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In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

Introduction: Words And Narrations

In Islamic philosophy, there are two words that are often translated as “essence”: dhāt and māhiyah. I will use “essence” for dhāt and “quiddity” for māhiyah. Essence is contrasted with attribute (ṣifah). The essence of a thing is the thing itself to which various attributes are applied. Quiddity, on the other hand, is what defines a thing’s kind.

The Arabic, māhiyah, translates What is it”; and Aristotle’s τὸ τί ἐστι, “the what is it” or “the what it is” was translated as al-māhiyah. William Chittck aptly translates it as whatness, although quiddity is more prevalent. Quiddity contrasts with accident, in one way, and with existence, in another. God, according to Avicenna, Maimonides, and Aquinas, has an unknowable essence and has no quiddity at all. The latter point is sometimes put by saying that God’s quiddity is His existence, or that He has no quiddity other than His existence.

In the Shi’i tradition, it is generally agreed that the essence (dhāt) of God is unknowable. An allusion to the unknowability of the divine essence is taken to be indicated by the verses of the Qur’ān: “and Allah warns you of Himself” (3:28, 3:30). There is also a hadith in which it is reported: “Think of the blessings of Allah and do not think of the essence of Allah, for you do not esteem Him with the estimation due to Him.” At the same time, there are statements in the Qur’ān and narrations from the infallibles in which the essence of God is named—Allāh is the proper name of God—and described. The early Shi’i theologians divided the divine attributes into attributes of essence and attributes of action. What is attributed to God in the Qur’ān (3:2) where God is described as the living (al-ḥayy) would be an attribute of essence, but what is attributed to Him by the name, the sustaining (al-Qayyīm), would be an
attribute of action.³

Shaykh Ṣadūq (306/919 – 381/991) reports:

“Says the Shaykh Abū Ja’far ('a): “our belief concerning the attributes of (His) essence is this. Whenever we describe Allāh by the attributes of His essence, we only desire by each attribute the denial of its opposite in respect of Him, the Glorious and Mighty.””⁴

He continues by naming several attributes of essence; and he contrasts these with the created attributes of action. In another work, Shaykh Ṣadūq reports on the meaning of the phrase “Allāhu akbar!” Since Arabic uses the same word for comparative and superlative adjectives, this could be translated as “God is greater” or “God is the greatest”. Shaykh Ṣadūq reports:

“Ibn Maḥbūb reported that he heard from somebody that when a man in the presence of Abū Abd Allah ('a) said, “Allahu Akbar!” He ('a) said, “What is Allah greater than?” He said, “He is greater than all things.” He ('a) said, “You have limited Him.” The man said, “What should I say?” He ('a) said, “Say: Allah is greater than what is attributed [to Him].”⁵

Ayatullah Javādī Āmulī has commented on this narration that one limits God by considering Him as one thing among others that is greater than them but which excludes them.⁶ One of the most famous narrations that seems to deny the divine attributes is the report of a sermon given by the first Imām, ‘Alī ('a):

Praise belongs to God, who did not originate from anything, nor did He bring what exists into being from anything. His beginninglessness is attested to by the temporality (ḥudūth) of things, His power by the impotence with which He has branded them, and His everlastingness (dawām) by the annihilation (fanā’) which He has forced upon them. No place is empty of Him that He might be perceived through localization (ayniyyah), no object (shabaḥ) is like Him that He might be described by quality (kayfiyyah), nor is He absent from anything that He might be known through situation (ḥaythiyyah).

He is distinct (mubā’in) in attributes from all that He has originated, inaccessible to perception because of the changing essences He has created (in things), and outside of all domination (ta’arruf) by changing states (ḥālāt) because of grandeur and tremendousness. Forbidden is His delimitation (taḥdīd) to the penetrating acumen of sagacities, His description (takyīf) to the piercing profundities of thought and His representation (taṣwīr) to the searching probes of insight.

