



Mulla Sadra's Four Journeys as the Four Levels of Self-Consciousness

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Abstract

Mulla Sadra's philosophy is a creative synthesis of the main currents of thought in the Islamic culture before him. One of the most fruitful amongst these currents is the mystical current which reaches to its climax with Ibn Arabi and his commentators. Mulla Sadra not only has adapted many of the mystical concepts in his philosophy, but he has also used the symbolism of four spiritual journeys as the main theme in his philosophy inasmuch as he named his greatest book after this symbolism as *Journeys (Asfār)*. These journeys in his philosophy in addition to mystical aspect finds philosophical aspect as well. A comprehensive interpretation of these journeys should take in consideration both philosophical and mystical aspects. In this article I have proposed an approach that include both aspects by taking these four journeys as the four levels of self-consciousness and self-realization. Accordingly, these journeys can be considered as the journey from the self to the self and in the self.

Keywords: *Four Spiritual Journeys; Islamic Mysticism; Mulla Sadra; Self-Consciousness; Gradation of Being*

Introduction

In his works, Mulla Sadra occasionally uses the symbolism or allegory of journey to describe the core of his philosophy. Using this symbolism, he wants to show that his philosophy is not merely limited to the rational arguments. Rather it is a process of becoming or a kind of substantial or better said existential transformation.

Mulla Sadra is not the first who used this allegory. Before him some Muslim and even non-Muslim thinkers and mystics had used this allegory as the description of their method. Probably the first trace of using such a symbolism can be found in the Taoism. The very name of Taoism is derived from the "Tao" literally means the "way" (Nasr, 1997, 57). In the history of Western thought, the origin of this symbolism can be traced back to Plato's allegory of the Cave. Plato's allegory in its turn emphasizes on a kind of existential transformation that a philosopher must go through, until he eventually becomes a true wise or philosopher.

Despite the universal background of such a symbolism, Mulla Sadra in using this symbolism is mostly influenced by the works of Muslim thinkers and sages especially the works of great Islamic

mystics. Attar Neishabouri as one of the greatest mystics and Sufis in Islamic tradition makes the plot of his masterpiece “*Conference of the Birds*” in accordance with this symbolism. (Ibid)

Mulla Sadra names his greatest work “*Transcendental Wisdom about Four Intellectual Journeys*” (*al-Hikmat al-Mutalliah fi Asfār al-Aqliyyat al-Arbaah*) or in an abridged form *Journeys (Asfār)*. The title of this book alludes to the famous four mystical journeys mentioned in the works of Sufis before him. But he extends its meaning to cover both mystical and intellectual aspects.

It seems that the first who addressed these four mystical journeys in his works was Talmasani, a Muslim mystic in seventh century, who raised these four journeys in his commentary on the *Manazel Saerin* (Stations of the Wayfarers) and after him Kashani mentioned these four journeys in his own commentary on this book with a trivial changes. But he was Gheysari who presented the final edition of these four journeys in his works and Mulla Sadra adapted it from Gheysari’s works and used it both as the title of his book and as the main theme of his philosophy (Hassan Zadeh, 1390, 13).

Mulla Sadra adapts these mystical journeys in his philosophy in such a way that include both mystical and intellectual dimensions. After Mulla Sadra many commentators and interpreters of his works attempted to give different expositions of these four journeys and to explain how these journeys correspond to the different levels of his philosophy and different chapters and volumes of his book.

All of these attempt’s despite of their diversity, have either mystical or philosophical approach. But a good interpretation of these quadruple journeys must be able to take in consideration both of these aspects. That is why, some commentaries (Nouri, 1999,17) including the proposed commentary in this article, try to have an inclusive approach which encompasses both of these approaches. My proposed approach in this article is based on both contextual and extra contextual evidences and can be treated as a text-based attempt to interpret the different stages of this journey.

We should take in consideration that every inclusive interpretation of these four journeys must be able to make harmony between intellectual journey of a philosopher from essences to limited and finite beings and then from these beings to the Absolute Being and mystical journey of an initiate (sālik) from the world of multiplicity to the pure unity or in other words from himself to the Divine.

