

A critical survey on priority of existence in philosophy of Mulla Sadra

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Abstract

One of the philosophical issues which Mulla Sadra is influenced by, is the discussion of existence and essence. He built his philosophy on the principality of existence and he recognizes essence as mental process that is neither real nor unreal. Although the issue of existence and essence were discussed by Greek and Islamic philosophers like Aristotle and Ibn Sina; but before Mulla Sadra there is no philosopher who dealt with this topic in depth by giving philosophical arguments. This paper is going to discuss about the idea of Mulla Sadra on principality of existence and analyses it in positive and negative views.

Keywords: existence, essence, principality, objective, relative.

Introduction

The priority of existence over essence or quiddity was rejected not only by the Greek philosophers but also the Islamic philosophers who were before Mulla Sadra such as Ibn Sina and Farabi. Suhravardi was the first philosopher of Islam who discussed this issue, but he accepted the priority of quiddity on existence. After him this question was discussed among many other the Muslim philosophers and it played a central role in the realm of Muslim philosophy. For example, Ibn Sina and his followers believed the existence to be out of mind and advocated the primacy of quiddity. Suhravardi or Shaikh Ishraq is also called a philosopher of essentialist position. He believed that the essence alone is real and existence is captured only by mind. Mulla Sadra is thus the first one to have rejected this idea as he, on the contrary, said that nothing is real except existence and that it isn't grasped by mind. He called Existence to be primary and real and quiddity to be relative and contingent (Fazlur Rahman, 1975, p. 34).

Existence

The first of all, for Mulla Sadra existence cannot be defined because ontologically, being as the principle of the unity beneath the multiplicity of the phenomenal objects, is beyond the domain of the applicability of these categories. Then here existence is found as indefinable. It is not a genus, differentia, species or a common and specific accident. In this case, understanding the meaning of existence cannot be based on anything other than itself:

“It [existence] cannot be described [defined], because description is due to either a definition or a [distinguishing] mark. Thus, it cannot be described by definition. Since it has neither a genus nor differentia, it does not have a definition. Nor can it [be described] by a distinguishing mark, since its understanding cannot be supplied by anything more manifest and prevalent than it. It is a mistake to attempt to describe existence, for it would need to be described by something more hidden than the [entity] itself-unless the aim were to [approach

it by] either an indication or a notification, or some description; the latter is merely a syntactical [lit. linguistic] inquiry” (Mulla Sadra, 1992, pp.6-7).

Then existence is then not conditioned by any sort of determination and limitation. If it is defined it is limited and conditioned by its determinations, for every affirmation is a negation. According to him the concept of existence becomes a prior condition and the foundation of all kinds of scientific discourse and knowledge:

“The question of existence is the foundation of the principles of wisdom, the basis of philosophical theology, and the nexus of [concern] of those in the circle [lit. the millstone; i.e., the center] of the sciences of unity, the resurrection of souls and bodies, and of much else that only we have developed and articulated. It gives them a synthesis [lit. a unity] through its explication. Anyone who is ignorant of the gnosis of existence is also ignorant of the major subjects and most significant quests and misses the refinements of gnosis and its subtleties, the science of the divine and the prophets, the gnosis of the soul, and its connection and return to the [primordial] source and destiny [i.e., telos]” (Mulla Sadra, 1992, pp. 3-4).

Another point is that Mulla Sadra believes the concept of existence is self-evident that everyone can realize him but the reality of it is in hiddenness.

“The truth of existence is the clearest thing in appearance and presence; and its essence is the most hidden thing in grasping and understanding the depth of its reality” (Mulla Sadra, 1987, pp. 7-8).

According to Mulla Sadra, the concept of existence has two meanings which are as follows:

1. The concept of existence is united with external reality. In this sense ‘existent’ refers to is externally existent.
2. Existence is a reality which comprehends external world.

According to the first meaning existence is known as conceptual thingness (Mulla Sadra, 1987, p. 133).

