

Survey of Mulla Sadra's Interdisciplinary Approach to Ontological and Epistemological Issues

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Abstract: Throughout the history of philosophy the question, saying what is the relationship between the mind and the external world, has been seriously considered by philosophers from ancient Greek thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle. Regarding the importance of the question, it should be noted that each answer to this question determines the boundary of idealism and realism, which provide the foundation of different philosophical doctrines. Mulla Sadra tries to answer to the mentioned question according to his Transcendent Theology, which includes some special ontological principles such as the primacy of existence, analogical gradation or systematic ambiguity of being, unity of existence and also epistemic aspects like knowledge by presence and the unity of known and knower. In his philosophy, the two approaches, ontology and epistemology, are so blended into each other that just through an interdisciplinary view it is possible to analyze, prove and criticize his ideas about the relationship between mind and the external world. Unlike some philosophers who consider knowledge as a bridge which connects the mind to the external world, in view of Mulla Sadra, knowledge as a perfection is a process from potentiality to actuality. He establishes his theory on some principles underlying the unity of knower and known rather than the theory of abstraction supported by followers of Peripatetic Aristotelian Philosophy such as Al Farabi or Avicenna. In fact, his flexible and multi-dimensional approach to different aspects of reality helps him to see the ontological and epistemological boundaries through a broad view, which covers his both illuminative and logical attitudes. In this paper, after a brief explanation of the difference between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary researches, I try to argue how Mulla Sadra's both ontological and epistemological approaches support each other to present two sides of one reality, which appears as either existence, or awareness to us.

Key words: Primacy of existence • Interdisciplinary approach • Unity of known and knower • Systematic ambiguity of being

INTRODUCTION

Among ancient Greek philosophers, encountering two different worlds, internal and external world, evoked the question of the relationship between mind and real environment. In other words, their minds were involved by basic epistemological questions, such as: "Is there any reality besides our imaginations?", "Can we know anything about objective world?" "Does our knowledge correspond to concrete existence?" Each answer to these questions determines the foundations of different doctrines such as Skepticism, Idealism or realism.

These controversies continue until Modern Age and even Descartes (1596-1650), as a French mathematician, philosopher and scientist who is considered the father of analytic geometry and the founder of modern rationalism, answers to it, relying on the belief in the impossibility of a deceiving God (AT, VII: 62; CSM II: 43). Kant holds a permanent gap between subjective and reality (Palmquist, 1998: 48). Platonic Ideas and Aristotelian abstraction are two important theories, which suggest fundamentally different answers to these questions, having significant influence on later philosophical doctrines. Al Farabi (872-951) and Avicenna (980-1037) as pioneers of Peripatetic

Philosophy in the Islamic world and Mulla Sadra (1571/2-1640), the founder of Transcendent Theosophy, can be considered as Muslim prominent philosophers inspired by the two Greek thinkers whose works have been widely translated and deeply reflected.

Having a large number of common points with Al-Farabi's and Avicenna's realistic approach in proving the external world as an undeniable fact and counterpart of the mind, Mulla Sadra's doctrine, as the continuation of realism, differs from Peripatetic Philosophy in ontological foundations and consequently in epistemological theories. That is while the two approaches, ontology and epistemology, in Sadra's system are so blended with each other that either is based on the other one and indeed we should consider them two manifestations of one reality. Existence, or being, per se is the very fact on which his ontology and epistemology are established. Therefore, the present paper, through an interdisciplinary approach, focuses on the relationship between these two approaches in Sadra's Transcendent Theosophy and tries to explain the related elements of them to present a comprehensive sight of his philosophical system.

Interdisciplinary Approach: Today interdisciplinary and other terms such as multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary and so on, are common in the many texts. It seems that new challenges in science and research agitate new perspectives for manifestation of knowledge. There is a restructuring of knowledge in the late twentieth century. New divisions in the definitions, researches, comparative studies and intellectual labor increased borrowing from disciplines and tendency to unified perspectives have created capacity to go over traditional divisions of knowledge. The postmodern era promotes the permeability of the boundaries of knowledge and blurring and mixing of genres. All these activities have been labeled "interdisciplinary". (P. 10). Researchers, educators and scholars have turned to interdisciplinary work in order to accomplish a range of objectives such as answering complex questions, addressing broad issues, exploring professional relations, solving problem beyond the scope of one discipline and achieving unity of knowledge. There is a general uncertainty about the meaning of the term interdisciplinary. Klein (1990) described interdisciplinary as both nostalgia for wholeness and a new stage in the evolution of science (p. 11). Klein distinguishes between interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary or pluridisciplinary in that multidisciplinary is not integrative. There is not interactive

but mutual and cumulative relationship. In addition, there is no real cooperation and the participating, disciplines neither are changed nor enriched (p. 56).

