however, argues that they are not separate beings. At the beginning, there is only a material substance, which is potentially a human being. That very material being gradually becomes the soul, or in other words, the soul originates in that material substance. Thus, Sadra does not accept the idea of simultaneous creation; his is gradual creation. The key principle for his theory of the soul is substantial

motion. It is the substantial motion that enables the material substance to become a soul. According to Mulla Sadra, since earlier philosophers could not understand the nature of the soul, that is, its ever-changing essence, they failed to explain its creation (Shirazi, p. 398), and therefore resorted to erroneous theories such as dualism. In Sadra's theory, however, there is no place for dualism. The soul and body, in his psychology, represent a unified whole. They are not ontologically separate beings. Rather, they are gradationally different levels of human existence. This monistic concept of the soul also allows him to offer a different perspective on the soul-body problem.

**Conclusion**

An analysis of the philosophical psychology of Avicenna and Mulla Sadra reveals a significant divergence regarding the nature and origin of individual human souls. Both philosophers reject the preexistence of individual souls, advocating instead for their temporary origination. Avicenna posits that the soul and body originate simultaneously; he asserts that the soul is created instantaneously as an immaterial entity by a distinct cause when a suitable body is present, emphasizing the substantial separation between the two. In contrast, Mulla Sadra argues that the soul originates corporeally and, through substantial motion, evolves into a spiritual entity. This divergence in their views can be attributed to their differing ontological understandings upon which their respective philosophies are grounded.

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