



Kamal Abdul Karim Shlbei

Sadra and Hegel on

Metaphysical Essentialism

Peter Lang

This book provides a comparative study of the accounts of the relationship between essence and existence, which are provided by Sadra and Hegel respectively. Sadra is presented as having a project that is similar in scope to Hegel's own.

The author argues that while Sadra shares with Hegel the latter's rejection of essence as the positive quality of a determinate being, Sadra's characterization of essence as the negative quality of a determinate (existent) is seen as too one-sided from Hegel's perspective. This book would be primarily useful for Hegel scholars, scholars of Islamic philosophy, and those who are engaged in comparative philosophy.



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To Sadra and Hegel

Sadra and Hegel were sitting near a river on a distant island.

I was there,

Sitting between existence and essence.

Sadra said to me,

Existence is opening as a window of necessity.

Hegel said to me,

Essence is opening as a window of potentiality.

Between potentiality and necessity is a moment for me.

Am I existence?

Am I essence?

Am I a synthesis of them?!

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Introduction

Situating Mulla Sadra's philosophy within Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* raises two interrelated problems. The first one concerns the historical period in which Sadra's philosophy appeared. The second one pertains to the philosophical themes of Sadra's thought.

If we follow Hegel's historical division of the development of philosophy, Sadra, whose philosophy flourished in the seventeenth century, could be situated within Hegel's classification of "The Third Period: Modern Philosophy."¹ More precisely, it could better fit with what Hegel called the "Transition to the Modern Era."² Here we meet with Hegel's reading of Francis Bacon and Jacob Boehme, both of whom are contemporaries to Sadra.³ This account, however, conflicts with the principal themes of Sadra's philosophy. The determinate problem of Sadra's philosophy is the problematic relationship of essence and existence in its relation to God. This problem is a medieval problem, which is more related to the philosophical thinking of "The Second Period: Medieval Philosophy."⁴

Considering Sadra from the Hegelian perspective of Arabic medieval philosophy faces a problem. Although Sadra does not chronologically belong to this period, Hegel deals externally and briefly with Arabic philosophy, to which Sadra belongs. He says, "In this second period, philosophy has its locus in the Christian world; we need to refer to Arabs and Jews only in an external way, for the historical background."⁵

- 1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, 1825–1826. Volume III, Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. R. F. Brown and J. M. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), p. 83.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 3 Sadra was born in 1571, Bacon in 1561 and Boehme in 1575.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Sadra's situation with Hegel becomes further complicated if we add the fact that Sadra, whose writings are mostly in Arabic, is ethnically Persian.⁶ Sadra is thus seemingly excluded from the divisions of Hegel's history of philosophy. He lacks a philosophical spot in Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*; for he could neither properly fit within modern philosophy nor within medieval philosophy.

Let us then try to approximate Sadra with Hegel's *Logic*. According to Hegel's logical principle, philosophy, in its dialectical development, must sublimate its previous determinate principle.⁷ In this regard, Hegel says:

Although it must certainly be conceded that all philosophies have been refuted, it must also equally be affirmed that no philosophy has ever been refuted, nor can it be ... So "refuting" of a philosophy means only that its restricting boundary has been overstepped and its determinate principle has been reduced to an ideal moment.⁸

Within this specific philosophical view, Hegel presents his philosophy as the highest moment, in which not only the previous determinate principles of Western philosophy but also the previous determinate principles of Eastern philosophy are ultimately sublated and reduced to an ideal moment. On the other side, Sadra's determinate principle of *the absoluteness of existence over the nothingness of essence* overstepped the restricting boundary of its previous principle of *the realness of essences over the appearances of existences*. In the context of Arabic philosophy, this principle is historically formulated in the metaphysical essentialism of Peripatetic, Neo-Platonic, and Intuitionism. Sadra is the successor of this principle. His important philosophical contribution, from a Hegelian standpoint, would consist in the sublation of this previous determinate principle.

6 For more on the influence of the Parisian culture on Sadra, see: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sadr al-Din Shirazi and His Transcendent Theosophy, Background, Life and Works* (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997).

7 Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic, Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), § 86, *addition* 1, p. 138.

8 *Ibid.*

But Hegel never read Sadra. If Sadra's philosophy is considered in Hegel's thought at all, it is only as an implied, reduced ideal moment within the logical processing of the Absolute's self-determination in Hegel's *Logic*.

The basis of my approximation of Sadra and Hegel is their parallel critique of the metaphysical essentialism of Plato and Aristotle, as well as their parallel critique of the metaphysical essentialism in Arabic philosophy. So, I must limit, in particular, what I mean by metaphysical essentialism.