Because of His tremendousness places encompass Him not, because of His gauge majesty measures gauge Him not, and because of His grandeur standards judge Him not. Impossible is it for imaginations (awḥām) to fathom Him, understandings (afhām) to comprehend Him or minds (adhhān) to imagine Him. Powers of reason ('uqūl) with lofty aspiration despair of contriving to comprehend Him, oceans of knowledge run dry without alluding to Him in depth, and the subtleties of disputants fall from loftiness to pettiness in describing His power.
Praise belongs to God, whose laudation is not rendered by speakers, whose bounties are not counted by reckoners, and whose rightfully due (ḥaqq) is not discharged by those who strive. Grand aspirations perceive Him not and deep-diving perspicacities reach Him not. His attributes (ṣifah) possess no determined limits (ḥadd maḥdūd), no existing description (naʿt mawjūd), no fixed time (waqt maḍūd) and no extended term (ajal mamdūd). He originates the creatures by His power, loses the winds by His mercy, and fastens the shaking of His earth with boulders.

The first step in religion is knowledge (maʿrifah) of Him. The perfection of knowledge of Him is to confirm Him (taṣdīq). The perfection of confirming Him is to profess His unity (tawḥīd). The perfection of professing His Unity is sincerity (ikhlās) towards Him. And the perfection of sincerity towards Him is to negate attributes (nafy al-ṣifāt) from Him, because of the testimony of every attribute that it is not that which possesses the attribute (al-mawṣūf) and the testimony of everything that possesses attributes that it is not the attribute.

So whoso describes God — glory be to Him — has given Him a comrade (i.e. the description). Whoso gives Him a comrade has declared Him to be two (tathniyah). Whoso declares Him to be two has divided Him. Whoso divides Him is ignorant of Him. (Whoso is ignorant of Him points to Him). Whoso points to Him has delimited Him. Whoso delimits Him has numbered Him. Whoso says, ‘In what is He?’ has enclosed Him. Whoso says, ‘On what is He?’ has excluded Him (from certain things).

...He is with everything, not through association [connection] (muqāranah); and He is other than everything, not through separation (muzāyalah)....

In the narrations presented above, there certainly seem to be elements of apophatic theology, the via negativa, as Aquinas called it; and finally it may seem that there are hints of pantheism, in God’s being with and other than things without connection or separation. Of course, this is not unique to the Shi’ite tradition. In his discussion of apophasis in Plotinus, Michael Sells writes:

Ironically enough, apophatic writers are accused of pantheism, the denial of the transcendent. They begin with the premise that one-proposition affirmations of transcendence are incomplete. When they are taken as complete, they mislead. The attempt to find a meaningful formulation of transcendence leads ineluctably to the discovery of radical immanence.

My purpose here is not to trace the ways in which radical transcendence and immanence were interwoven in Neoplatonic thought, and reappear in Christian and Islamic writings, especially among the Sufis and the Shi’ah. Instead, I will focus on how some of these issues are treated in the thought of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (c. 1572—1640), who is popularly known as Mulla Sadra, in his treatments of the divine attributes and the nature of existence.
Apophasis

Apophasis (Ἀπόϕασις)

As a preparation to reviewing Mulla Sadra’s treatments of the issues, reflection on the Greek term, apophasis, may serve as a propaedeutic aid. Apophasis is a form of denial, a saying ‘no’. So, apophasis requires a prior claim that is to be denied. Apophatic theology denies prior claims about God. In the dialogue quoted above about “Allāhu akbar!” there is a good example of this. Someone says that God is greater than all things, and the Imam denies this. However, it is not a simple denial. The Imam thereby asserts that a comparison of God’s greatness with the greatness of other things is inappropriate. We can call this a form of ontological apophasis, because what is denied is the existence of a certain kind of relation between God and other things. God does not stand in relation to things so as to be one among others and to differ from them only in being greater.

We may contrast ontological apophasis with epistemological apophasis, which denies knowledge. The interpretation of Allāhu akbar recommended by the Imam, that Allah is greater than what is attributed to Him may be understood ontologically or epistemologically. Ontologically, it might be taken to mean either that God has no attributes (but this is contrary to the explicit attributions in the Qur’ān); or that God has no positive attributes, and what seem to be positive attributes are really negative. For example, to attribute life to God is, thus, to be interpreted as a denial that God is dead; and there is support for this interpretation, at least with respect to the attributes of essence from the first narration reported above from Shaykh Ṣadūq. The long narration from Imam ‘Alī ('a), however, suggests an epistemological interpretation. Our capacities for understanding God are so limited that our descriptions of God are to be denied as inaccurate.