The proposed idea in this article is that we can take these four journeys as different levels of self-consciousness and self-realization of the wayfarer. This view has some advantages: first, it can include and encompass both mystical and philosophical dimensions of these journeys, second, it is based on some textual evidences and finally it is in harmony with the whole structure of Mulla Sadra’s philosophy.

1- The First Journey as the Rise of True Self

As a starting point it would be helpful to have a look at these four journeys as Mulla Sadra addresses in his great book *Asfār*. (Mulla Sadra, 1999, 1/13)

- 1- The journey from the creature (Khalgh) to the Truth (Haqq) or creator
- 2-The journey in the Truth with the Truth
- 3- The journey from the Truth to the creature (Khalgh) with the Truth
- 4- The journey from the creature to the creature with the Truth

According to the traditional interpretation of Muslim mystics the first journey is a journey from the creature to the Truth. In this journey initiate(sālik) tears the veils of light and darkness between him and the Truth one by one. The final goal of this journey is the annihilation of initiate in the Truth. In accordance with the mystical interpretation, in this transition of initiate from selfhood to the annihilation

in the Truth there are some stations and levels that the initiate must pass all of them step by step. At the end of this journey the selfhood of the initiate vanishes and the being of the initiate is annihilated in the pure and Absolute Being (Nasr,1993, 58).

But if we want to have a philosophical comment on this journey in such a way that corresponds to the philosophy of Mulla Sadra we should take in consideration that Mulla Sadra's philosophy is the philosophy of being. In his philosophy he tries to move to the deepest layer of the reality of things. He starts his philosophy from the world of multiplicity and step by step reduces these multiplicities to the unity. He starts his philosophical contemplations from the outer layer of things which is the layer of accidental characteristics and descriptions. Then he puts aside all of these accidental characteristics to get to the essence of things. In another step, he even tears away the layer of essence to penetrate to the deeper layer of being; after passing the layer of essence what the philosopher can find is the specific and finite being of a thing. According to Mulla Sadra this is the foundation of the thingness of a thing and makes a thing what it is (Mulla Sadra,1999, 1/75-76). In other words, according to Mulla Sadra what makes a thing what it is, is neither its accidental characteristics nor its essence but it is its specific being. This is the main theme of the pivotal principle in his philosophy called primacy of being over quiddity or primacy of existence over essence (Mulla Sadra, 2014, 11-19).

According to this principle the reality of thing has different layers in such a way that every layer is rooted in and depended upon lower layer. At the bottom of these layers there is the layer of being which is the origin of the thingness of a thing and also the origin of all the effects and characteristics of thing. He even insists on this point that the essence of a thing without its being has neither any effect nor any sign of reality (Mulla Sadra, 2014, 12). Being is the ultimate source of all realities and all manifestations and appearances. "the reality of everything is its being. From which all of its effects and existential determinations emerges." (Mulla Sadra, 2014, 11)

Mulla Sadra then penetrates to a deeper layer of the reality which as he mentions is the unique Absolute Being. According to Mulla Sadra all the finite beings are just manifestations and determinations of the One, the Ultimate Truth which is as he says an infinite and Absolute Being (Mulla Sadra, 1981a, 49-50). In this way he explicitly confirms the theory of the unity of being, the most important teaching of the Sufis and Islamic mysticism, and lays the philosophical foundation for this theory. For this aim, he gives a profound explication of the causality and turns it to a kind of manifestation. According to Mulla Sadra effect is not a separate being from cause; rather, it is a manifestation or determination of cause. This finally leads to the convergence of philosophy and mysticism in his philosophy (Mulla Sadra, 1981a, 49-50).