With regard to Plato, metaphysical essentialism mirrored him as an idealist who thinks that "essences/ideas" exist objectively and absolutely in a transcendental realm of truth. The existents of the sensible world are just copies or shadows of these real essences.⁹ On the other hand, metaphysical essentialism granted Aristotle the status of a realist philosopher who thinks that "essences/universals" are immanent in substances.¹⁰ Metaphysical essentialism thus introduced both Plato and Aristotle as essentialists who consider the abstract or universal essences, whether in their Platonic transcendental forms or in their Aristotelian immanent forms, to be the truest correspondence of truth.

Based on their critique of this specific meaning of the abstractness of essence as the truest correspondence of truth, reflected in the metaphysical essentialism of Plato and Aristotle as well as in Arabic philosophy, I divided the chapters of this book. So, Chapter 1 deals with Sadra's critique of the metaphysical essentialism of Plato and Aristotle. Chapter 2 deals with Hegel's critique of the metaphysical essentialism of Plato and Aristotle. In Chapter 3, we meet with Sadra and Hegel about their critique

- 9 Gadamer says, "The prevailing form of interpretation in which Plato's philosophy has been passed on to us has advocated the two-world theory, that is, the complete separation of the paradigmatic world of ideas from the ebb and flow of change in our experience of the sense-perceived world. Idea and reality are made to look like two worlds separated by a chasm, and the interrelationship of the two remains obscure." Hans Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 156.
- 10 Gilson summarizes these views: "It has often been remarked, and rightly, that the forms of Aristotle are but the Ideas of Plato brought down from heaven to earth. We know a form through the being to which it gives rise, and we know that being through its definition. As knowable and known, the form is called 'essence.'" Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: PIMS, 2005), p. 47.

of the metaphysical essentialism of Arabic philosophy. These three chapters pave the way for Chapter 4: Hegel's Critique of Two Views of One-Sided Essence, That of Aristotle and That of Sadra. In this chapter, Sadra's determinate principle of the absoluteness of existence over the nothingness of essence is logically reduced to an ideal moment in Hegel's *Absolute Self-Determination*.

Sadra himself had initially sided with metaphysical essentialism. But he eventually rejected it and converted to its opposite, metaphysical existentialism. In Chapter 1, I investigate how Sadra's metaphysical existentialism, based on the ontological priority of existence over essence, has emerged (to speak in a Hegelian way) in opposition to its previous moment: the metaphysical essentialism of Plato and Aristotle.

To show that Sadra's metaphysical existentialism represents an opposite moment to metaphysical essentialism, I provided a comprehensive interpretation of Sadra's philosophy of essence and existence. I argue that Sadra's critique of the metaphysical essentialism of Plato and Aristotle is based on his double view of essence: essence-in-itself and essence-for-existence.

Whereas essence-in-itself is equivalent to *nothingness*, essence-for-existence makes sense only as a *conceptual existence* in the knowing mind. Under the impact of real positive existence, the mindful, knowing subject, from within, creates universal concepts and essences and then mistakenly attributes them to the existents as their inner truth. For Sadra, this is an inadequate account of truth, performed by the cognizant soul at one of its stages of unfolding, the stage of understanding. Here I discuss Sadra's doctrine of the *substantial motion* of existence to show how the unfolding of existence is correlated with the three phases of the unfolding of knowledge (sensation, understanding, and intellectual-mystical intuition). To grasp the truth of existence neither as a multiplicity of existents nor as a unity of existents but rather as multiplicity-in-unity and unity-in-multiplicity, the knowing subject must pass to a higher stage of unfolding: the stage of intellectual-mystical intuition.

My analysis in Chapter 1 shows that, for Sadra, the unity of the Absolute cannot be fully known. It can only be approached by the mystical intellectual intuitive grasp of the *spreading existence* as multiplicity-in-unity and unity-in-multiplicity, which Sadra calls the truth of truths.

This knowledge of the truth of truths is a kind of mystical knowledge that goes beyond both the immediacy of sensation and the meditation of the understanding's principle of abstract identity. If the principle of abstract identity takes "multiplicity" and "unity" as true only in their separation, Sadra's mystical principle of identity also takes them in their unity. The difference between one existent and another does not consist in their abstract identities. It consists rather in their real, distinct grade of existence.

We can summarize Chapter 1 with the following important result: Existence is the qualitative differential principle of truth, and essence is just a negative quality that can be equated with nothingness in itself. This result is important for the building of my argument in the next chapters.

