

# MULLA SADRA'S PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>



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## Introduction

Mulla Sadra, one of the most prominent figures in Islamic philosophy, lived during the 17th century under the Safavid dynasty. His philosophical contributions have had a profound impact on contemporary Islamic thought in Iran. In recent decades, some Muslim philosophers in Iran have sought to further develop Mulla Sadra's ideas, leading to the creation of what is now referred to as Neo-Sadraean philosophy. A stream of thought in Iran also advocates for deriving progressive political ideas based on Mulla Sadra's philosophy, with Sharif Lakzaee and his brother, Najaf Lakzaee, being key figures in this movement.

Mulla Sadra's philosophy is characterized by several core elements. While his writings are relatively clearer in comparison to other Islamic philosophers, they remain deeply complex and multidimensional. Discussing his philosophy can thus be challenging. It is also important to acknowledge that no philosopher, including Mulla Sadra, is without flaws, and his works exhibit both strengths and weaknesses.

Mulla Sadra's most notable contribution lies in his ability to challenge established philosophical theories and strive for innovation and reconstruction within the framework of Islamic philosophy. Here, I will outline seven key advantages of his philosophy, providing a brief overview of each while placing greater emphasis on the fifth and sixth points.

## 1. Unity of Existence

Mulla Sadra's philosophy places significant emphasis on the concept of the **unity of existence** (*wahdat al-wujud*), asserting that all things are manifestations of a singular, ultimate reality. This worldview fosters a sense of harmony and interconnectedness across all aspects of reality. While parallels may be drawn between Mulla Sadra's approach to existence and that of Spinoza, Mulla Sadra's perspective is deeper and distinct in several fundamental ways.

Mulla Sadra introduced the notion of the **originality of existence**, proposing that all things emanate from God and that all of creation is merely a reflection or ray of divine light and the truth of existence. According to his philosophy, what is original and unique is the essence and existence of God.

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<sup>1</sup> To cite this essay: Gholami, R. (2024). Mulla Sadra's Philosophy, *Wisdom House*. Available at <https://www.wisdomhouse.at>

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Within his theory of the unity of existence, Mulla Sadra outlines a hierarchical understanding of reality. If existence is conceptualized as a spectrum, one end represents a weak and diminished order of existence, while the other end signifies the ultimate source and origin of all existence—God. For Mulla Sadra, perfection involves a journey from the weaker realms of existence toward the ultimate source. Since the source of existence is infinite, the pursuit of perfection is likewise infinite.

Through this framework, Mulla Sadra offers a profound way of understanding the nature of existence and the relationship between the divine and the created world, emphasizing continual progress and connection to the ultimate truth.

## 2. Transcendental Wisdom

Mulla Sadra's philosophy transcends empirical observation, delving into metaphysical and spiritual dimensions to provide a holistic understanding of existence. While he does not dismiss empirical experience as a source of knowledge, he confines it to a specific scope within his philosophical framework.

A central contribution of Mulla Sadra is his development of **Ishraqi** (Illuminationist) philosophy, which integrates mysticism with rational inquiry. He argues that mystical insights must be articulated in rational terms to be subject to critique. Without this rational translation, mystical knowledge lacks the authority to enter philosophical discourse.

In Mulla Sadra's thought, **self-refinement** plays an essential role. He posits that without purifying one's soul, an individual cannot grasp higher truths. This emphasis reflects the spiritual foundation of his philosophical approach.

Contrary to claims that Mulla Sadra's philosophy opposes **Mashaei** (Peripatetic) philosophy, he navigates a unique position between theology and philosophy. While his transcendental wisdom incorporates elements of Qur'anic and Hadith-based theology, giving it a theological inclination, it retains a level of philosophical rigor that surpasses Ishraqi philosophy. Thus, it does not completely align with either the pure philosophical nature of Mashaei thought or the theological focus of illuminated philosophy.

Mulla Sadra states: "The rulings of the real Shari'ah are not in conflict with rational, certain, and necessary knowledge. It is not a philosophy whose laws are in accordance with the book and tradition."

This assertion demonstrates his commitment to rational interpretation. He does not accept all interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah uncritically; instead, he strives to offer rational explanations for these sources.