Accordingly, one can easily correspond the first journey of initiate from the creature to the Truth, to the intellectual journey of the philosopher from finite beings to the Absolute Being. This shows how Mulla Sadra attempts to make a harmony between philosophy and mysticism. Additionally, we should take in consideration that both Islamic philosophers and mystics believe that this journey is the core of Islam and ultimate goal of the human life. According to Mulla Sadra this intellectual journey from the world of essences and finite beings to the realm of Absolute Being and finally getting annihilated in it, which corresponds to the mystical journey from the creature to The Truth is the spirit of the teachings of Islam.

This was the popular interpretation of the first journey amongst Muslim scholars. but I propose here another interpretation for these journeys, which can encompass all the previous interpretations and has some strengths in comparison to them. According to my proposed interpretation these four journeys are in fact four levels of self-consciousness and self-realization. I start my proposed interpretation with a profound and extremely important passage of Mulla Sadra.

"Whatever a man views in this world and even after his migration to the next world, he merely views in himself and in his world. He does not view anything out of himself

and his own world, and his world is also in himself” (Mulla Sadra, 1981a, 244-245; 1984, 585).

This passage as one of the most profound and weird implications of Mulla Sadra’s philosophy is fully understood in the light of other principles of his philosophy. As we mentioned above, Mulla Sadra’s philosophy has an existential approach, which means all the entities in this world in a profound view are finite and limited beings derived from Absolute Being. From an existential viewpoint every entity has its own existential realm and by no means, it can go out of this realm. Although this is true for all kinds of entities, human being has an exceptional capacity to extend or intensify its being through a process called existential intensifying or existential transformation (Mulla Sadra, 1999, 8/347; 1981a, 227-229). To understand this exceptional capacity in man we should consider that although all finite beings are manifestations of the Absolute Being, there is a kind of gradation in these manifestations and human being is the only entity which can pass all the levels of being (Mulla Sadra, 1999, 8/343) until he reaches the ultimate source of all manifestations which is the Absolute Being.

The proposed idea in this article is that the first journey from the creature to the Truth or from finite and multiple beings to the unique Absolute Being can be considered as the first level of self-consciousness and self-realization of the philosopher who steps in this path. According to this interpretation this journey is not neither an external journey nor even an internal journey in the general meaning. But it is a deep introspective contemplation for finding the true self deep inside. But what does true self mean? Answering this question, it should be considered that every human being has a self which is formed and established in family and society but this is not his true self. According to classic texts of Islamic mysticism man despite being finite has infinite capacity for evolution and change and through the process of existential intensifying can fulfill all his existential capacities till he finally reaches his true self through its annihilation in Absolute Being.

I believe that this annihilation does not mean to remove or eradicate self; rather it means the realization of true self instead of illusory self. To understand this, it would be better to recall Mulla Sadra’s mentioned utterance that anything that man views in this world or other world merely views inside himself. Thus, annihilation cannot be considered as removing the self totally. Rather it implies the melting of the illusory self in the Truth and rising a real self. That is why I take the first journey as the journey from the self to the self. It might be true from another aspect that this is not a journey at all because during this process the man does not go anywhere, Instead, he explores himself deeper and deeper. But, if we want to stay committed to the allegory of journey, we might call this a journey from the self to the self and in the self. This journey, meanwhile, can be taken as a journey from the being, in the being and to the being because in Mulla Sadra’s philosophy the levels of existential completion of human being corresponds to the gradations of being. So, this journey can be taken equivalent to the trustful(seddighin) way mentioned in his works as the way in which the wayfarer, the way and the target are the same (Mulla Sadra, 1981, 379). So, according to the proposed view, this journey is not an outward or even spiritual or as some believe an epistemological journey. But it is an inward journey from the illusory self to the true self.

