

Transcendent Philosophy

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Transcendent Philosophy

On the Teleology of Perception

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Abstract

Mulla Sadra's primary philosophical project is to map out the path of achieving the soul's perfection. His several well-known contributions to the philosophical vocabulary, such as the "systematic Ambiguity" (*tashkik*) of existence and "substantial motion," were all developed to explain how the soul enters into this world through corporealization and departs from it by way spiritualization. His remarkably detailed investigations of the modalities of afterworldly experience simply illustrate his desire to explain the full range of possibilities that are open to the human soul. In order to grasp the role of perception in his overall project, it is necessary to understand the end toward which perception is directed and the nature of its final fruition. The soul perceives by nature, so much so that perception enters into its very definition. In and of themselves, however, the varieties of perception possessed by the animal soul do not suffice for the achievement of human perfection, though perception remains an essential attribute of the soul. Human efforts to cleanse perception of distortion play a key role in the soul's unfolding. The most important concept here is probably *tajrid*, "disengagement", which designates the act of freeing perception from its entrancement by embodied and materialised forms and training it to focus on the forms in themselves, that is, the forms in their intellectual existence, where they are innately disengaged and "separate" (*mufarig*) from every trace of material existence. The final goal is the transmutation of perception through the full development of the acquired intellect. Then the soul will be able to perceive the forms for what they truly are on all planes of existence, including the endless worlds of the afterlife.

In modern philosophy, the word perception typically designates physical sensation. Earlier philosophers often dealt with the concept in much broader terms, as would be expected from the original meaning of Latin word percipio. So also the Muslim philosophers spoke of perception—using the Arabic word idrāk—in an exceedingly broad sense. For them, perception denotes apprehension and obtaining knowledge by any agent, from animals to God, and on any level, from physical sensation to intellectual vision.

In the philosophy of Mullā Sadrā, the concept of perception plays a crucial role both in the explanation of the nature of existence and in the analysis of the goal of human life. This follows naturally from the fact that his philosophy is oriented toward "psychology" in the pre-modern sense. In other words, he attempts to provide an overview of the human self in all its ramifications and to map out the way for the self to achieve the highest of its own possibilities, possibilities that are rooted in its ability to perceive.

Perception

At the end of the first of the four books of the *Asfār*, Sadrā provides definitions for some thirty words that are employed in discussing the modalities of knowledge (*'ilm*). He lists "perception" as the first of these words. In defining it, he begins with its literal sense. As

any Arabic dictionary will tell us, it has a variety of meanings, such as attaining, reaching, arriving, catching, grasping, comprehending, and discerning. Sadrâ writes,

Idrâk is encounter [liqâ'] and arrival [wusûl]. When the intellectual potency arrives at the quiddity of the intelligible and attains it, this is its perception in this respect. In philosophy, the meaning intended by the word coincides with the literal meaning. Or rather, true perception and encounter is only this encounter, that is, perception by knowledge. As for bodily encounter, it is not really an encounter. (Asfâr 3:507, 323.31)¹

Before going any further, we need to allude to some of the issues raised by this definition. Like all Muslim philosophers, Sadrâ analyzes the human self in terms of faculties. However, the Arabic word for "faculty" is quwwa, which is also the word for "potentiality" as contrasted with "actuality." Given that every faculty is at the same time a potentiality, quwwa can better be translated as "potency." Its dual meaning is especially important in Sadrâ's writings, because his analysis of the human soul depends precisely on seeing it as a grand potentiality that encompasses every other potentiality designated by the names of the faculties.

In this definition of perception, Sadrâ means by the "intellectual potency" the power and potential of the self to know something. When this power reaches an object, it moves from potentiality to actuality. The degree of actuality that it achieves is one of the most basic issues that needs to be addressed.

In the definition, Sadrâ says that through perception the intellectual potency arrives at the "quiddity" (or "whatness") of a thing. In other words, when perception takes place, we come to know "what" the object of perception is. The fact that perception entails knowing a thing's quiddity is emphasized in the second word that Sadrâ defines in his list of technical terms—shu'ûr or "awareness." Awareness, he says, is to perceive something without "achieving fixity" (istithbât), that is, without ascertaining the thing's whatness.² He adds, "Awareness is the first level of the arrival of knowledge at the intellectual potency. It is, as it were, a shaky perception. That is why it is not said about God that He is 'aware' of a thing" (3:508, 323.34), though it is said about Him that He "perceives" things.

The thing that is perceived is an "intelligible," that is, an object known to intelligence. The intelligible is called the "form" (sûra) of the thing, in the Aristotelian sense of the word form. Hence it is contrasted with the thing's "matter" (mâdda), which is unintelligible in itself. The only things we can truly perceive and know are forms, not matter.

Finally, in this definition Sadrâ insists that true idrâk—that is true attainment, reaching, arrival, and encounter—pertains to knowledge and not to the body. This reminds us that real perception of things can only take place if an intelligent agent encounters an intelligible object. Every bodily attainment can only be fleeting and evanescent. So also, any modality of perception that is in any way sullied by the body's materiality will be

deficient in certain basic ways, because the form will be obscured both by the means of perception and by the existential situation within which it is perceived.

Levels of Perception

In the same list of important terms, Sadrâ provides another definition that can help us understand the final goal of perception. This term is dhihn or "mind." He writes, "The mind is the soul's potency to acquire knowledges that have not yet been attained" (3:515, 325.35).

