

Mullā Şadrā's Perspective on Proof of the External Material World

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ABSTRACT: The main topic in this paper is whether the true knowledge of external and material world is possible, and if it is possible how and to what extent can the extra-mental realm be achieved? Western philosophers since few centuries ago have dealt with this issue and presented several epistemological doctrines. There is an initial review of textual sources of Islamic philosophy in order to present the approach of certain Muslim philosophers like al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Bahmanyār, Suhrawardī and Naşīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī regarding this, however the focus in this essay is on Mullā Şadrā's thought and his approach to the matter. A rational and analytic method is used to address in detail all the fundamentals, both evident and obscure, of the views in question.

KEYWORDS: external world, sensual perception, material world, Mullā Şadrā.

Introduction

In everyday life we all communicate with the external world; we use means of transportation to go to work, we eat food when we are hungry, and we use a pen and paper for writing. Have we ever doubted the existence of the pen and the paper, or of the external material world in general? Contemporary Western philosophy pays close attention to knowledge of the external world, and modern thinkers have tried to discover if the material world can be known at all. If an understanding of the external world is possible, how can it

be achieved? Several philosophers have been engaged with this question, trying to find ways of proving its existence. In this article, we focus on the thought of Mullā Ṣadrā in order to review his approach to the matter. To begin, we have tried to present a report of the evolutionary journey of this discussion in the history of Islamic philosophy. We first mention al-Fārābī, and then those philosophers who have tried to build upon earlier findings. The aim is to provide an insight into the changing attitude towards this subject.

Philosophers before Mullā Ṣadrā

We begin with al-Fārābī (10th century A.H.), who believed in a theory of emanation which was inspired by the Neoplatonists. He considered that Intellect emanated from Necessary Being, and the subsequent active intellect manifests the earthly souls. Through the celestial spheres, Intellect realises the four elements of water, earth, air and fire. From this point of view, objects appear because of the movements of the celestial spheres.¹ This series of emanations indicates that al-Fārābī admits the existence of material world. He gives credit to the senses for transmitting knowledge of the external world, but argues that the real perceiver is the soul, which is affected by the external objects.² Al-Fārābī believed that we are incapable of actually knowing the objects, and simply know that there is an object with certain characteristics, such as length, breadth and depth.³ In this way he denies the ability of the soul to know the reality of material entities, yet accepts that we can know the existence of substances with physical dimensions.

Ibn Sīnā (11th century) believed that our knowledge of the reality of objects depends on our knowledge of their means and measures. He indicates that since we do not know the means and measures of objects, and know them merely through our senses, we cannot know the reality of objects.⁴ From this point of view, the external world cannot be known directly through the intellect, because the material world is composed of matter, which does not allow the objects to be known. He admits that the existence of things in the tangible world is, however, axiomatic.⁵

Bahmanyār (11th century) believed that the external world does not require proof, because material substance is perceived through the senses.⁶ He considered observed facts to be axiomatic and ‘necessary-to-accept’ propositions, and refers to the existence of the sun as an example. In addition, he intended to prove the existence of elemental material.⁷ If we take the latter as his ultimate viewpoint, we may conclude that, according to him, our knowledge of the external world is based on sense perception and achieved through intellectual reasoning.

In his discussion on the proof of the existence of substances, Ghazālī (1059-1112 A.H.) mentions that proof of the existence of all substances other than matter requires reasoning, whereas the understanding of matter is based on observation.⁸ He considers sight as the perceiver of colours and forms.⁹ He refers to our perception of the qualities of things, like the luminosity of the sun and the moon – but not to our knowledge of the existence of the sun – as instances of sensible objects.¹⁰ Ghazālī also believed that our knowledge of the external world is independent of reasoning, but provides no clarification for this claim.