Hence, we can see some main traits of interdisciplinary approach. It means that the simple connection and just mutual relationship cannot be interdisciplinary. It is a common confusion in the research realms.

The roots of interdisciplinary are in the ancient ideas, which referred to unified science and general knowledge and they resonate throughout the modernism. Plato cited the unified science. According to Plato, the knowledge cannot obtain by learning but human can get it by remembering the knowledge. It means the knowledge is inside the human and they should just remember it. Although his pupil, Aristotle moved more in direction of specificity by dividing the knowledge into politics, metaphysics and so on, he believed that the philosophy can collect all forms of knowledge to organize and to know all in general.

As we see interdisciplinary is not a completely new term, although in modern era it developed. Philosophers and scholars have used the interdisciplinary approach without mentioning it. In philosophical schools, which developed after the advent of Islam in Islamic societies, there are schools, which it seems they used the interdisciplinary. There is a manifestation of this, in Mulla Sadra's Doctrines about the knowledge and existence. Among some kinds of interdisciplinary approaches, Sadra's work closes to superdisciplinary in which none of methods or concepts have been taken from other disciplines. In this superdisciplinary, disciplines provide a collection for examining the concepts, theories and methods. It goes beyond the limited boundaries of disciplinary perspectives. An example of this superdisciplinary is Marxism (Luattua, 2001). For explaining this process in Sadra, we should consider some elements in his thought.

The Dependence of Epistemology to Ontology

The Primacy of Existence and the Presential Knowledge: Discussion of reality is propounded in Sadra's philosophy as the primacy of existence or quiddity. The main question is which of these two factors, existence or quiddity, has the condition of being really in the external world and which one is the abstraction of our mind function. In Avicenna's works (980-1037), it is implicitly believed that being has priority since existence is opposite to non-existence, but it is the accident to quiddity (Al-Shifa,

202). That is while, Suhrawardi (980-1037) not only denies the primacy of existence, but he also holds that being is just mentally posited and there is no counterpart for it in the external world (Musanafat Sheikh Ishraq, Vol 1, 335). By transition from essentialism to special kind of existentialism, Mulla Sadra rejects Suhrawardi's arguments and presents the primacy of existence as the most fundamental theory of his Transcendent Theosophy (Asfar, Vol 1, 38-39). Based on it, existence is the essential reality existentiated by the Absolute Single Being (Asfar, Vol 1, 398). More precisely, in the process of creating different creatures, the existence of everything is created not quiddity or whatness of things. It means that the being of each effect is issued and come from cause and quiddity of everything is nothing, but the limitation of its existence. Therefore, the reality of objects is based on their existence and the quiddity or whatness of them, which is conceived by the mind, refers to the limitations and existential boundaries of them. The theory of primacy of existence is so efficient in Mulla Sadra's idea that he establishes all dimensions of his worldview, such as cosmology, illuminative intuition, the definition of knowledge and eschatology on it. For instance, he explains the relationship between cause and effect according to this view. To explain, he argues that the origin of being effect is due to a kind of existential deficiency of the effect in the system of gradation of existence (Ibid, Vol 2, 299). Description of knowledge is even more dependent on existence because Sadra defines knowledge as presence which is, in fact, a mode of being (Ibid, Vol 3, 297-298; Al-Mabda' Val-Ma'ad, Vol 2, 429; Al-Masha'ir, 50; Mafatih Al-qaib, 262). Although, according to primacy of being, existence is the base stone of this philosophical system, Mulla Sadra explicitly claims that it is one of the most indefinable conceptions that can just be conceived intuitively. This is the point in which his ontology and epistemology reach each other since, here, he suggests the theory of knowledge by presence, which is, unlike knowledge by acquisition, unmistakable and self-evident and provides the framework of epistemic foundationalism in his philosophy. Therefore, self-awareness through knowledge by presence, as the first experience of reality, proposes the relationship between known and knower.