In another word it means that we are able to conceive in our minds the existence of a thing which has a corresponding external reality. So if a concept corresponds to an external reality, then that concept of existence can be said to have conceptual thingness (Mulla Sadra, 1987, pp. 49-50). Here there is one example that the concept of human corresponds to an external reality such as Mohammad or Zaid so it must be said that mankind exists as a concept. Obviously if a number of different concepts can be applied to a single external reality, all of those concepts can be said to have conceptual thingness. For example the concepts of mankind, essential contingency and being a single unit (wāḥid) can be applied to an external reality such as Mohammad or Zaid so it is true to say that those concepts exist. Now we could say that every concept that corresponds to an actual external reality – not just a hypothetical or metaphorical reality-can be said to have an actual matter of fact existence. Thus regarding to this point, essence, philosophical secondary ineligibles and even non-existence in the sense of privation can be said to exist.

“All notions which arise from [our experience of] the external world and are fully grasped by the mind, even though the mode of their existence changes [in the mind]. But since the very nature of existence is that it is outside the mind and everything whose very nature it is to be outside the mind can possibly come into the mind or, else, its nature will be completely transformed-hence, existence can never be [conceptually] known by any mind” (Mulla Sadra, 1958, v1, p. 37).

According to the second meaning all the external world is pervaded by existence. The point is that if we say a thing exists from this perspective i.e., it is the same as external reality, and precisely the opposite of non-existence, such a thing cannot be conceptual and if we wish to express this in philosophical terms, we say that it has an external and existential

thingness. Mulla Sadra believes that making distinction between the two meaning of existence lead us to realize the priority of existence and the subjectivity of essence or quiddity indeed, to conflate those leads only to confusion and error. Here he gave one example to show the priority of existence; when we see some unknown creature that is coming towards us from a far, at the first instance, we recognize its existence but its identity (quiddity) is still unknown to us. Gradually, however, it is closing to us, we are able to know its identity that may be of animal or human or anything else. Then existence cannot be depending on the quiddity.

Quiddity

“Essence is defined as that ‘which makes or renders a thing what it is’ it covers both the mental and the existential” (Fazlul Rahman, 1975, p. 45).

We start the concept of quiddity by giving the examples like stone, tree, man, etc are contingent which means that quiddity or material thing isn't necessary to exist and not necessary to be annihilated, it can be both existence and non-existence. It may be existing in external world or in mind, and even when it exist in both no contradiction follows. But we can never say the same about existence for to say that existence doesn't exist is a blatant contradiction. Each reality in fact has some features of existence, objectivity and personification. It means that without them no reality is possible. If some reality doesn't have these features, it cannot exist. Quiddity as such can never be real and it cannot be known as reality. Each thing that is existent, existence is essential for it while in itself, it is opposite of existence. The thing which is opposite of non-existence must be existence. When, for example, we say that “man exists” it means that the concept of existence should come along with it otherwise the man would not exist. When the concept of existence is attributed on external matter it cannot to be known as objective. According to essentialists, quiddity is placed in both mind and external world but Mulla Sadra says, it isn't possible to find the

quiddity in external world. The place of quiddity is only in mind. Quiddity is essentially one kind of concept although the place of its truth is in our mind. It isn't possible that this truth is known directly by thought. When man's mind tries to realize this truth the concept of quiddity is mistaken as truth. Quiddity is regarded as boundary of being in mind. In other word quiddity is meant as that which is an answer to the question with reference to something that what is it? Regarding to this point, Ibn Sina divided quiddity in three types: Non-conditioned quiddity (La bi shart), negatively conditioned quiddity (Bi-shart la) and Conditioned by something (Bi-shat al-shay). These distinctions are made by Ibn Sina but in opposition of other Islamic philosophy like Ibn Sina, Mulla Sadra applied these three notions to existence that is called Wujud. Mulla Sadra believes, regarding to the first notion or 'non-conditioned' refers to the necessary being that is beyond all manifestation. Regarding to the second notion or 'negatively conditioned' refers to the extended existence (al-wujud al-munbasit) that is the first demonstration of the ultimate reality and creative principle. In the basis of third notion or 'conditioned by something' that refers to all relative beings that are known as demonstration of being.