From this perspective, there is no contradiction between religion and reason in Mulla Sadra's philosophy—specifically, between his rational interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah and reason itself. He emphasizes that during philosophical inquiry, one must temporarily suspend personal beliefs to ensure objective reasoning. Philosophers may hold certain faiths, but these must not influence their philosophical pursuits. This principle underscores the integrity and universality of philosophical activity in Mulla Sadra's framework.

## 3. Spiritual Journey

Mulla Sadra's philosophy provides a comprehensive framework for individuals to embark on a spiritual journey toward self-realization and inner perfection. Through cultivating self-awareness and deep reflection, one can establish a profound connection to the source of existence.

The **four journeys** in Mulla Sadra's philosophy are as follows:

- Journey from people to the source of existence (God)
- Journey with God to God
- Journey from God to people with God
- Journey (living) among people before God

Mahdi Haeri Yazdi, in his explanation of these mystical journeys, considers them inseparable from the **four intellectual journeys**, emphasizing their interconnected nature.

Placing Mulla Sadra's philosophy within the framework of these four mystical journeys is one of his major innovations, effectively linking mysticism and philosophy. In Mulla Sadra's view, the entire universe operates within these four stages. Philosophy, as a discipline, aims to understand the universe in its reality, encompassing both its mystical and rational dimensions. Therefore, Mulla Sadra structured his philosophy around these interwoven mystical and intellectual journeys, offering a unified approach to understanding existence

#### **4. Integration of Knowledge Sources**

Mulla Sadra's philosophy integrates Islamic mysticism and the Quran with reason and proof, providing a comprehensive perspective that resonates with Islamic teachings. This synthesis allows for deeper thought and the resolution of some challenging philosophical problems.

However, using religious sources in philosophy does not necessarily mean exiting from the philosophical realm. It is crucial that a philosopher does not use religious sources in detail without critical and reasonable research. This is a great truth: religions and metaphysics can open some super important perspectives for philosophers. I think there is no philosophy in history (even modern philosophies) that has not borrowed from religions.

Compared to other religions, Islam is committed to rationality in its teachings, and Mulla Sadra cleverly used Islamic sources to solve philosophical dilemmas. It is interesting and useful to mention that the synergism of Islamic teachings and Sadra's philosophy has made his philosophy more popular than previous philosophies, especially the Mashaei philosophy, in the Shiite Muslim society.

#### **5. Al-Harkat al-Jowharī**

Mulla Sadra introduced a significant philosophical concept known as "Substantial Motion" (Al-Harkat al-Jowharī). This idea is a foundation of his dynamic and innovative philosophical system called "Transcendent Theosophy" (al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah). Substantial Motion posits that all substances are in a constant state of transformation. Unlike the traditional Aristotelian view that only non-essential properties change while the essence of things remains static, Mulla Sadra demonstrated that substances themselves are in a continuous process of intrinsic movement and evolution.

He argued that this motion is not merely accidental but substantial, meaning that the essence of a substance is dynamic. This leads to his doctrine that existence is a single, continuous gradation of being, with more

complex beings evolving from simpler ones over time. In this framework, all changes in the world are expressions of a unique reality undergoing substantial motion.

Mulla Sadra's theory of movement is progressive and revolutionary because it integrates various philosophical traditions—including Islamic theology, mysticism, and the philosophies of predecessors like Avicenna and Suhrawardi—into a coherent metaphysical system that places movement and change at the very heart of reality. This concept has profound implications for understanding the nature of the universe, the process of becoming, and the dynamic relationship between God and creation. It suggests that the universe is not static but is constantly evolving, with each being participating in a grand cosmic movement toward perfection.

Additionally, the theory of Substantial Motion has a transformative role in two other areas: the quality of the emergence of the soul and its connection with the body, as well as the explanation of the relationship between perfection and resurrection (Ma'ad).

## **6. The Soul-Body Relationship**

Mulla Sadra had profound views on the soul, believing it to be a substance that is essentially independent (spiritual survival) but requires matter for its action (physical occurrence). The soul, according to him, is attached to the body and governs it. In other words, Mulla Sadra posited that initially, humans are purely physical beings, and the soul forms in connection with the body through a process, ultimately surviving after the body's death.

