

EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE IN SADRĀ'S
METAPHYSICS: THE DYNAMIC REALITY
OF BEING AND THE PRINCIPLE OF
TASHKIK

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Sadrā's philosophy of existence, emphasizing that existence is the only true reality, while essences are merely mental constructs derived from particular modes of existence. Sadrā critiques the notion that abstract concepts can fully grasp real existence, arguing that existence is dynamic, unique, and beyond the limitations of conceptual thought. He distinguishes between essences, which are static, and existence, which is constantly evolving and manifesting in new forms. The principle of "*tashkik*" (systematic ambiguity) is central to Sadrā's thought, explaining how existence is both the same in all things and yet generates unique, individual realities. Sadrā's existential framework rejects the Peripatetic view that existence and essence are separate, and also diverges from Al-Suhrawardī, who prioritized essence over existence. Sadrā asserts that existence itself gives rise to essences, with God being pure existence without essence. He also dismisses monism, ascribing irreducible uniqueness to contingent beings, while asserting that God's absolute simplicity transcends all multiplicity. Furthermore, the article discusses Sadrā's idea of intrinsic movement within existence, where beings ascend towards higher forms, culminating in the perfected human (*Insan-i Kamil*) who bridges the contingent and the eternal.

According to Sadrā nothing is real except existence. But this sole reality cannot be grasped by the mind which can understand only the general ideas i.e., concepts or essences. There is a fundamental difference between essences and existence. Essences do not exist per se, but arise in the mind from the particular modes of existence. Therefore, they are mental phenomena. The mind is capable of capturing them. However, the general idea of existence cannot grasp the real existence, since existence is an objective reality and its transformation into an abstract idea distorts it. In other words, what exists is uniquely particular. Hence it cannot be understood by the conceptual mind. However essence is a concept and does not exist per se. Therefore, it can be grasped by the mind.

Sadrā further clarifies his view and admits that there is an abstract notion of existence arising from different existents. He also endorses the fact or observation that there is nothing that strictly corresponds to this abstraction; but the blunder is to imagine the existence is just this abstraction or concept.

Sadrā maintains if existence is to be considered as a concept, then it is some sort of essence or a genus. But existences are unique and no general idea can do justice to the uniqueness of real being. Moreover, essences are static. Hence, each instance of an essence is exactly the same. No instance of essence is unique or individual *Fard* (فرد). Existence on the other hand, means individuals (فرد) who are unique and not just cases (*hisas* حصص) of existence.¹ Existence is dynamic and constantly manifesting itself is new and dynamic form. Reality is the home of existence, while mind is the proper place for essences, concepts and static ideas.

The above-mentioned chain of reasoning leads to the conclusion that existence is a unique unanalysable factor in everything. Sometimes an objection is raised against it. According to it if existence is asserted of essence as something over and above essence, then essences will be invested with being prior to their existence. One answer to this objection is that existence is a special attribute which does not presuppose the existence of an essence. However, in reality existence is just the status of being real. It is not an attribute of something which is in its own right already something real.

For Sadrā existence is pure and absolute. It manifests itself in different forms. The resultant beings are modes of existence (*anwaul al-wujud*). They differ from the absolute existence and exhibit certain essential characteristics to the mind. Hence it is in the mind and not in external reality that essences arise a sort of secondary nature of the primordial reality which is existence.² Here Sadrā draws an analogy between absolute existence and the sun which in a sense is identical with the rays of light it emanates; but the rays can give rise to different characteristics.

The more an existence is complete, the less of essences it exhibits. Hence, God has no essence. From this point of view essence constitutes negation of existence. Existence is positive, definite, determinate and real. Essences are vague, dark, indeterminate, negative and unreal. Essences are nothing in themselves unless they are conjoined with existence, but existences are real; because, they are manifestations of the absolute existence.

When it is said that essence and existence are “united”, this description gives the impression as if there are two realities, i.e., essence and existence, and they are united, but Sadrā has already declared that essences do not possess any reality. The question arises: ‘In what sense these are said to be conjoined?’

In the light of afore-mentioned discussion the answer is that when absolute existence ceases to be absolute and becomes ‘modes’ of existence. These modes give rise to essence. From this point of view essence is the subjective element. God himself gives rise to essences when he “descends” from his absoluteness and generates attributes as contexts or ideas of His mind.³ His attributes have no real existence. They are purely subjective to him. Therefore in its downward movement, when existence is further diversified into modes, these modal existences generate essences.

The fundamental difference between Sadrā and the Muslim Peripatetic is that according to the former existence itself creates essences, while the latter believe that a concrete existent is a combination of essence and existence and each of them having a separate reality in its own right. This point of view separates Sadrā from al-Suhrawardi who holds that essence is the reality and existence is only an abstraction.

The Principle of *Tashkik*

The classical Aristotlean logic has made the distinction between two types of universals which are the following:

- (a) The universals univocally applicable.
- (b) The universals equivocally or ambiguously applicable.

Later Muslim peripatetic believe that there is no difference within a single essence and differences exist only in particular existences of an essence. For example there is no differences in general 'redness', but instance of redness differ from each other. So when it intensifies, a new species of red arises and the previous red goes out of existence.