When we attribute F to a, there is a concept of F that is asserted to correctly describe God. Our limited concepts, however, do not correctly describe God. Hence, we are to deny what people attribute to God, not because people attribute life to God and we are to deny that God is living, but because the concept of life that people use when they make attributions to God does not correspond to the divine life. Epistemological apophasis is an admission of human ignorance, the inability of the human faculties to properly conceive of God. Sometimes the point is made that it is not the particular failings of the human intellect that make God inconceivable; rather, God is so sublime that no intellect could ever possibly have full knowledge of Him.

So, apophasis may be directed toward the essence of God or the divine attributes, and it may be ontological or epistemological. In addition to ontological and epistemological apophasis, a semantic form of apophasis should also be acknowledged. From a semantic point of view, apophasis denies that certain predications or namings are appropriate for God because of the meanings of the terms used in them. With regard to the divine essence, it is held that the special names for the essence are able to name the divine essence only because the meanings of these names are devoid of conceptual content.
The terms used for the divine attributes, such as “power” and “life”, are also used to describe creatures. Apophatic theologians deny that these terms can be properly applied to God with the same meanings with which they apply to creatures. In discussions of this issue among Muslim philosophers, Maimonides (d. 1204) is often taken as the standard bearer of the view that the meanings of terms that apply to creatures are different from their meanings when applied to God. When applied to God, “power” is interpreted to mean an absence of weakness and, Maimonides teaches: “God lives, but not by life.”

The semantic analysis of this strategy is that the same terms have different meanings when applied to the Creator and His creatures. When applied to creatures, “living” implies “by life”; but when applied to God this conceptual content is absent. Among the Shi‘i mutakalimīn (scholastic theologians), Shaykh Mufid (d. 413/1022) writes:

“I say that God is living by Himself (li-nafsih), not by a life; He is powerful by Himself and knowing by Himself, not by an entity, as the anthropomorphist attribute-party maintains…”

According to Mufid, the ideas we associate with the terms by which attributions are made about God differ, but these terms all refer only to the divine essence. He does not, however, provide a theory of how the same ideas can be used to make attributions to both creatures and God when there is no attribute common to them.

Aquinas was able to avoid the conclusion that the terms used for the divine attributes are equivocal by introducing his theory of analogical predication, which begins not from the ordinary meanings of “life” and “power”, but from consideration of the divine nature and its perfections. Likewise, Mulla Sadra begins from pure existence and its perfections and goes on to posit differences in degree in the meanings of terms applied in different contexts. The link between attributions made of creatures and of God does not require them to have common properties, but that the different properties they have are linked. The divine attributes are not entities in any way different from the essence; they are perfections of pure existence.

**Mulla Sadra On The Narration From Imam ‘Ali (‘A)**

In the sixth volume of his magnum opus, Transcendent Wisdom in Four Intellectual Journeys, Mulla Sadra offers a commentary on the negative theology expressed in the narration quoted above from Imam ‘Ali (‘a).

[Imam ‘Ali’s] (‘a) statement: “The perfection of confirming Him is to profess His unity (tawḥīd).” indicates the proof of a denial of multiplicity for the Necessary with regard to the reality of the Necessary itself, which is mere existence, which is not adulterated by generality or particularity. Verily, whoever contemplates it realizes that the Necessary is the reality of existence itself (nafs qaṣṣah al-wujūd). Every existent other than He is adulterated by what is other than the reality of existence, by limitation or by particularization or by universalization or by flaw or lassitude or faculty or inability.
...The existence of every existent other than Him rests on His existence, such that it is not possible to have perfect knowledge of a thing from among such existents except by the presence of its identity and witnessing it, and this implies the presence of that on which it rests, that is the existence of al-Ḥaqq (the Real) to the extent possible through the emanation of what emanates upon it.... Existence, in accordance with differences in degree, is the same as knowledge and power and will and the other existential attributes. However, existence in some things has strayed to such weakness that it no longer manifests the attributes, because of straying into incapacities and mixing with nothingness and darkness. 14