Mulla Sadra believed that the human soul is brought into being with the body, starting as prime matter full of potentiality. Through a process called substantial motion, it evolves from a vegetative soul to an animal soul and finally to a human soul. This theory led him to present a philosophical proof for physical resurrection (Ma'ad), a significant departure from the views of other philosophers and the dualism of Descartes.

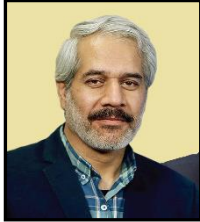
Notably, even great philosophers like Avicenna struggled to rationally prove physical resurrection and eventually turned to faith for this proof. Mulla Sadra, however, argued that the faculties of intellect and imagination are incorruptible. He used this theory to explain divine rewards and punishments and the physical resurrection.

His philosophical perspective on the soul was deeply intertwined with his interpretations of the Holy Quran, theology, and the narrations of prophets and Imams. Mulla Sadra endeavored to show that it is possible to derive a progressive interpretation from the core of the Quran and Islamic narrations, illustrating deep truths about the soul and its journey.

## **7. Social Theory**

Although Mulla Sadra, like some philosophers before him, such as Farabi, did not dedicate an important part of his thought system to practical wisdom, general principles in the social field can be derived from his theories. However, in my opinion, our use of Mulla Sadra in the social arena does not go beyond these general principles. While a realistic view of society and its complex problems is absent in Mulla Sadra's philosophy, it is possible to build a social theory based on his philosophical framework.

# PRIVILEGES OF MULLA SADRA'S PHILOSOPHY, WITH AN EMPHASIS ON HIS SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES<sup>3</sup>



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Sadr al-Muta'allihin Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra, was born in 1571 AD and died in 1640 AD, according to the famous tradition. He is one of the great Iranian thinkers who was born in Shiraz.

This great professor of philosophy studied with prominent scholars such as Sheikh Bahā'i and Mirdamad during the Safavid era and reached high levels of knowledge. Mulla Sadra's scientific achievement is *al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah* (Transcendent Wisdom). The *Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah* is the philosophical system of Mulla Sadra, which is based on detailed studies and research that he carried out over the years.

Mulla Sadra is the founder of Transcendent Wisdom, a philosophical system rooted in his extensive studies and research. This wisdom was founded by Mulla Sadra in the 17th century, and after one or two centuries, it spread in seminaries and was taught as a philosophy textbook. This is one of the main schools of Islamic philosophy that extends the life of philosophy in Iran and even the Islamic world. If we do not exaggerate, the study of the philosophy texts of Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Suhrawardi, and Khajjah Nasir is necessary to understand the philosophy of Mulla Sadra.

The *Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah* has its roots in the past of the Islamic philosophical stream in Iran, incorporating the legacy of earlier philosophical schools. By studying Mulla Sadra's sources, we can trace the influence of philosophical thinking before him. This issue, especially the sources of his intellectual system, can be discussed separately. To introduce Mulla Sadra's school of *Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah*, we can start with him.

## **Mulla Sadra's Intellectual Development and Substantial Contributions**

One of the significant topics in Mulla Sadra's intellectual system is *al-Harkat al-Jowharī* (Substantial Motion). It can be said that he himself underwent a substantial motion and voluntary journey in the creation of this wisdom until he reached this point. Similarly, Mulla Sadra, based on his theory of "Multiplicity in

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<sup>3</sup> To cite this essay: Lakzaee, Sh. (2024). Privileges of Mulla Sadra's Philosophy, with an Emphasis on his Socio-Political Issues, *Wisdom House*. Available at <https://www.wisdomhouse.at>

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unity and unity in multiplicity," navigated through many multiplicities to achieve unity in his intellectual system.

This idea applies not only to Mulla Sadra but also, in my opinion, to his followers and his system of transcendental wisdom. When we examine this scholarly figure, it becomes evident that we are not dealing with a static and uniform intellectual and scientific persona. At the very least, we encounter three phases of Mulla Sadra's intellectual development, based on his surviving works: a young Mulla Sadra, a middle-aged Mulla Sadra, and an older Mulla Sadra or Sadr al-Muta'allihin.

