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## RESEARCH ARTICLE | SPECIAL ISSUE: PHILOSOPHY

# Mulla Sadra on Beauty and Art<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Using light as a conceptual metaphor for his main philosophical framework, Mulla Sadra introduces some mystical-philosophical principles such as principality of existence, its gradation, unity, and substantial movement. By applying these principles on aesthetics, Mulla Sadra achieved some aesthetical principles such as the principality of beauty, its gradation, and unity. Having these principles in ontology, aesthetics, and regarding some anthropological principle to confront the complicated problems of art, it is reasonable to construct notions such as angelic art and satanic, wrathful, and carnal pseudo-art. The first is the result of a person's emanation who reached high levels of existence; others are due to existential emanations of those who have existential deficiencies. This paper shows that similar to art, love is also of four kinds.

**Keywords:** Art, Beauty, Mulla Sadra, Angelic Art, satanic-pseudo Art

## Introduction

Mulla Sadra acknowledges the consistency of mysticism, philosophy, religion, and intellect, and as a systematic philosopher, wants to put them in a harmonized structure. He does not face a single problem in a single field of philosophy. Rather, he regards thought as a web with numerous ties, one should construct in his mind to represent the world as it is. So, there is no wonder if one finds his philosophical contribution in various areas,

such as theology, ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, mind, and action.

His philosophy has a hierarchal construction, in which some ontological principles such as principality of existence, its unity, simplicity, gradation, gradual intensity, and its being equivalence to perfection make the heart and others are their entailments. By employing ontological principles in aesthetics, Mulla Sadra established principles such as

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on two former essays I have written in Persian on Mulla Sadra's theory about beauty and art. Speaking at Paderborn University made it plain that I need a new plan for presenting this theory to non-Persian students. The article tries to introduce his ontological principles and then their aesthetical implications. I hope this can help in exposing the core concept.

gradation and gradual intensity of beauty. We can divide his discussion on beauty and art into three parts:

1. Ontological: Deals with the existence and nature of beauty;
2. Epistemological: Examines how human beings know and taste beauty;
3. Practical: Explores the relationship between a piece of art and its creator, the artist.

In the following, I will briefly introduce Mulla Sadra's main ontological principles. Then, I discuss the application of these principles to aesthetics. Finally, I will explicate how it is possible to construct notions such as divine art and divine artist in the framework of his philosophy.

## 1. Mulla Sadra's Ontological Principles

### 1-1. The Principality of Existence (*asalat al-wujud*)

This principle is the kernel of Mulla Sadra's philosophy that needs to be explained more thoroughly. One of the foundations of his entire philosophy is Ibn Sina's principle concerning human knowledge of unity and multiplicity (see Akbari, 2012). Ibn Sina differentiates two stages of humans' knowledge- conception (*tasawwur*) and definition (*ta'rif*)- about unity and multiplicity (Avicenna, 2005: 80). In the stage of conception, the imagination conceives multiplicity and then comes the role of the intellect for grasping unity based on what

imagination has conceived. In this phase, this is imagination that is more familiar with multiplicity. In the second phase, the intellect knows unity as a basic notion, and then by using it, defines multiplicity. So in this stage, this is the intellect that is more familiar with unity.

The first phase, in which mind ascends from imagination to intellect, attracted Mulla Sadra's attention. Imagination understands multiplicity, and then the understanding of unity takes place at the level of intellect. In other words, knowing unity depends on the intensification of human epistemic faculties. One, who is at the level of imagination, is familiar with multiplicity, and he needs to ascend to the level of intellect to know unity. Understanding reality as something Multiple is a low-level understanding. Imagination brings into account the limited nonexistence, grasped by the comparison of beings on different levels of existence. Intellect proves that nothingness does not exist to be the basis of multiplicity, and reveals that unity is the nature of reality.<sup>2</sup>

Paying attention to Muslim philosophers' thoughts about existence and quiddity exposes the centrality of this principle in Mulla Sadra's philosophy. They believe that quiddity and existence are origins of multiplicity and unity. Quiddities are different from each other, but existence is a univocal concept. Learning this doctrine from his philosophical ancestors, Mulla Sadra came to the belief that human beings recognize quiddities by imagination, which is the epistemic faculty for grasping

<sup>2</sup>Mulla Sadra asseverates that multiplicity does not exist. He says: The multiple with respect to multiplicity does not have any existence but in the consideration (*'I'tibar*) of the intellect. (Mulla Sadra, 1981b: 92)

multiplicity, and the univocal meaning of existence by the intellect, which is the epistemic faculty for understanding unity.