In this passage, Mulla Sadra alludes to his doctrine of tashkīk al-wujūd, sometimes translated as the “gradation of being,” “equivocal being”, and “the systematic ambiguity of existence,” although in a recent study Sajjad Rizvi makes a good case for using “modulation of being.” Mulla Sadra expanded on the division between mental existence and external existence to include verbal and written existence, as well. Within each of these, being ranges over various levels of intensity. This allows Mulla Sadra to offer alternatives to simple apophasis in ontology, epistemology, and semantics. The word tashkīk is derived from shakka (he doubted), and shakk was used in the Arabic translations of Aristotle to translate aporia (ἀπορία) (literally, a lack of passage). The aporia are conundrums that are not readily solved, and, so, impede progress. Following Aristotle, Sadra structures his philosophy as a series of discussions of aporias. Rizvi argues:

...tashkīk is a central guiding principle in Sadra’s metaphilosophy and permeates all branches of his philosophical system....

Tashkīk is an essentially aporetic idea because it entails concepts of affirmation and scalar gradation, modulation and negation.... Affirmation as well as essential privation is asserted of every level of ontic hierarchy. The negotiation between these poles is graded and ambiguous as well, and in itself a mushakkak concept.

...for Sadra... being is becoming, insofar as an essential property of being is to become, to unfold and to overflow. 15

According to Ayatullah Misbah, tashkīk enters philosophical terminology from discussions of the logic of concepts. Concepts are mutawāṭī (uniform) when they apply to the same degree to all their instances, such as the concept of having a body and the concept of being human. An individual either is or is not an instance of such a concept. Concepts are mushakik (graduated) when different instances of the concept differ in the degree to which they instantiate the concept, as milk, snow, and plaster may instantiate different intensities of whiteness. Mulla Sadra extends this discussion to consider, first, that the concept of existence is mushakik; and, second, that existence itself has varying degrees of intensity. 17

With regard to the divine attributes, Mulla Sadra holds that at attenuated levels of being, power and
knowledge will differ; but at the highest level they are identical. Because they differ at lower levels of intensity, the general concepts of power and knowledge will differ (indicated in the second passage below). However, since conceptual existence is also modulated or graded, the concept of divine knowledge and the concept of divine power will coincide.

[Imam ‘Ali’s] (‘a) statement: “The perfection of professing His Unity is sincerity (ikhlāṣ) towards Him” means what is additional and secondary, for otherwise there would be something other in existence, regardless whether it is an attribute or something else. There is no simple reality that precedes simple reality when what is not denied is essentially a perfection of existence, unless attenuations and non-beings. The way of negating existence is other than the way of establishing existence. So, if you were to negate from His essence an existential reality, this would imply a compound in his essence, while He is simple in essence. So, it is proved by reductio. 18

Here Mulla Sadra, like Avicenna, Maimonides, and Aquinas, affirms divine simplicity; but Sadra explains that God is pure being; pure being is simple; and, hence, God is simple. The divine essence together with the divine attributes is also simple, since the divine attributes are identical with the divine essence. He proves that what is to be denied regarding attributions made about God, is not the perfections of being, the divine attributes, by reductio ad absurdum. Suppose that what is meant by the Imam’s claim (below) that we are “to negate attributes from Him” were that the existential perfections were to be denied of the divine essence. This would imply that the divine essence contained within it some imperfection. Then the divine essence would contain perfections and imperfections, and thus be compound. However, the divine essence is simple and contains no imperfections. Therefore, the divine attributes, understood as existential perfections, are not to be denied of the divine essence. So, what the Imam requires is not the denial of the true divine attributes, but attributes at a lower level than perfection, attributes with attenuated existence.

By [Imam ‘Ali’s] (‘a) statement: “And the perfection of sincerity towards Him is to negate attributes (nafy al-ṣifāt) from Him” he means negating those attributes whose existences are other than the existence of the [divine] essence, for His essence by His essence is the instantiation of all the characteristics of perfection. His knowledge, His power, His will, His life, His hearing, and His seeing are all existents by the single existence of His essence, although their concepts are different and their meanings are diverse. The perfection of existential reality is in their being combined by multiple meanings of perfection, together with the unity of existence (wa dah al-wujūd). 19