Suhrawardī (1155-1190 AD) said that observation takes place by an intuitive illumination of the soul directly by the object, and not through the senses. This is the soul’s intuitive knowledge of visible things. His idea of the intuitiveness of sight is related to the apparent qualities of objects, and we know that substances, including material substance itself, are not visibly apparent. From this point of view, observation takes place through illuminative and intuitive knowledge, and not through perceptible forms, although with sensual perceptions there is no veil between the perceiver and the object perceived.¹¹

Imam Fakhr Rāzī (1149-1210 A.H.) discusses three shortcomings of sensual perceptions. Firstly, the senses are fallible, because we need a criterion to differentiate between true and false, and this is the intellect. Therefore, in order to know the qualities and accidents of the objects perceived by the

senses, we require the intellect to differentiate between true and false. Secondly, the role of the senses is to merely discern the qualities of the objects, but we cannot achieve complete certainty through the senses, because the meaning of objects may be uncertain. Therefore sensual perception cannot lead to logical certainty. Lastly, the senses perceive the qualities and accidents of objects, but it is beyond the scope of the abilities of the senses to discover what the qualities are, because relating the appearance of an external object to a specific quality is not a perception, but an intellectual judgement.¹² Generally speaking, Fakhr Rāzī provides no clarification on knowledge of the external material world.

However, Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (1201-1274 A.H.) states that most basic natural knowledge, including knowledge of the external world, is achieved through the senses, and the approach of natural philosophy requires the philosopher to trust sensual perceptions and consider them certain.¹³ He then observes that determining whether a sensual perception is true or false is a characteristic of judgement, and since sensual perceptions are independent of judgement, they cannot be determined as either true or false. Yet sometimes sensual perceptions are appended to intellectual perceptions. In this case sensual perceptions may be considered true or false based on the intellectual judgements to which they are appended. From this point of view, certainty could be defined as a 'second' judgement which indicates that the truth of the first assessment is unavoidable, since sensual perception alone cannot be certain and certainty requires truth.¹⁴ However, sensual perceptions are ultimately infallible, since they report things as they are, and it is the intellectual judgement appended to sensual perception that may be faulty.¹⁵

A Review of Mullā Ṣadrā's Approach

We now come to Mullā Ṣadrā (1572-1641 A.H.), for whom knowledge of the external world cannot be axiomatic, because the external material world requires reasoning to prove its existence. Mullā Ṣadrā tries to prove the existence of the external world by his basic philosophy, which includes the

primacy of existence, the gradation of existence and causal connection. He accordingly discusses four reasons which we here recount and then review.

The First Reason

The first reason that Mullā Ṣadrā demonstrates in order to prove the material existence of the external world is based on a gradational hierarchy of existence. He says:

If the chain of existence does not terminate with something whose consideration of existence contains a consideration of non-existence, it would continue indefinitely; hence, prime matter which is sheer potentiality and possibility would not exist, while it must exist, as you will know later.¹⁶

This very short statement is based on his major philosophical theory of transcendent theosophy, which covers the primacy of existence, the gradation of existence and causal connection. Based on his theory of the primacy of existence, everything in the external world is an instantiation of essence, because essence is principal and a real thing that has external effects. The essence of mind – which is the same as the essence of external effects – can be considered as the real cause of these effects. This means that there should be no difference between the essence of externals and the essence of mind. But can we say that there is no difference between them in terms of the sequence of effects? Can imagining the sun turn night into day? Hence, primacy pertains only to existence, which has real and essentially external instances. According to the gradation of existence, an individual unit of reality is a unity with a multiplicity of grades, and the multiple grades form the individual unit of reality.¹⁷ The third element of his transcendent theosophy is ‘causal connection.’ According to Mullā Ṣadrā, primacy belongs to ‘existence.’ Therefore, a causal connection is real only if it is an existential connection. This means that whatever issues from a cause must be the existence of the effect, and not its essence. In this way the cause gives existence

to the effect, and therefore the effect is existentially in need of the cause. The effect's need of the cause is not its inherent quality, but an accidental attribute. Mullā Ṣadrā's first reason can thus be explained as:

1. Existence is principal (due to the primacy of existence).
2. Every existent has effects (one of requirements of existence).
3. Every effect is an existent being (based on clause 1).
4. Every effect has other effects (conclusion of clauses 2 and 3).
5. Every effect is:
 - a. limited, or
 - b. unlimited (the intellectual median between affirmation and denial).
6. Matter is potential existence (based on the definition of 'matter').
7. If the chain of causes and effects had no end, there would be no matter (conclusion of clauses 5-a and 6).
8. Every accident is contingent (based on reasons of indigent possibility).
9. This contingency (in 8 above) can be related to privation, excess or other existential attributes (based on the gradation of existence).
10. Everything related to existential attributes is an existential issue (conclusion of clauses 1 and 9).
11. Contingency is an existential issue (conclusion of clauses 9 and 10).
12. The contingency of the created thing as accident (based on clause 8).
13. Every being that is the resultant accident of another being is an accident (based on the definition of 'accident').
14. Contingency is an accident (conclusion of clauses 12 and 13).
15. Every accident needs a subject (based on the definition of 'accident').
16. Contingency requires a subject (conclusion of clauses 14 and 15).