Al-Suhrawardī does not agree with the above-mentioned view and maintains that a single specific essence may have a range of intensity. So when a qualitative intensification takes place essence is not replaced by another essence. Therefore, when red colour intensifies not only "redness" but also "red" remain the same, though a qualitative increase has taken place. In other words, all essences are capable of increase and decrease. For Al-Suhrawardī, the category of 'more or less' is most basic category applicable to the range of reality.

Sadrā has taken this category of "more or less" and makes it as the basis of his theory of existence. However, this principle called "*tashkik*" (تشكیک), is not applicable, to existence. Sadrā argues that essences are univocal and existence is equivocal or ambiguous (*mutashakik*). When something is ambiguous, it acts both as a principle of identity and difference. Only existence is such a principle and that is why it creates identity in difference.⁴

Moreover, existence is not only ambiguous, it is systematically ambiguous. Its reasons is that existence is not static but in perpetual movement. The movement is from the more general (*amm*) and the more indeterminate (*mubham*) to the more concrete and determinate (*kbās*), integrated and simple forms of existence. Every prior form of existence behaves like genus or matter and it is absorbed into the concreteness of the posterior form which behaves like differentiae. This movement from the less perfect to the more perfect is uni-directional and irreversible. Therefore existence never moves backward.

The more a thing has essence, the less it has of existence. At the lowest in the scale of existence is primary matter which does not exist. It is only a concept, i.e., an essence. The highest in the scale of existence is God who is absolute existence. Hence He has no essence and is beyond the reach of the conceptual thought. For Sadrā existence is not something static. It is constantly moving from the lower to the higher. The driving force this movement is '*Isbq*' or cosmic love which compels everything towards a movement of concrete form. Sadrā believes that intellectually and spiritually perfected members of the human species will become a

species in themselves hereafter. Since existence is good and absolute existence is absolute good. The absolute existence has no opposite; because, opposites are subsumable under a genus and existence has no genus.

What does Sadrā means by the systematic ambiguity of existence? In order to answer the question we should keep in mind the following points:

- (i) Existence is all things is basically the same.
- (ii) Existence is basically the same, yet it creates fundamental differences which renders every existence unique.
- (iii) Due to substantive movement in existence all the lower forms of existence are contained in and transcended by higher forms.

Difference and Unity

There seems to be real tension between existential monism of Sadrā (according to which everything vanishes in the Absolute existence, i.e., God) and the doctrine of the systematic ambiguity of existence according to which every contingent being has a unique reality of its own which cannot be reduced to anything else. When we study Sadrā it becomes clear that for him God alone is real as Reality. The contingent beings are real only as appearance. If this is so how we can reconcile the principle of ambiguity of existence with this absolute and all encompassing monism?

Sadrā tries to answer the above mentioned questions by differentiating between necessary and contingent existents. He maintains that all existents are unique and irreducible. Therefore, all existents whether necessary or contingent are original & unique. However, there is a difference in the case of God who is pure existence and a necessary existent, while the contingent existents are mixture of existence and essence.

Sadrā on the basis of the principle of '*tashkik*' rejects existential monism. He criticized those Sufis who think that existence is a single individual reality, i.e. God, and it is a universal having multiple instances. In Sadrā's opinion it is not possible that God's being itself should form the existence of contingents— substances or accidents. The reason is that in the case of many existents whose essence is identical (for example in the case of men). Supposing that their existence is also identical (as in the case of God), then there will be no distinction among them. This shows that existence can never be identically the same in any two existents, whether they stand under the same genus or essence.

Sadrā also rejects monism on the basis of his famous principle: "That which is of simple nature is everything (*basit al-haqiqa Kull al-ashya*)." ⁵

On the basis of this, Sadrā argues that God is absolutely simple. Therefore, He is all existence. However, Sabazwari maintains that this does not lead to the conclusion that there is unity in multiplicity. It means multiplicity in unity, where as absoluteness of God means that nothing relative can be attributed to Him. God being absolutely simple cannot be identical with anything that is composite, because, composite is that to which affirmative or negative attributes can be ascribed.

Lastly, according to Sadrā, the contingent existence is not static or fixed. There is an intrinsic movement of being upward (*baraka fil joubar*). He presents the principle of movement as a manifestation *tashkik* The physical nature in moving towards higher forms of existence gives rise and assumes the higher forms. This movement towards higher forms of being a matter of observation and experience. It can be attested and confirmed. The end product of this process is that perfect man (انسان کامل) in whose being the contingent and the eternal meet. However, it does not mean that the contingent becomes God.

Notes and References

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- ¹ Shirazi, Sadrā-al-Din, *Al Asfar al Arba'ah*, p. 43, lines 4.
 - ² Ibid., p. 86-87, lines 6-8.
 - ³ Fazal-ur-Rehman quotes *Al-Asfar*, I, p. 308, line 8 and p. 318, line 4 – in his book – *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadrā*, pub. University Press of New York University, 1975.
 - ⁴ Fazal-ur-Rehman, *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadrā*, quotes from *Al-Asfar*, I, 1, p. 483, line 13. Pub. The State University of New York, Albany, 195.
 - ⁵ Fazal-ur-Rehman, *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadrā*; Quote from *Al-Asfar*, I, 1, p. 47, line 8. Pub. by the State University of New York, Albany, 1975,