[Imam ‘Ali’s] (‘a) statement: “because of the testimony of every attribute that it is not that which possesses the attribute (al-mawṭ) and the testimony of everything that possesses attributes that it is not the attribute indicates the proof of the denial of accidental attributes, equally whether you assume them to be pre-eternal, like the position taken by the Ash’arites, or having a temporal origin. If the attribute is accidental, then it will be other than that which possesses it. Everything that is other in existence is such that there is a distinction between that which possesses this thing and that which is
common between it and another thing. So, there will be nothing in common between them in existence. It is impossible for there to be a distinction with regard to what is common. Otherwise, the single, as single, would be multiple. Indeed, the unique, insofar as it is unique, would be multiple. This is impossible. So there would have to be some compounding of a part they have in common and a part by which they are distinct. This would imply compounding in the essence of the Necessary. But it has been proved that this is simple. So, it is proved by *reductio*.\(^{20}\)

Mulla Sadra continues that the meaning of negating attributes from God in the narrations from the Imams cannot mean negating what is realized in God, in the divine reality (*tāqqaahu ta’ālā*), for that would imply the complete denial (*ta’tīl*) of the descriptions of God in the Qur’an, which specifies the characteristics of divinity and the most beautiful names (*asmā’ al-ḥusnā*). The Imams clearly did not mean to deny the perfections attributed to God in the Qur’an! All of these perfections are existent by a single existence, the existence of the divine essence.

The divine attributes are unique to God because divine power, life, and wisdom are perfections of pure being, not because God and other existents belong to some common genus from which God is distinguished from other members of the genus by these perfections. According to Mulla Sadra we can understand difference without distinction, as we can imagine two things that are alike, except that one is more intensely black than another. What makes them different is not some property that one has but the other lacks, but a difference in the intensity of a property both have.

**Mulla Sadra Between The Negative And The Positive: Relational Existence**

If *pantheism* is claim that the world and God are identical, and *panentheism* is the view that the world is in God, or that God somehow includes the world,\(^{21}\) then Mulla Sadra is neither. A related view takes everything to be God; in Persian it is called *hameh-khoda-i* (all-God-ism). This view is never defended but only used in attacks on the views of others. Another related view is *acosmism*,\(^{22}\) according to which the world is illusory and only God really exists. Mulla Sadra’s position on these issues is based on the twin principles of his philosophy: (1) *tashkīk al-wujūd*, the gradation of existence, which we have already introduced; and (2) *iṣālah al-wujūd*, the fundamentality of existence.

Although we have not yet introduced the fundamentality of existence, some allusion to it is to be found in the idea that the divine attributes are not things distinct from the divine essence, but are perfections of being. According to Mulla Sadra, entities are fundamentally beings, and it is only due to the grade and limitation of a being that it is said to be a tree or a man. Each existent is fundamentally being, but contingent beings are limited. The reality of being is that it emanates to be realized in different levels: intellectual, imaginal, and sensible. The quiddity of a thing, such as the humanity of Socrates, is the expression of the limited being of Socrates. Existence is not an element added to Socrates by which the quiddity of Socrates becomes real; rather the reality of Socratic existence realizes itself as limited in
such a way as to be human.

Just as the quiddity of Socrates is not something to which existence may be added or subtracted, likewise the divine attributes do not constitute the analogue of a divine quiddity that could imply its existence. The divine essence is existence and the attributes of essence are implied by this. So, Mulla Sadra avoids the extremes of ta’āl, the complete denial of all attributes, which would be inconsistent with the Qur’ān, and tashbīḥ, the affirmation that God has perfections like the perfections that creatures possess.

Sometimes tashbīḥ is contrasted with tanzīḥ, the view that God’s attributes are exclusively transcendent and incomparable with those applied to creatures. Tanzīḥ is inconsistent with the Qur’ān, which describes God as sitting on His throne, and which mentions the hand of God and the face of God. The restriction of the divine attributes to exclude anything that cannot be considered an abstract perfection of pure existence rests on a neglect of the fact that in addition to the attributes of essence, God’s attributes of action must also be considered. According to Mulla Sadra, a proper analysis of the attributes of essence and the attributes of action allows the avoidance of ta’tīl, tashbīḥ, and tanzīḥ.