Throughout his approximately seven decades of life, largely dedicated to knowledge and philosophical thought, he made significant contributions to the prosperity and advancement of philosophy in Iran. However, the different periods of his life are clearly distinguishable. Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, a contemporary scholar of supreme wisdom, divides Mulla Sadra's life into five periods, excluding the first decade, which covers his birth, upbringing, and the material and spiritual development of his childhood. The remaining four periods are analyzed based on his four spiritual journeys, which is also the theme of his book *al-Asfar al-Arba'ah*.

Although I do not intend to delve into this discussion now, Professor Javadi Amoli's perspective is highly respectable. I propose a three-phase classification based on Mulla Sadra's books and intellectual works. This framework allows us to understand Mulla Sadra's philosophical and political discussions in the context of his intellectual development. This approach is common among Western thinkers but has not been widely applied to Muslim philosophers.

Therefore, we are not facing a single, uniform Mulla Sadra. His works vary in level and should not be approached in the same way. It is crucial to distinguish his specialized works on transcendental wisdom from his early writings. Similarly, some of his works, especially his commentaries on the philosophical works of others, should also be treated separately.

Among his most important contributions is the monumental 7–9 volume collection *Al-Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah fi 'l-Asfar al-'Aqliyyah al-Arba'ah* (Transcendental Wisdom in Four Intellectual Journeys). This work explains the system of transcendental wisdom, critiques and evaluates the viewpoints of other thinkers, and serves as a philosophical encyclopedia.

Additionally, his other works, such as *Al-Shawahid al-Rububiyyah fi al-Manahij al-Sulukiyyah*, especially the fifth part dealing with political philosophy, are considered summaries or abstracts of the 9-volume collection *Al-Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah*.

### **Understanding Mulla Sadra's Intellectual System**

To understand Mulla Sadra's intellectual system and delve into transcendental wisdom in detail, students often begin with introductory discussions in his works. These texts serve as entry points into Islamic philosophy and Mulla Sadra's transcendental wisdom.

In addition to his philosophical compositions, his spiritual interpretations hold special significance. Works such as *Sharh Usul Kafi* and *Mafatih al-Ghaib*, written towards the end of his life, are particularly important. Moreover, some of his social and political works, including *3 Asl*, *Kasr al-Asnam al-Jahiliyyah*, *Iqaz an-Naimin*, *Al-Mazahir al-Ilahiyyah*, and *Mulla Sadra's Masnawi*, are also noteworthy.

Mulla Sadra's extensive body of work can be categorized into three main types:

### 1. **Philosophical Works.**

These include *Al-Asfar al-Arba'ah*, *Mabda wa Ma'ad*, *Al-Shawahid al-Rububiyyah fi al-Manahij al-Sulukiyyah*, *'Arshiyyah*, *Sharh al-Hidayah al-Athiriyyah*, *Taliqat al-Shefa*, and *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, among others.

### 2. **Philosophical, Political, and Social Works.**

This category encompasses works such as *3 Asl*, *Kasr al-Asnam al-Jahiliyyah*, *Iqaz an-Naimin*, *Al-Mazahir al-Ilahiyyah*, and *Masnawi*.

### 3. **Philosophical, Exegetical, and Hadith Works.**

These include *Tafsir Al-Quran Al-Karim* in seven volumes, *Sharh Usul al-Kafi*, and *Mafatih al-Ghayb*.

Additionally, Mulla Sadra authored a work titled *Shawahid al-Rububiyyah*, distinct from *Al-Shawahid al-Rububiyyah fi al-Manahij al-Sulukiyyah*. In *Shawahid al-Rububiyyah*, he presents 487 of his intellectual innovations, making it a reliable and important contribution to his corpus.

Today, discussions about the social and political implications of Mulla Sadra's transcendental wisdom are gaining prominence. His works, especially the three types mentioned above, are being revisited and studied from the perspective of political philosophy. New questions have emerged in this field, sparking extensive debates and reinterpretations.

Although Mulla Sadra's body of work exceeds 50 volumes, particularly in the domain of political philosophy, there has been relatively little exploration of this aspect. This represents a new chapter in the study of his thought, prompting further analysis and conversations about his contributions to philosophy and beyond.

## **The Three Phases of Mulla Sadra's Life**

During the Safavid era, Mulla Sadra identified significant gaps in Islamic philosophy and sought to establish a new philosophical system. This endeavor evolved through three stages, reflecting the intellectual, scientific, and social phases of his life.