Here it would be helpful to mention the difference between two levels of self-consciousness in the contemporary texts especially in the field of philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences. According to contemporary views, one can make distinction at least between two different levels of self-consciousness. The first level is a kind of minimal self-consciousness which in specialized contexts has been called with different names such as peripheral self-consciousness or pre-reflective self-consciousness or sometimes as minimal self-consciousness (Goldman, 1970, 96; Gallager, 2012, 127-129). Despite of trivial differences between the meaning of these different terms, they have something in common that in the first level of self-consciousness one does not know himself explicitly and reflectively but he has a kind of weak consciousness about himself peripherally. This means that in this level the subject does not pay attention to himself through immediate and introspect intuition. Rather, when he is aware of other things, he is aware of himself implicitly. This kind of minimal self-consciousness is common between human being

and animals. Even a baby is born with such a kind of minimal self-consciousness. But what makes a man a self-conscious entity and a subject as well is his introspective intuition and immediate reflection upon himself. For achieving this level of self-consciousness, a man must return to himself and put every other object into *epoche* to find himself explicitly and reflectively. This transition from other objects to self, corresponds to the first journey in mystical viewpoint with the difference that in mystical viewpoint as well as Mulla Sadra's philosophy this is just the initial step of the first journey and first journey will be continued till the man finds his true self. But according to a pervasive viewpoint in contemporary debates, when man turns back to himself with introspection or immediate reflection and he finds implicitly himself as the subject of all the actions and intentions the final level of self-consciousness has come to its end.

2- *The Second Journey as the Realization and Manifestations of All the Capacities of the True Self*

According to the traditional mystical approach the second step is the journey in the Truth with the Truth. However, one can consider the second journey as another step of self-realization. This does not mean that these two views are in contrast; rather these two interpretations refer to two different aspects of one reality. According to mystical interpretation in this journey the initiate understands the attributes of the Truth in a separate and distinct form and tries to realize these attributes in himself (Kashani, 2006, 314). After annihilation of the initiate in the Truth or Absolute Being, his attributes and actions are also annihilated in the Absolute Being.

As I mentioned before, one can consider this second level as the manifestation and realization of the attributes of the true self in a distinct and separate manner as well. According to a pervasive viewpoint in the contemporary debates the second level of self-consciousness finishes when a man turns back to himself with introspection and finds himself explicitly as the subject of all actions and intentions (Zahavi, 1999, 14-15). But in Sadraean viewpoint this is just the beginning of self-consciousness. In fact, self-consciousness is a process that evolves during someone's life. As Mulla Sadra argues, after a man finds his true self he should realize all the attributes of perfection in himself till he becomes the full manifestation of the Truth.

This second level is with the Truth or Absolute Being because in this level the illusory self of initiate has vanished and the being of initiate has been annihilated in the Truth. Thus, he is nothing but the full manifestation of the Truth and as Mulla Sadra occasionally utters, he has become a mirror in which the attributes of the Truth appear distinctly and clearly. (Mulla Sadra, 1981a, 1/254)

3- *The Third and Fourth Journeys as the Final Levels of Self-Consciousness*

According to traditional interpretation these two levels do not show any existential completion and with the first two levels the existential completion comes to an end (Hassan Zadeh, 1390. 11). The proponents of this view usually consider the last two levels as the complementary component which points to the social dimension of Islamic mysticism. Islamic mystics following the teachings of Islam are not indifferent to the social aspect of human completion and believe that perfect man is responsible to the society. This means that a perfect man after making change in himself, is responsible for reforming his society. That is why, after journey from the creature to the and exploring the attributes of the Truth and the realization of these attributes in himself, the initiate should turn back to the creature and try to fulfill the attributes of the truth in the society. This time the initiate has gone through existential transformation and become the full manifestation of the Truth. That is why the third and fourth journeys are the journeys with the Truth. The third journey is the journey from the Truth to the creature with the Truth and the fourth journey the journey in the creature with the Truth.

What was mentioned above was according to the generally acceptable interpretation of the status of the third and fourth journey, but if we consider the four journeys as the different levels of self-

consciousness and self-realization as I do in this article, then the third and fourth journeys will play a pivotal role and there would be no way to neglect these last two journeys or look them down or even consider them as complementary attachments to the first two journeys. In my opinion the third and fourth journeys along with the first two journeys are indispensable levels of self-consciousness and should not be considered as something marginal.