17. If the subject of a contingency is actual, two actualities must combine in a single thing (conclusion of clauses 15 and 16).
18. The combination of two actualities in a single thing is impossible (based on reasons for the impossibility of a combination of two similar things).
19. The subject of this contingency cannot be actual (conclusion of clauses 17 and 18).
20. The subject of contingency is an absolute potentiality (based on the reasons for the existence of matter).
21. Matter exists (conclusion of clauses 16 and 20).
22. The chain of causes and effects is limited (conclusion of clauses 5-a and 21).
23. Every effect is weaker than its cause (based on the reasons for particular gradations).
24. The last link in a chain is its last effect (conclusion of clauses 23 and 24).
25. The last link of a chain is the weakest being in the chain (conclusion of clauses 23 and 24).
26. Each part of the material essence is hidden from all the others (based on the definition of 'body').
27. The being whose parts are hidden from one another is the weakest being (conclusion of clauses 25 and 26).
28. The material essence is the weakest essence (conclusion of clauses 26 and 27).
29. The material essence is the last link of the chain of causes and effects (conclusion of clauses 25 and 28).
30. The material essence exists (based on clause 29).

The Second Reason

After explaining his first reason, Mullā Ṣadrā immediately goes on to the

second reason. This also follows the basics of his transcendent theosophy. That is to say, as in the First Reason, he uses the 'primacy of existence' and 'gradation.' He states:

Although this, i.e., bodily form, is a dark affair, it is among the levels of the light of existence; hence, if existence does not end in it, its non-existence will be evil and its not-making will be a constriction on the part of its innovator, which is impossible with regard to the All-Emanating Origin who is purified from imperfection and contingency, as intellectually proved.¹⁸

Mullā Ṣadrā refers here to divine attributes such as 'the All-Emanating' and 'the Generous' to explain his second reason, which can be explained as:

1. The external world has a reality (immediate axiomatic clause).
2. External reality is the reality of existence (based on reasons for the 'primacy of existence').
3. There are numerous existences in the external world (immediate axiomatic clause).
4. The numerous external existences are nothing other than the reality of existence (conclusion of clauses 2 and 3).
5. The multiplicity of external existences refers to the multiplicity of the levels of reality of existence, and the unity of external existences refers to the unity of the reality of existence (based on reasons for the gradation of existence).
6. There is a causal connection between the various levels of existence (based on reasons of particular gradation).
7. The cause is stronger than the effect (conclusion of clauses 5 and 6).
8. Every stronger level of existence is the cause of the weaker level (based on the reasons for causal connection).
9. The highest level of existence is that which is a cause but not an effect (conclusion of clauses 7 and 8).

10. Necessary Being is the cause of all other beings (based on the definition of 'Necessary Being').

11. The highest level of existence is the essence of Necessary Being (conclusion of clauses 9 and 10).

12. If Necessary Being includes parts, then either:

a. the parts are not Necessary Being, or

b. the parts are Necessary Being.

13. If the parts are Necessary Being, then either:

a. all the parts are Necessary Being, or

b. some of the parts are Necessary Being (based on clause 12-b and the intellectual division between denial and affirmation).

14. Necessary Being is unique (based on reasons for the oneness of Necessary Being).

15. We cannot say that all the parts of Necessary Being are Necessary Beings (conclusion of clauses 13-a and 14).

16. Every contingent being is in need of Necessary Being (based on the definition of Necessary Being).

17. If some parts of Necessary Being are in need of Necessary Being, then Necessary Being would be in need (conclusion of clauses 12-a and 16).