### 1. **First Period: Acquiring Knowledge of Past Philosophical Traditions**

The initial phase of Mulla Sadra's life was dedicated to studying foundational knowledge. He devoted himself to understanding various philosophical schools and the prevalent knowledge of his era. This period, which can be regarded as Mulla Sadra's "youthful phase," was marked by an intense focus on learning and acquiring wisdom from earlier traditions. During this period, Mulla Sadra became acquainted with the intellectual sources and prominent thinkers of the Islamic world, including Farabi, Avicenna, Suhrawardi, and Ibn Arabi.



## 2. Second Period: Formulating Transcendental Wisdom

The second phase of Mulla Sadra's life involved the creation of his philosophical system, known as transcendental wisdom (*Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah*). This period saw the introduction of a new research plan aimed at addressing the gaps he observed in Islamic philosophy. Mulla Sadra sought to carve new avenues within the philosophical discourse, enriching both intellectual thought and the broader cultural life of Iran. He began developing these ideas during his exile in Kahak and later continued them in Shiraz, building a philosophical system that remains influential. Of course, Mulla Sadra's time in Kahak is also regarded as a period of his exile.

## 3. Third Period: Deepening and Adapting His Philosophical System to Societal Issues

In the final phase of his life, Mulla Sadra applied his philosophical insights to address societal issues. His critiques and evaluations of social conditions are evident in works such as *Kasr al-Asnam al-Jahiliyyah* and *3 Asl*, written in Farsi. During this period, he extensively referenced Islamic primary sources, including the Qur'an and Hadith, offering interpretations rich with social and political insights.

In this phase, Mulla Sadra explored the relationship between religion and philosophy, as well as intellect (*al-Aql*), esoteric insight, and revelation. He critiqued superficial mysticisms and false ideologies prevalent in society while striving to integrate spiritual, philosophical, and societal dimensions into his work.

### The Focal Point of Mulla Sadra's Philosophy: Humanity

Mulla Sadra placed humanity at the center of his political discussions. At the beginning of his seminal work *al-Asfar al-Arba'ah*, he defines theoretical wisdom as the pursuit of truth and practical wisdom as the emulation of divine morality. His philosophy addresses both the material welfare of this world (*Dunya*) and the spiritual salvation in the Hereafter (*Ma'ad*).

This human-centered perspective, which began with Mulla Sadra, has been further developed by contemporary philosophers such as Allameh Tabataba'i, Imam Khomeini, Professor Motahari, and Allameh Javadi Amoli. Notably, Allameh Javadi Amoli reinterprets humanity as *Hayyehe Motalleh*—a "divinely thinking living being"—rather than the traditional *Hayawan Natiq* (rational animal). This reinterpretation extends to the social and political domains, emphasizing human dignity, freedom, and creativity in shaping society.

### Key Themes in Mulla Sadra's Thought

Mulla Sadra's intellectual system highlights essential themes such as construction, creation, and human movement. His works, particularly the fourth article of *Mabda wa Ma'ad*, the fifth part of *Al-Shawahid al-Rububiyyah*, and *Kasr al-Asnam* and *3 Asl*, explore the interplay between human intellectual journeys and their societal implications. In fact, Mulla Sadra views the first step in true religiosity and reform as cleansing society of superstitions, moving beyond mere religious rituals and manifestations, and deepening religious knowledge, which should then be applied to politics and society.



One of his notable contributions is the analysis of the relationship between the soul and the body. Describing this relationship as "physical occurrence and spiritual survival," Mulla Sadra considers religion the "soul of politics." This idea is elaborated in the fifth chapter of *Mabda wa Ma'ad* and in *Al-Mazahir al-Ilahiyyah*.

Mulla Sadra's contributions to philosophy, especially his emphasis on the integration of religion and politics, have influenced modern thought. His political philosophy has been further examined in works like *Transcendent Political Wisdom* and *Political Philosophy of Sadr al-Muta'allihin*.

These perspectives offer new insights into the political, social, and intellectual dimensions of human society, warranting greater attention and discussion. Mulla Sadra's philosophy continues to inspire debates on the intersection of spirituality, intellect, and societal well-being, presenting a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of human existence.

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