The attributes of action are to be analyzed by consideration of the relation between creatures and the Creator, or, in Sadra’s philosophical terminology, between impoverished being and pure being. While the attributes of essence refer to the divine essence; the attributes of action refer to abstracted relations between God and other existents; as such, the attributes of action are neither identical with the divine essence nor are they additions to it. These relations have an objective grounding in the existents (God and creature) from which they are abstracted; but they are not existents in addition to them and they do not have any specific external existence independent of the conceptualization of the existents.

Since contingent existents have an impoverished existence that depends entirely on the wājib al-wujūd, that which is necessary in its existence, these contingent beings may be considered to be divine actions, in a general sense (that is, not as special divine actions, such as miracles). Because of this, some mystics have defended the position that creatures do not have real existence, but only a metaphorical (majāzī) existence. God alone really exists; all else is only metaphorically said to exist. This is acosmism.

Mulla Sadra rejects this view and insists that lesser beings have real existence (wujūd al-τaqqal); but he explains that this existence is impoverished (faqr al-wujīd). Contingent existents do not have their own independent existences aside from the existence of God; but neither are they parts of God. Sadra explains the existence of contingent beings as a relational existence (wujūd rābiṭ), such that the contingent beings are identical to the relation they have to God, for this relation itself is their existence. The relation, in itself, is an aspect of the self-manifesting essential to the nature of being but otherwise has no essence: “Indeed the relation (al-rābiṭah) has no essence at all, like a mirror has no color....”

In order to understand this, we may first consider ordinary relations that one thing accidentally has to
another by virtue of which one thing depends for its existence on the other. The dependent thing’s essence is due to the relation. Second, we are to consider two things that are essentially related so that one necessarily depends on the other, in which case Mulla Sadra says that the thing with the dependent existence has a relative (*rābiṭī*) existence. In the external world, the essence of the dependent thing is said to be the relation; although in the mind, the quiddity of the thing is due to the relation, but is not identical to it. This is the kind of dependence that creatures are commonly thought to have on God.

Third, there is the pure relation, said to have relational existence, for the relation itself, no essence is conceivable, so that it makes no sense to say that its essence is due to a relation or is identical to the relation. Relational existence is not a part of absolute existence or a type of existence, because: (1) absolute existence is simple and has no parts or types; (2) even if we interpret “x is a part of existence” to mean that the instances of x are a subset of the set of all existents, relational existence will not be a part of existence because an essence is required for something to be an instance of a concept, while that which has merely relational existence has no essence.30

The heavens and the earth and creatures exist, according to Sadra, as works of God in a process of continual creation, which he takes to be indicated by the ayah: “Every day He is engaged in some work.” (55:29) Creatures are divine actions. Actions are not substances or even things. They are not essences so as to be essences that are necessarily dependent on the divine essence. Yet, creatures have real existence and not just metaphorical existence. However, the existence of the creature is limited, mixed with quiddity.

The existence of the creature does not amount to an essence or thing. The existence of a creature is nothing more than a divine action. The primary divine action is expressed in the name, *al-Qayyūm*, which indicates the effusion of divine grace, the standing by which all things are made to stand, to be set up or established. An action differs from its agent, for the effect differs from its cause; yet the action has no essence independent of the cause; the action is an expression of the identity of the agent; the action is nothing more than this relation of expression.

According to Ibn ‘Arabi (560/1165 – 638/1240) and his followers, creatures may be said to exist only metaphorically.32 Only God exists really. Creatures have metaphorical existence (*wjyːd al-majāz*), while God has real existence (*wjyːd al-aqṣa*). This means that predications of “existence” to God and creatures are equivocal: “existence” has its true meaning when applied to God and another metaphorical meaning when applied to creatures. As we have seen from Sadra’s treatment of the divine attributes, the principle of *tashkīk* allows Sadra to deny any equivocation, not because God and creatures exist in the same way, but because the concept of existence ranges over a continuum of levels, each of which stands in the position of a relational existence with respect to pure or absolute existence. Hence, we may say that there are a multiplicity of existents. The existences of creatures and of God are different without having a property to serve as their distinction or difference. Neither is God to be identified with the world; nor is the world in God. Neither are all things God, nor is it true that only God exists and not the world.
Conclusion: Critique Or Appropriation?