18. Necessary Being is never in need (based on the definition of Necessary Being).

19. We cannot say that some parts of Necessary Being are in need of Necessary Being (conclusion of clauses 17 and 18).

20. We cannot say that some parts of Necessary Being are contingent (conclusion of clauses 13-a and 19).

21. A complex is the totality of its parts (based on the definition of 'complex').
22. If all the parts of the Necessary Being are contingent, then Necessary Being would be contingent (conclusion of clauses 12-a and 21).
23. Necessary Being cannot be contingent (conclusion of clauses 21 and 22).
24. Necessary Being cannot be complex (conclusion of clauses 12, 13, 19, 20 and 23).
25. Every being is either:
 - a. simple, or
 - b. complex (the intellectual division between denial and affirmation).
26. Necessary Being is simple (conclusion of clauses 24 and 25).
27. If Necessary Being is limited, it has to be a complex of the presence of one thing and the absence of another (based on definition of Necessary Being).
28. Necessary Being has no limits (conclusion of clauses 24 and 27).
29. A being that is without limits is infinite (based on the definition of 'infinite').
30. Necessary Being is infinite (conclusion of clauses 28 and 29).
31. The material world has an equal tendency towards existence and non-existence.
32. That which has an equal tendency towards existence and non-existence would be contingent (based on the definition of 'contingent').
33. The material world is contingent (conclusion of clauses 31 and 32).
34. Necessary Being can grant existence to every contingent thing.
35. Deprivation takes place when a being can grant existence upon another being but does not (based on the definition of 'existential deprivation').

36. It would be a deprivation if Necessary Being did not grant existence to the material world (conclusion of clauses 34 and 35).

37. Deprivation is due to imperfection.

38. Imperfection means limitation (based on the definition of 'imperfection').

39. Deprivation is caused by limitation (conclusion of clauses 37 and 38).

40. Necessary Being lacks nothing (conclusion of clauses 30 and 38).

41. Necessary Being cannot cause deprivation (conclusion of clauses 39 and 40).

42. Necessary Being has granted existence upon the material world (conclusion of clauses 36 and 41).

The Third Reason

Mullā Ṣadrā bases his third reason on his theory of emanation. Explaining this he says:

... The non-emanation of this dark substance necessitates a halt of emanation at a finite number of existents, for proofs have demonstrated that existents which are subsequent in existence in an essential, causal manner are finite. Therefore, this will close the door of Mercy and Bounty to engender subsequent temporal beings, especially human souls, which are located in the chain of preparatory affairs.¹⁹

This reasoning can be explained as follows:

1. Multiplicity is either:

a. latitudinal, or

b. longitudinal (the intellectual division between denial and affirmation).

2. Latitudinal multiplicity is caused by a variety of specific forms (based on the sign of being an effect).

3. There is no difference between the specific forms of non-material entities (based on the characteristics of non-material entities).

4. Non-material entities are not included in latitudinal multiplicity (conclusion of clauses 2 and 3).
5. Non-material entities are included only in longitudinal multiplicity (conclusion of clauses 1 and 4).
6. Non-material entities are unique in type (based on clause 4).
7. If Necessary Being did not grant the material essence, the chain of beings would be limited to a longitudinal chain (conclusion of clauses 1 and 5).
8. The Divine is 'all-emanating' (based on the attribution 'all-emanating').
9. As 'all-emanating,' the Divine is required to create both latitudinal and longitudinal chains (based on clause 8).
10. Limiting the chain of beings to the longitudinal chain is contrary to being 'all-emanating' (conclusion of clauses 8 and 9).
11. The chain of beings is not limited to the longitudinal chain (conclusion of clauses 8 and 10).
12. The chain of beings includes latitudinal multiplicity as well (conclusion of clauses 1 and 11).
13. A variety of specific forms exists (conclusion of clauses 8 and 12).
14. Material essences are the ground of the variety of specific forms (based on the compatibility of cause and effect).
15. The material essence exists (conclusion of clauses 13 and 14).