At first, like other philosophers and theologians such as Mirdamad (2002, 132) and Davani (2002, 129), Mulla Sadra was an adherent of the principality of quiddity for possible beings. But through divine inspiration he recognized that his imagination was the obstacle in the way of his intellect to know the reality as it is. He was grasping multiplicity (quiddities) in a low-level knowledge by using imagination. Ascending to the intellect, the epistemic leader, he accepted that reality is existence and not quiddities

Sentences such as “this wood exists”, which consist of a subject (this wood) and a predicate (exists), guided Farabi, to separate existence from quiddity. This differentiation led to further philosophical problems, such as the conflict between language scheme and perception. When I see a piece of wood, I perceive one entity, but my language scheme divides it into two notions: wood and existence. One simplistic solution is maintaining the twofoldness of wood, which necessitates the improperness of perception. Another solution is accepting the unity of the wood, which requires the inappropriateness of our language scheme. Both of these solutions will lead to skepticism. By putting perception away, we lose our epistemic guarantee of the external world. On the other hand, language is the mirror of thought, and thinking of it as the cause of the mistake, will lead us to the same problem.

Muslim philosophers' solution came from recognizing the ability of minds to extract different notions from a single reality. For example, the mind can extract being one, being

material, being made of wood, being made by human beings, being used for writing, and so on, from a pencil. The same happens in the case of quiddity and existence.

Yet, we encounter another problem. Is there wood in reality or existence? Does reality consist of wood, table, wall, sky, and ... or it consists of the existence of these things? In answering these questions, Muslim philosophers have divided into two major schools: Those who accepted the principality of quiddity and those who accepted the principality of existence.

- a) Principality of quiddity: According to the proponents of this school, such as Suhrawardi and Dashtaki, the reality is composed of different quiddities, and existence is merely a mental notion grasped by our minds.
- b) Principality of existence: According to the proponents of this school, the reality is composed of existence, and what we call wood, wall, table, and ... are only notions that our minds extract from existence.

One can find many arguments in support of the latter theory. Mulla Sadra, as its founder, has provided more than 19 arguments. One can find fifteen explicit arguments in his very brief treatise under the title of the principality of existence in the instauration (ja'l) (Mulla Sadra, 1975: 182-191).

## 1-2. The Simplicity of Existence (bisat al-wujud)

In Mulla Sadra's philosophical framework, it is easy to provide an argument for the simplicity of existence. If existence has any components,

it will be either existence, quiddity, or nothingness.

- a) Nothingness does not exist to be its component;
- b) According to the principality of existence, quiddity is posterior in rank to the existence (Mulla Sadra, 1981b: 288), and it cannot be its external component;
- c) Existence cannot be a component of itself.

All these three possible suppositions are false; hence existence has no components and is simple.

### 1-3. The Unity of Existence (*wahdat al-wujud*)

Mulla Sadra admits the univocity of existence, a theory among peripatetic philosophers saying that existence has a singular meaning (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 1, 35, 120, 244; id. 1975, 10). Adding an epistemological principle to the univocity of existence, its principality, and simplicity, led Mulla Sadra to accept its unity. This epistemological principle maintains that it is impossible to abstract one singular concept from existents who do not share anything in common (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 1, 35; vol. 4, 261). Existence has a singular meaning, and there are different existences in the world, so they have something in common outside our minds. As the simplicity of existence denies any components for existence, it confirms that the shared part of different existents is not a component of them, but their whole reality. It means that one reality, the existence, has filled the entire world.