Priority of being

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Ontological discussion of Mulla Sadra first is written in journey of al-Asfar and is continued in al-Masha‘ir and al-Shawahid al-Rububiyah. Generally his ontological idea is based on the principality of existence that tries to explain it in eight arguments that he knows them as evidences.

The First Evidence

This argument is written in Al-Masha'ir that is as follow:

“The reality of anything is its existence, which ranks with its effects and implications. Existence, therefore, must be the most real of all things for it is the possessor of reality, because whatever possesses reality possesses reality only due to it” (Mulla Sadra, 1961, p. 10).

According to this argument existence is regarded as an a priori ontological condition for the existence of all things. Each thing finds its way into the light of being or the objective reality only through existence and by relying on Being rather than its essence.

The Second Evidence:

In this argument, Mulla Sadra says that when the priority or the truth of essence is affirmed there will be no difference between external and mental realities, but that ‘this however is absurd’. Again he says that if something exists in the external world or intellectually, it does not signify that these two domains (external and intellectual) stand for that thing as containers in which the existence of that thing is established. It simply means that it has an existence from which some effects and consequences are derived (Mulla Sadra, 1961, p. 13).

The Third Evidence:

In this argument Mulla Sadra says that if we accept that the truth of things is based on quiddities, then it is not possible to predicate quiddities of one another. Predication is the union of two concepts. According to this point when one thing is predicated of another, the two will be united in existence but be different from one another in their quiddities:

“If things exist by their essences and not by the [mediation] of something else, it would not be possible to predicate them on each other, such as ‘Zaid is an animal’ or ‘Man walks’. It is so, because the use and the truth of predication is a union between different concepts in

existence. Thus the judgment made of something predicated on something else is an expression of their unity in existence, though they be diverse as concepts and in terms of their essences” (Mulla Sadra, 1961, p. 14).

Regarding to the above speech if the truth of a thing is its quiddity, then there will be no distinction between a subject and its predicate on the bases of unity and diversity.

The Fourth Evidence: in this argument Mulla Sadra states that if existence is non-existent then nothing is existed. When the non-existence of things is false, the non-existence of existence is necessarily false. In another place, if we realize essence as not in a union with existence, then it is non-existent in any mode. Again if there is no existence, then the predication of an essence is impossible, as affirming a predicate presupposes the existence of the subject. The adjunction of a non-existent thing to another non-existing thing cannot have validity (Mulla Sadra, 1961, pp. 15-16).

The Fifth Evidence:

In this state Mulla sadra want to say that if the existence has no external actualization, then nothing such as species can have particulars:

“If existence is not realized in the individuals of a species, no one of the [individuals of the species] is realized in the external realm” (Mulla Sadra, 1961, p. 17).

According to above speech for the actualization of an individual a species is required, that also relies on being to be, and nothing (as instance, another universal concept) other than being can qualify as a necessary condition for this purpose.

The Sixth Evidence:

In this argument Mulla Sadra discusses to explain the priority of existence so he says that there are two types of accidents: accidents of existence like ‘whiteness’ for a body, and accidents of essence such as differentia for a genus. Here there is some criticism that which is said by some thinkers that the qualification of essences by existence, and the presentation of

existence to the essences, is not a case of an external kind of qualification or an occurrence of an accident to its subject, because this shows that the object of qualification enjoys a certain degree of reality. Then the occurrence of accidents of quiddity (differentia to genus) does not contradict their unity in the real world. This can be held true for the connectivity between being and quiddity. Being as an accident of quiddity should be united with it, and this shows that being as an objective reality must be known:

“Existence, therefore, must be something by the mediation of which an essence exists and with which it is united in [the externally determined realm of] existence” (Mulla Sadra, 1961, p. 19).