The Fourth Reason

Mullā Ṣadrā also bases his fourth reason on certain basics of his transcendent theosophy, such as 'the gradation of existence.' He explains this as follows:

Also, if the chain of origination does not end in the bodily substance, it will necessitate the limitedness of contingent affairs to intellects; for other than intellects, such as souls, temperaments,

forms and accidents – as well as quantity, quality, where, when and others – cannot become existent except with or through a body.²⁰

The important point in this reasoning is his use of the existence of the soul for proving the existence of the material essence. To find out what Mullā Ṣadrā means by this, we must review his definition of ‘soul.’ Soul is an essence which is inherently independent of matter, but actually belongs to matter. The basis of this definition ‘belonging to matter’ is derived from the definition of the ‘whatness’ of the soul. Therefore, we cannot believe in soul but deny the existence of the matter to which the soul belongs. But the use of ‘with matter’ or ‘for matter’ in this reasoning refers to the discussion of the relationship between soul and matter. The question is whether the soul is accompanied by matter, or whether matter effects the realisation of the soul. However, his fourth reason can be explained as follows:

1. The chain of beings is either:
 - a. latitudinal or
 - b. longitudinal (the intellectual division between denial and affirmation).
2. If the chain of beings were limited to the longitudinal chain of non-material objects, the latitudinal chain of beings would not exist (based on clause 1).
3. Latitudinal multiplicity is caused by the variety of specific forms (based on the signs of being an effect).
4. If the latitudinal chain of beings did not exist, the specific forms would not exist (based on clause 3).
5. Specific forms actualise matter (based on the definition of ‘specific forms’).
6. If matter were not actualised, it would not exist (based on the concomitance of actuality and existence).
7. The soul is an essence which is independent of matter, but actually belongs to matter (based on the definition of the ‘soul’).

8. I perceive the existence of my soul (immediate axiomatic clause).
9. My soul exists (conclusion of clauses 7 and 8).
10. If matter did not exist, the soul would not exist (based on clause 7).
11. The material essence exists (conclusion of clauses 9 and 10).

Conclusion

1. Mullā Ṣadrā believes that the existence of the external material world – or the material essence – is not axiomatic and has to be logically proved.
2. He presents four reasons for proving the external material world.
3. He has focused on the logical implication between separate intellectual substances and material essence. However, the discussion on knowledge of the external world is not limited to proving the existence of the external material world, but continues with the question of how one can gain knowledge of the characteristics of the external world.

Notes

1. Hannā, al-Fakhūrī and Khalīl, al-Jar, *History of Philosophy in Muslim World*, trans. 'Abdul Muḥammad Āyatī, Tehran: Markaz Nashr Dānishgāhī, 1382 S.H., 415-416.
2. Al- Fārābī, *al-Ta'liqāt*, researched by Ja'far Āl Yāsīn, Beirut: Dār al-Manāḥil, 1408 A.H., 38-39.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Ḥusain Ibn 'Abdullāh Ibn Sinā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, researched by 'Abdulrahmān Badawī, Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmili al-Kitāb, 1973, 77.
5. *Ibid.*, 189.
6. Bahmanyār, *al-Taḥṣīl*, ed. Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, Tehran: Tehran University Publications, 1349 S.H., 308.
7. *Ibid.*, 652.
8. Abūḥamid, Ghazālī, *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifah*, researched by Sulaymān Dunyā, Tehran: Shams Tabrizi Publications, 1382 S.H., 103.
9. *Ibid.*, 352.

10. *Ibid.*, 103.
11. Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī, *Muṣannafāt*, ed. Henry Corbin and others, Tehran: Anjuman Ḥikmat wa Falsafeh-ye Iran, 1355 S.H.
12. Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, *Sharḥ ‘Uyūn al-Ḥikma (Commentary on ‘Uyūn al-Ḥikma)*, researched by Aḥmad Ḥejāzī, Qum: Mu’assiseh Imām Ṣādiq, 1373 S.H., vol. 1, 203-205.
13. Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, *Talkhīṣ al-Moḥaṣṣal*, Tehran: Tehran University Publications, 1359 S.H., 13.
14. *Ibid.*, 12-13.
15. *Ibid.*, 15.
16. Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Ibrahīm Shīrazī (Mullā Ṣadrā), *al-Ḥikma al-Muta‘āliya fī al-Asfār al-‘Aqliyya al-Arba‘a*, Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1981, vol. 5, 3.
17. The discussion of ‘the unity and multiplicity of existence’ is a complicated subject in Ṣadrā’s transcendent theosophy, and has been criticised by many theosophists. An analysis of it is beyond the scope of this article, and we simply mention that Ṣadrā gives some strong evidence supporting the multiplicity of existence in his transcendent theosophy, in which it is classified as an ‘axiomatic clause.’
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*