### 1-4. The Gradation of Existence (*tashkik al-wujud*)

If existence, as a single reality, has filled the entire world, then how can we explain the differences among beings? Mulla Sadra, who emphasizes the authenticity of sensory beliefs, relies on the gradation of existence to solve the problem. This principle states that the differences among beings, like their resemblance, go back to existence itself.

As existence is equivalent (*musawiq*) to perfection (*kamal*) and goodness (*khayr*) (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 1, 341), its gradation requires that every level, in its unity and simplicity, includes the perfections of its subordinate existential levels, and has additional perfections too (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 1, 261). So, the gradation of existence is another expression of the gradation of goodness and perfection.

Mulla Sadra's ground for this principle was the famous light metaphor. In his opinion, light is a non-complex reality with different illuminations; some of them are bright, and some gloomy (Mulla Sadra, 1983, 37; id., 1981a, 228). The word *tashkik* used by Mulla Sadra has an important significance. In Arabic, the meaning of this word links to doubt. Seeing people use the word light for what radiates from a candle and the sun, you find yourself in the position of doubt. How is it possible to call both of them light, given huge differences between them?

Gradation in English recalls another metaphor. We call a student in an elementary school and a professor at a university literate, despite huge differences between them. Coming back to our discussion, God and a tree, according to Mulla Sadra, are both existence, despite their gigantic differences.

### **1-5. The Intensification of Existence (ishtidad al-wujud)**

Mulla Sadra accepted the substantial movement to explain changes in the world gloomy (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 3, 101). If existence is principal, then any motion cannot be attributed to quiddity by itself, but through a mediator: existence (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 8, 368). Existential changes provoke changes in quiddity and attributes. Mulla Sadra divided existence into mutable and immutable (Mulla Sadra, 2008: 25). Material beings are mutable existences that have existential intensification by moving toward proper perfection designed for them.

## **2. Mulla Sadra's Aesthetical Principles**

As I mentioned before, the hierarchy of Mulla Sadra's philosophy allowed him to apply the ontological principles in his philosophy on other realms such as anthropology and aesthetics. In this section, I will explain how he gained some aesthetical principles by using those ontological ones.

### **2-1. The Principality of Beauty**

Because of the equivalency of beauty and existence, the principality of existence entails the principality of beauty. God is the highest existence and the highest beauty (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 2, 77; id. 1981a, 145), and other beings constitute its lower levels. Speaking of God as a beautiful existence does not imply that beauty is an accident, but it is an intrinsic property for Him (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 2, 78; *ibid.*, vol. 6, 134-135). In Mullah Sadra's opinion, what fills the entire world, has all perfect attributes, including knowledge, life, and beauty (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 7, 235). Using existence, as a concept to refer to reality

has a communicative function, and goes back to its familiarity for most people. But, ontologically addressing, principality of knowledge, life, or beauty makes sense too. In the discourse based on the dichotomy of existence and quiddity, philosophers prefer to use principality of existence, but in other discourses, it's not peculiar to admit principality of beauty, goodness, or life.

### **2-2. The Unity of Beauty**

If beauty and existence are equivalent, then they have the same rules. Existence is principal and one, and so the beauty. Mulla Sadra introduced personal and gradational unity of existence as two different, but related theories, involving the unity of existence. The first considers God the only existence in the world. Other beings are His manifestations and without any independent descriptions. They are like mirrors that cannot depict, but only the image of others. In the latter, as we explained before, Sadra accepts a mixture of unity and multiplicity. Existence is one and many at the same time. Following two theories about the unity of existence, there are two theories about the unity of beauty in Mulla Sadra's philosophy: gradational and personal. The first says that beauty is one and many at the same time. God, as the origin of the Universe, is more beautiful than others (3), and they are in harmony with Him because God created all of them. (4) The beauty of every existence corresponds to its existential level.

According to the personal unity of beauty, there is only one beauty in the world, namely God, and other beauties are His manifestations, His shadows, which need Him. (5) Using the metaphor of mirrors, they only depict God's beauty.