The Unity of Being and the Unity of Known and Knower: The unity of known and knower that is an epistemological doctrine is supported by another ontological theory, known as the unity of being. In this view, if we call the knower A and the known object B, The existence of A and

B is the same and as B is present to A, it is known by A. This interpretation argues that consciousness, as the presence of known to knower, requires concomitantly a unity between known and knower; as, according to primacy of being, existence is the reality of everything, it is clear that such a unity can just be realized in the existence of the known and knower. It is to mention that this kind of presence is in immaterial facts (Mafatih Al-Qaib, 109). To explain, we can imagine a material object, which is divided into two parts. It is obvious that each part of the object is absent from the other part and if we continue dividing, we encounter to four parts which each of them is absent from the other three parts. In the same manner, more continuation of the division, more Absence we observe in the material object. Therefore, Mulla Sadra concludes that there is no knowledge in matters because of their deficient presence at the lowest level of existence. The theory, unity of being, interprets the relationship between known and knower and, too, explains how presence realizes in action between the two separate facts. Integration of unity and difference in relationship between known and knower provides an opportunity to suggest another ontological theory, graded reality, which justifies the contradiction of unity and multiplicity.

The Systemic Ambiguity of Being: Mulla Sadra develops this argument by presenting his another ontological theory, known as systematic ambiguity of being, according to which he explains the difference and relationship between known and knower as the different levels of hierarchical order in the whole Universe Ta'liqe bar Hekmat Al-Ishraq, 294). In other words, he maintains the opinion that the existence of everything in the world is univocal and the difference of various objects refers to intensity and gradation of being. According to this view, the existentially higher position of knower provides a situation in which the known object is present totally to the knower and the knower, in the common part of existence, is present to the known object, too. The phenomenon of knowledge is continually expanding relying on another ontological theory, which presents a dynamic perspective of reality.

Substantial Motion: The theory of substantial motion, (Asfar, Vol 7, 298; Al-Shavahid Al-Rubobiyya, 85) completes the process of knowledge in his system saying the reality of knowledge is a gradual trend from potentiality to actuality. This theory provides a dynamical and lively state in Sadra's philosophy so that relying on it; he easily explains the evolution of the Universe from

deficiency to perfection. For instance, through acquisition of knowledge, as perfection of soul, the existence of human grasps transcendence in hierarchical order of the Universe. In view of Sadra, the role of knowledge is to change the substance of the soul, that is, when sense organs are connected to the external objects, the connection produces special biological effects on the nervous system, which provides a condition of soul to expand or increase the intensity of its existence. This additional existence is identical with our knowledge. In other words, knowledge is a level of our being and is created by a kind of extending in the existence of our soul in the system of gradation of being. Correspondence of the extra existence, knowledge, with the concretely existing in the world guarantees the value of human knowledge. Yet, it is clarified how Mulla Sadra's epistemology is based on the ontology of his philosophy. Now, if we reconsider the relationship between the two approaches from another side, we see the same dependency from his ontology to his epistemology.

The dependence of ontology to epistemology A: knowledge by presence In Mulla Sadra's realism, knowledge by presence appears as a foundation on which his ontology is based. Realism, believing in reality in extramental world, is the essential base of realistic ontology. Since nothing can prove the external world, as a reality and justify the direct association between human mind and the objective world, but knowledge by presence, it as the foundation of whole human knowledge supports the structure of Sadra's ontology. As a result, the most important element of ontology research, existence, is intuited and proven through an epistemological factor i.e., presential knowledge, which plays a significant role in Sadra's thought system. The first experience of each person in the life is particular individual self-awareness. Indeed, self-awareness is a kind of person's presence to himself or herself and this presence is the precise description of presential knowledge. In other words, human soul experiences his existence through a special kind of knowledge and that is nothing but presential knowledge. Conceiving existence itself directly is the first step of abandonment of skepticism. Then, according to the relationship between self and mental states, such as sadness, will or intention that is related to self, Sadra refers to the theory of causation in his ontology. This theory is developed to the external world by effects impressed on mind from external objectives and observation of different phenomena in natural relationships. Throughout the life, the mind continues attaining knowledge by acquisition, which ultimately

returns to presential knowledge. Therefore, according to this view, all human sciences and especially illuminative intuition, are eventually based on an epistemological deep structure, knowledge by presence.

CONCLUSION

Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Theosophy is a comprehensive, Rational and illuminative doctrine through which we see the Universe, from creator to creatures, as a unit which existence constitutes its core. He reflects this central point in light of two different approaches, epistemology and ontology. The two investigative lines integrate different phenomena so that each of them is justified rationally in relationship with the other one. Under such a multidimensional insight, we come upon a dynamic interaction between different aspects of reality. On one hand, primacy of being, unity of existence, gradation of being and substantial motion are four significant elements of the ontology and on the other hand, the knowledge by presence and unity of known and knower are two epistemic theories which all of them support each other in one single base stone, existence. Therefore, studying, analyzing and criticizing Sadra's doctrine requires an interdisciplinary and comprehensive research.

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