The Seventh Evidence:

In this argument, the truth of being is studied in the connectivity of an accident with its subject. Regarding to this point the being of an accident is nothing in itself but is something for its subject; that is, the being of an accident is equal with its incarnation in its subject. (Mulla Sadra, 1961, p. 20).

According to the incarnation of an accident in its subject takes place in the real world. We could also realize obviously that the subject of an accident is not included in its essence or its definition but in its existence. Then it is the result that accident's categories depends on something other than itself, it means that subject, to be manifest. Thus if being (the subject) is not real, then the accident is a mental concept. For example the being of blackness would be a concept rather than an incarnation in a body, which is an actual base for the meaning of blackness. This also follows to the rejection of the separation of being from quiddity or essence in the realm of accident, whereas the reality of this separation has already been accepted upon.

The Eighth Evidence:

Here Mulla Sadra started with the criticism of Ishraqi like Suhrawardi that recognizes the being as mental concept and not real. Mulla Sadra claimed that he could solve the philosophical problem that latter thinkers weren't able to solve it. This problem is solved by the doctrine of principality of existence. So he emphasizes on the doctrine that the structure of all essences stands on the foundation of a single unity (i.e. Existence) and one incessant form. In this incessant form, the unity of being is known as actual and its plurality would be in the stage of the potential mode without opposing or negating one another (Mulla Sadra, 1961, p. 21).

Sadra has given following arguments to prove the priority of existence over essence:

1. The simplest reason is that, quiddity naturally is attached neither to existence and nor non-existence and such a quiddity cannot be the reality of external world unless the ascription of existence on quiddity is believed.

2. We can get a direct intuition that energy isn't based on quiddity.

3. If the external truth is just essence or quiddity then ultimate reality has quiddity, too.

4. Since quiddity is relative and accidental, it cannot get the existent from itself.

5. Existence conceptually unites subject with predicate. For example when we say "wall is white" is wall connects to white.

6. If the essence or quiddity is efficient cause then it should have same quality in both external world and mind .For example if fire burns in external world then it should burn in mind, too.

7. Each creature has various species that are different in terms of intensity such as power, action and etc. For example, we know many different degree of water from the 1 to 100. Now if essence is prior then we should realize many water quiddities of different degrees.

Criticism:

Mulla Sadra in his books used existence with two different meanings which as follows:

1. The first meaning is that, the existence has external reference but quiddity doesn't have external reference.

2. The second is that, both of them, existence and quiddity have external reference but admit some difference between them. The existence is necessary in itself but quiddity is accident and its existence depends on existence. According to the first meaning, there is nothing outside but only pure existence and according to the second meaning the external world is the realm of existence and quiddity both. Some of the assumptions of priority of existence are based on the first meaning and others are based on the second meaning. Therefore there is conflict between these two meanings, because the first meaning accepts the external correspondence of quiddity but the second meaning refuses it. So the philosophy of Mulla Sadra has gone through the internal conflict, and if we want to resolve this conflict, one of the meanings must be deleted from the philosophy of Mulla Sadra.

Conclusion

However Mulla Sadra was the first philosopher who tries to prove the principality of existence by philosophical arguments. However, we could see some obscurity in his theory. He gave two different concepts of essence in his system to prove the principality of being. First, he claimed that we can abstract the concept of existence from external world or from presence things but essence doesn't exist in external world. In another place he recognizes both existence and essence in external world. It means that existence and essence can exist in objective realm but some distinction is there; the existence exists in itself but the existence of essence is in dependency. Then in some place he accepts the existence of both being and essence in external world and again in another place he accepts the existence of essence just as mental exposed that exist in mind. But there is a problem that these two different points are used to prove the principality of existence in different places and if we want to remove

one of the principles, the structure of his system would be demolished. However these two principles are in conflict but the philosophy of Mulla Sadra is based on them. And if we want to be free this conflict, we have to avoid one of them but it is not possible because the school of him would be destroyed. The conclusion is that, Mulla Sadra did not fix his idea on this topic at the end of his discussion.

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