### **2-3. The Intensification of Beauty**

Mulla Sadra acknowledges two types of intensification of beauty. In human beings, this is based on free will. If a person recognizes the divine plan for his life and acts accordingly, his beauty will grow, but by opposing God's plan through listening to evil temptations and neglecting intellect, he will drown in the sea of corporeal desires, and his beauty won't improve. Instead of entering the beautiful world of light, he finds himself captured in darkness. The intensification of other creatures who do not have explicitly free will, is almost non-volitionally. Note that from Mulla Sadra's perspective, all beings have free will, but like existence, it comes in degrees. This goes back to Mullah Sadra's opinion about the equivalency of existence with all perfect attributes including free will.

### **2-4. The Criteria of Beauty**

Noticing layers of Mulla Sadra's philosophy, we can distinguish different criteria for beauty:

a) Those, at the level of imagination, regard proportionality and excellent composition as the criterion for beauty. If our epistemic faculties cannot observe multiplicity, then constructing notions, such as proportionality and composition, is impossible. Mulla Sadra connected beauty observed in beautiful faces to subtlety, the proportionality of faces parts, and excellent composition (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 7, 235). Addressing dance, he acknowledged the same criterion for its beauty: The excellent composition of movements, which makes observers comprehend it as one activity (Mulla Sadra, 1975: 63).

b) For those at the intellect level, the criterion of beauty is existence, so every

existence is beautiful in their eyes. In the framework of existential gradation, God is the most beautiful existent, and other creatures in the beauty chain follow Him. In the framework of personal unity of existence, God is the only beautiful existent, and other beings mirror His beauty.

Here, we meet the important question that if all beings are beautiful, how do we perceive ugliness? We should recall the function of imagination. Ugliness is perceived by imagination, a lower epistemic faculty that permits to perceive nothingness, not as a real object, but as an imaginative concept. A person who uses intellect grasps unity, not multiplicity, and asserts loudly that there is no ugliness in the world (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 1, 303).

### **2-5. The Way to Know Beauty**

Mulla Sadra offers several arguments to show that the conceptual knowledge of existence unveils only some aspects of its reality (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 1, 37-38, 53, 61; id, 1975, 10), so for a more comprehensive understanding of existence, we require existential presence (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 1, 37). Granting the equivalency of existence and beauty, the same arguments indicate the deficiency of conceptual knowledge of beauty. Recognizing the need for existential presence, we should be aware of the correlation between this kind of knowledge and existence in their weakness and strength. As a result, the difference in the perception of beauty refers either to epistemic subjects or epistemic objects. One, who is at the level of imagination, differs in knowing beauty, from one, who is at the level of intellect. Furthermore, the role of presuppositions,

familial, and social training is important. Nations, with high-level knowledge, customs, and arts, have a higher grasp of beauties than those who are weak in these features. He uses the metaphor of the heart to explain the reason: Former nations have softer hearts (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, vol. 7, 172).

### 3. Reconstructing Mulla Sadra's Theory of Art

Although Mullah Sadra did not offer any theory about human's art, his discussions on the congruence between cause and effect, existence and its levels, human beings' epistemic faculties, and human beings' existential levels, form the basis for constructing his theory about it. Let me draw a brief outline of his theory.

1. Whoever observes goodness or perceives beauty, will enjoy, and will be pleased.
2. God created human beings in such a way that their existences can transmit, within existential intensification, from being an animal to the highest levels, close to angels.
3. Superficially, all human beings are human, but they differ according to their existential levels: Some are among brutal animals like wolves, some among animals such as cows and sheep, some among devils, and some among angles.
4. Every human being loves what is similar to him. People are numerous in terms of existential levels, so are the objects of love.
5. Considering 4 and 3, there are at least four general categories of beloved things, corresponding to four general categories of human beings:

**A)** The highest beloved of a carnal soul (al-nafs al-shahwi) is to exist forever, without any obstacles that lead to the reduction of his

pleasures, to achieve his desires, and to enjoy pleasures. This soul is forever in love with eating, drinking, and sexual desires.

**B)** The highest beloved of a wrathful (al-nafs al-ghazabi) soul is to be eternal, to rule over others, to defeat his enemies, and to take revenge from them.