In Chapter 2, I investigate Hegel's reading of Plato and Aristotle in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. This step is important because it helps to understand the difference between Hegel and Sadra in their critiques of metaphysical essentialism. I found that Hegel does not consider Plato's and Aristotle's accounts of essence as two different accounts of truth (i.e., he does not admit that the "idealist" Plato only believes in the transcendental ideal world of essences or that the "empiricist" Aristotle only believes in the objectively real world of existence). Hegel's dialectical reading of Plato and Aristotle reveals the speculative moment of essence within their philosophies. Truth does not lie in the isolated world of objective transcendental essences, nor in the isolated world of the subjective essences of cognizant finite beings. The main result that Hegel reached in his reading of Plato and Aristotle is this: Essence is a negative dynamicity that contains its mediation within itself.

Two important results of Chapter 2. The first one is related to the general approximation between Hegel and Sadra in terms of their disapproval of considering the abstract essence to be the true correspondence of truth. The second important result concerns Hegel's discussion of the four Aristotelian principles. I found that Hegel makes Aristotle's formal principle equivalent to "determination or quality as such, the wherefore of anything, essence or form."¹¹ This result raises the following idea: If Hegel

11 G. W. F. Hegel. *Hegel's Lectures on The History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane & Frances H. Simson (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), p. 335.

maintains that Aristotle's account of essence is *quality* as such, then, in Hegel's *Logic*, we must look to the Doctrine of Quality rather than the Doctrine of Essence, if we want to understand Hegel's critique of the metaphysical essentialism of Aristotle.

I suspended my last result until I see first if Hegel's strict division of Arabic philosophy into (Theologians /Speakers) and (Commentators/Philosophers) is also applicable to Sadra. And this was the task of Chapter 3. Here I show that Hegel's and Sadra's critiques of the metaphysical essentialism of Arabic philosophy share common concerns. Both refused the Speakers' claim of causation, which takes the connection between cause and effect as a mere habit. Moreover, both criticized the formal logic of the law of abstract identity, upon which the metaphysical essentialism of Arabic philosophy is based.

To see whether Sadra and Hegel start from the same standpoint in their critique of the metaphysical essentialism of Arabic philosophy, I examined the principles underlying their critique. They are different. Whereas Sadra takes existence as the ground in which the opposites find their unity, Hegel takes essence as the ground in which the opposites find their sublation. Sadra's unity of opposites within the absolute unity of existence is different from Hegel's sublation of the opposites within the speculative unity of essence. Whereas Sadra builds his account of the absolute groundedness of existence on the basis that essence-in-itself is nothingness, Hegel's essence-in-itself as a ground is a dynamic self-sublation of its own determinations – a sublation that must result in existence. To prove the last point, I provided a detailed analysis of two important moments in Hegel's *Logic*: "Essence's issuing from Being" and "Essence's emerging into Existence."

In Chapter 4, three interrelated results dialectically emerged from my detailed analysis of Hegel's category of quality. First, Hegel's immediate account of quality resembles the traditional Aristotelian view of essence as a positive quality. Second, Sadra's negative account of essence-in-itself resembles the moment of negative quality in Hegel's *Logic*. Finally, Hegel's final account of essence sublates the previous two moments of positive and negative quality within a higher moment of determinacy that dialectically unfolds toward the Idea of Being and Essence.

Sadra on the Metaphysical Essentialism of Plato and Aristotle: The Unfolding of Existence

I. The Question of Existence

If for every philosopher there are main questions around which his investigations revolve, Sadra's main philosophical questions could be formulated in three interrelated questions: (1) Does "existence" exist in a determinate and concrete sense the way things in the external realm exist? (2) Is the corresponding reality of the affirmation "existence is an existent" the same as that of the affirmation "a tree, for instance, is an existent"? (3) How could the difference between, as Sadra puts it, "the existence of things and the existent status of existence itself"¹ be philosophically employed to bring out a comprehensive theory of reality?

Those three questions are fundamentally centered on existence. That is because, for Sadra, existence is:

The foundation of the principles of wisdom, the basis of philosophical theology, and the mill-stone of sciences of unity, the resurrection of souls and bodies, and of much else that only we have developed and articulated.²

It is obvious from Sadra's enthusiastic language that he is confident in his developed philosophical doctrine of existence. He is so because his

1 Mulla Sadra, *The Metaphysics of Mulla Sadra*, trans. Parviz Morewedge (New York: SSIPS, 1992), p. 25.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 3.