There is considerable controversy about whether Mulla Sadra is an exponent of waḥdah al-wujūd (the unity of existence) or a critic of it. However, Sadra’s analysis is original, and it is elaborated in a systematic philosophical theology developed in a number of different works with diverse styles and approaches. So, even if he is interpreted as endorsing Ibn ‘Arabi’s view, it is an endorsement together with a novel interpretation.

Mulla Sadra presents a number of lines of thought and arguments pertaining to the relation between unity and multiplicity, the one and the many, God and the world. The view he elaborates is based on the ideas of the fundamentality of existence, the gradation of existence, and on his analysis of the dependence of all existents on pure existence, a relation in which the dependent entity is an instance of the relation. Whatever the similarities and differences between Sadra’s views on these issues and those of Ibn ‘Arabi, the position he elaborates takes an intriguing course that is able to avoid many of the pitfalls associated with pantheistic and panentheistic views.

Likewise, Mulla Sadra may be said to offer a critique of apophatic theology, if that is taken to imply a denial of any of the attributions found in the Qur'ān; but this critique may be considered an endorsement of the kind of apophatic theology found in the Shi‘i narrations.

By considering how Sadra handles the problem of the divine attributes, we find some of the main principles through which he offers his own distinctive solutions to other problems pertaining to divine simplicity and unity and the relationship between God and His creatures. The positions Sadra defends is a rejection and critique of simplistic versions of apophatic theology and pantheism (and its variants) and an appropriation and endorsement of a sophisticated apophatic theology that identifies the attributes of essence with the divine essence and models the relation between God and the world on divine agency and actions, on pure existence and its essential self–disclosure.

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Ultimate Realities, Dordrecht 2013, 43–61.


3. According to ṭabarīt, the name, al-Qayyūm (literally, the Standing), is the basis for all the divine names that refer to the divine attributes of action. Cf. Sayyid Muḥammad Ṭabāṭabā’Ī, Al-Mīzān, Vol. 4, Tehran 1982, 156. Another example of a passage in the Qurʾān in which an attribute of essence and an attribute of action are paired is: “Say: He, Allah, is Unique! Allah is He on Whom all depend.” (112:1–2), if ṣamad is interpreted, as ṭabarīt does, to mean that on which others depend, and, hence to be an attribute of action, while uniqueness is an attribute of essence.


12. See Burrell, Knowing the Unknowable God, 58. For Sadrâ’s analysis of religious language, with particular attention to the terms used for the divine attributes, see MANSOUR NASIRI, Zabān-e Dīn dar Tafakur-e falsafi-ye Mulla Sadra. In Ma‘rifat 16, no. 113 (1386/2007) 31–52.


17. Misbah Yazdi, Philosophical Instructions, 247–255.


21. These definitions of pantheism and panentheism have become fairly standard since Charles Hartshorne And William Reese, Philosophers Speak of God, Chicago 1953; see WILLIAM L. REESE, Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion. Eastern and Western Thought, Atlantic Highlands 1980, 407–408; and, more recently, Ted Peters, Models of God. In: Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (eds.), Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities, Dordrecht 2013, 43–61, 57, who writes: “As the word panentheism indicates, what is affirmed here is that all things exist within God’s being. The entire world of nature and history exist within God’s being; but they do not exhaust God’s being. There is a little bit of God left over, so to speak."

22. The term was used by Hegel (d. 1831) to describe Spinoza’s (d. 1677) position; although the term is commonly believed to have been coined by Hegel, it was earlier used to describe Spinozism by Salomon Maimon (d. 1800) in 1792. See Yitzhak Y. Melamed, Hegel, Spinoza, and the Reality of the Finite. In: Journal of the History of Philosophy 48 no. 1 (2010) 77–92, 80.

23. “Then He settled on the throne” (7:54).

24. “Indeed all grace is in Allah’s hand” (3:73).

25. “Whichever way you turn, there is the face of Allah” (2:115).


27. See Misbah Yazdi, Philosophical Instructions, 522.

28. See Obudiyyat, Dar Amadār, Vol. 1, ch. 5.


30. This paragraph follows the interpretation of Obudiyyat: Obudiyyat, Dar Amadār, Vol. 1, 208.