**C)** The highest beloved of a demonic soul (al-nafs al-shaytani) is deception through presenting false propositions as true ones. This soul loves deception, temptation, false promises, and void desires forever.

**D)** The highest beloved of an angelic soul (al-nafs al-malaki) is to know the truth as it is. He believes in God, the angels, Holy Books, prophets, and the Day of Judgment. He has an ascetic life, is interested in praying God, and ponders God's creatures and kingdom. This soul is constantly in love with divine knowledge and companionship with God.

6. According to 1, a person creates something he loves. If what he desires, exists, he tries to achieve it, and if it does not, he tries to create it.

7. Causes and effects have congruence. Every piece of art that an artist creates is in congruence with him.

8. There are four general types of art, following different levels of existence. Divine art, the manifestation of an angelic soul, is a real art, and others are pseudo-arts.

**A)** Carnal Art: Those who are in the level of the carnal existence create this pseudo-art. Its content refers to eating, sleeping, and having sexual desires. Its purpose is to encourage people to obtain these things, to facilitate access to them, to show the ways to reach them, to identify obstacles that exist in the path, and to remove them.

**B) Savage Art:** Those who are in the level of bestial existence create this pseudo-art. Its content refers to those things connected to the faculty of anger. Its purpose is to encourage people to defeat enemies, achieve leadership by any means possible, facilitate access to them, show the ways to gain them, identify obstacles that exist in the path, and remove them.

**C) Demonic Art:** Those who have a demonic soul create this pseudo-art. Its content is deception, lying, decorating falsehood to be shown as truth, and vice versa. In carnal and savage arts, the emphasis is on anger and lust, but the demonic soul prepares justification for them. Its purpose is to encourage people to do these things, facilitate access to them, show the ways to gain them, identify obstacles that exist in the path, and remove them.

**D) Angelic Art:** God has created human beings to be on a journey toward him, and for this purpose, He has made angels their helpers. So it is appropriate to name this art, divine art. Its content is to pay attention to the noble goal of human life, stay away from the devil, be dissatisfied with carnal and savage lives, help others for having a social journey toward God, and so on. Its purpose is to bring human beings to the goal God has planned for them -being close to God-, facilitate the way of reaching it, identify obstacles that exist in the path, and remove them.

These preliminaries reveal another point. Similar to art, love is also of four kinds: carnal, savage, demonic, and angelic. Divine love, which brings human beings closer to God, is true love. Others are pseudo-loves that make human beings go astray.


Using a metaphor, Mulla Sadra names estimation the Satan's army in the interior part of human beings' existence. Contrary to the intellect, estimation turns human beings away from the perfection they deserve and manipulates them into the darkness of falsehood.

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## هنر و زیبایی از دیدگاه ملاصدرا

رضا اکبری<sup>۱</sup> 

**چکیده:** ملاصدرا با به‌کارگیری استعاره نور به‌عنوان چارچوب اصلی فلسفه خود، اصولی فلسفی-عرفانی همچون اصالت، اشتداد، وحدت و حرکت جوهری وجود را معرفی می‌کند. با به‌کارگیری این اصول در زیبایی‌شناسی ملاصدرا به اصولی زیبایی‌شناختی همچون اصالت، اشتداد و وحدت زیبایی دست می‌یابد. مواجهه ساختن اصول وجودشناختی و زیبایی‌شناختی ملاصدرا-در کنار برخی اصول انسان‌شناختی در فلسفه او- با مسائل پیچیده هنر این اجازه را به ما می‌دهد که به نحو معقولی از هنر مَلکی، هنرنمای شیطانی، هنرنمای غضبی و هنرنمای بهیمی سخن گفت. مورد نخست تجلی فردی است که به مراحل بالای وجود دست یافته باشد. اقسام دیگر تجلی انسان‌هایی است که نقایص وجودی دارند. این مقاله نشان می‌دهد که عشق نیز همانند هنر بر چهار قسم است.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** هنر، زیبایی، ملاصدرا، هنر مَلکی، هنرنمای شیطانی



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