One of the most important levels of self-consciousness happens when a man knows himself through the relationship with the world and other human beings. In this level of self-consciousness man turns the direction of his attention to the outer world and other knowing subjects and this time knows himself mediately in the mirror of others. This is not something surprising since some philosophers in the history of philosophy have addressed this kind of self-consciousness in their works. For example, Hegel in his famous work *phenomenology of spirit* refers to this kind of self-consciousness. He considers self-consciousness as a process and insists that self-consciousness is a return from otherness (Hegel, 2018, 103). A man knows himself better when he faces other and has mutual relationship with others.

For Hegel facing other self-consciousness is a fatal moment in the process of self-consciousness through which self-consciousness finds himself as another being (Hegel, 2018, 109). As Hegel argues self-consciousness has different levels and some of them are just realized through facing with others. Accordingly, self-consciousness has a social dimension which is inseparable part of its totality. This means that being in society and living with others is an indispensable level in the complementary levels of self-consciousness. So, if we take the third and fourth journeys as the levels of self-consciousness, then these two journeys not only are not extraneous attachments but they are also compulsory levels of the fulfillment of the self-consciousness.

Of course, what Hegel says is directed at the Cartesian view about self-consciousness and should be considered as a criticism to this view. As Descartes argues, when a man turns to himself and finds himself through introspection and immediate intuition, he is fully conscious of himself and this is the ultimate realization of self-consciousness which is reflected in his famous *cogito ergo sum* (Descartes, 1973, v1, 1). For him this immediate intuition is the foundation of certainty (Descartes, 1973, v1, 45).

In fact, Descartes takes the self-consciousness as a point which the subject can achieve it just at the moment of immediate intuition. Contrary to Descartes, Hegel believes that self-consciousness is not punctual event which happens at a special moment. Rather, it is much more like an evolving process which starts from someone's childhood and continues till the end of this process which is in his viewpoint getting to absolute consciousness.

4- Four Journeys as One Process with Two Aspects

As I suggested in this paper, one can consider the four journeys in Mulla Sadra's philosophy as the different levels of self-consciousness. Although this approach is somehow different from traditional approach, it should not be taken as something contradictory to that view. Rather, as I explained before these two approaches can be considered as two different aspects of one process. This claim has some contextual evidences in Mulla Sadra's philosophy. As Mulla Sadra repeatedly mentions in his works the process of human existential completion corresponds to the levels of being which starts from the matter as the weakest level and terminates in God as the Absolute Being (Mulla Sadra, 1999, v8, 343). Later when he marks a departure from the theory of gradation of being and lays the philosophical foundation for the doctrine of the individual unity of being, he explicitly utters that there is one unique being and all other entities including previously mentioned levels of being, are just its manifestations and determinations. According to Mulla Sadra human being is the only being which through the process of existential evolution can pass all the levels of being till he is finally annihilated in the Absolute Being. That is why in mystical texts human being has a unique status as the full manifestation of the Absolute Being and occasionally called the microcosmos (*al-alam al-saghir*) or sometimes the world called the great human (*al-ensan al-kabir*) (Mulla Sadra, 1981b, 232).

This means that the highest level of self-consciousness of human being is realized when a man finds his real self by annihilating in the Absolute Being and tearing away the shell of his illusory self. The illusory self is the self which is made during someone's life in family and society and is in negligence of being and his situation related to being.

Conclusion

Mulla Sadra adapts the traditional symbolism of four spiritual journeys as the most important theme in his philosophy. In addition to the mystical aspect, this symbolism founds a new philosophical aspect in his system of thought. A comprehensive interpretation of these journeys must consider both its mystical and philosophical aspects. In this paper I proposed that the four journeys can be understood as the four levels of self-consciousness. This interpretation can converge the mystical and philosophical approach in one direction with two aspects by taking the mystical journey from the multiplicity to the One and philosophical transcendence from the essences of entities to their beings and then from these finite beings to the Absolute Being as the levels of self-consciousness and self-realization.

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