In keeping with the general Graeco-Islamic view of things, Sadrâ understands the human soul or self to have many powers and faculties and many corresponding levels of actualization, beginning with the plant and animal levels. The soul actualizes itself by perceiving what it has the potential to perceive. The soul's goal in its existence is to move from potential knowing to actual knowing. When its potential knowledge becomes fully actual, it is no longer called a "soul" but rather an "intellect," or an "intellect in act." In Sadrâ's view, then, the human soul's potential to achieve actual knowledge is called the "mind."

The mind comes to know things through perception. "Perception" is simply the name given to the act whereby the soul comes to know, whatever the object may be. If we look at perception from the side of the perceiver, it has four basic varieties. In each case, the mind encounters the "form" of a thing—that is, its quiddity or intelligible reality—not its matter. However, the circumstances are different in each sort of encounter. These circumstances pertain both to the instrument that perceives and to the modality of the perceptible's existence.

The first level of perception is sense-perception (hiss). At this level the perceived form exists in matter, and the perceiver finds the form in modes of material embodiment. These modes are basically the Aristotelian accidents, such as quantity, quality, time, place, and situation. In its external existence as a thing, the form is inseparable from such accidental attributes, and it is precisely these attributes that allow us to perceive it with the senses. As for the matter through which the form exists, it can never be perceived in itself, because it represents the furthest and darkest reaches of existence, a realm that remains almost entirely unintelligible.

The second level of perception is imagination (khayâl, takhayyul), which is the perception of a sensory thing, along with all its characteristics and qualities, in the same way that it is perceived by the senses. Unlike sense-perception, however, imagination perceives the thing whether or not the thing's matter is present to the senses.

The third level is wahm. The medievals translated this Arabic word as "estimatio," but modern scholars have reached no consensus as to what exactly it means and how it can be appropriately rendered into English. I translate it as "sense-intuition" in order to suggest its intermediary status between intellect and the senses. According to Sadrâ, it is the perception of an intelligible meaning while attributing the meaning to a particular,

sensory thing. In sense-intuition, the soul perceives the universal, but within a particular, rather than in the universal itself.

The highest level is intellection (*ta' aqul*), which is the perception of something in respect of its quiddity alone, not in respect of anything else.³

What distinguishes the levels of perception boils down to the degree of "disengagement" (*tajarrud*), a term of fundamental importance in Sadrâ's writings. *Tajarrud* is another word concerning whose translation modern scholars have not agreed. Most commonly, it has been translated as "abstraction," a word that thoroughly obscures its basic meaning.⁴ A "disengaged" thing is not only free and quit of matter, but it also dwells in a domain of intensified existence and consciousness. In Islamic philosophy in general, few concepts have been more significant than "disengagement" for describing the ultimate goal of the human quest for perfection. In the purest sense, disengagement is an attribute of God, the Necessary Existence in itself, since the Necessary Existence has no attachment to or dependence upon anything other than itself. More specifically, disengagement is the attribute of the intellect that is able to see things as they actually are, that is, without their entanglement in the obscurities of imagination and sense-perception.⁵ It is also the essential attribute of the forms or quiddities that the intellect perceives.

According to Sadrâ, the four levels of perception need to be differentiated in terms of the degree of disengagement reached by the perceptibles.

The first level, that of sense-perception, can be understood in terms of three conditions (*shart*) that determine its nature: First, the matter is present at the instrument of perception, which is to say that the soul perceives the thing externally in its material embodiment. Second, the thing's form is concealed by the perceived qualities and characteristics. Third, the perceived thing is a particular, not a universal.

On the second level—imagination—the perceptibles are disengaged from the first of the three conditions, material embodiment, because there is no need for the external presence of the thing.

On the third level, sense-intuition's perceptibles are disengaged both from material embodiment and from the object's specific qualities and characteristics.

On the final level, the intelligibles are disengaged from all three conditions, because the intellect perceives only universals.⁶

Sadrâ concludes his discussion of the levels of perception by saying that the four levels can be reduced to three, because imagination and sense-intuition both pertain to the intermediary domain between intellect and the senses.⁷

Levels of Existence

The three basic levels of perception—sense-perception, imagination, and intellection—correspond exactly with the three worlds that are found in the external realm. These are the world of bodies, the world of imagination, and the world of intellect. Discussion of levels of perception is inseparable from discussion of levels of existence. If there were only one level of existence, there would be only one sort of perception. And indeed, this is precisely the view of much of modern philosophy. Reducing perception to sensation follows from the elimination of the imaginal and spiritual domains from serious consideration.

In talk of levels of existence, what is meant by "existence" is possible existence, or formal and delimited existence, not Necessary Existence. Existence in itself—Arabic wujûd—is the ultimate reality of all things, and, as such, it lies beyond the worlds and beyond the levels. In itself, existence remains forever unattainable, imperceptible, and unknowable. However, it deploys itself in degrees of strength and weakness. We come to know it indirectly by perceiving it in various conditioned modalities. The higher the realm of existence, the more it is disengaged from matter and from the conditions and characteristics of things. Correspondingly, the perception that pertains to the higher levels is more intense and more direct.

Each level of existence is typically called a "world" (âlam), and the sum total of the levels is known simply as "the world," or, as we can also translate it, "the cosmos" or "the universe." Discussion of worlds is plainly a discussion of knowledge and perception. In Arabic, this point is brought home by the word âlam itself. It derives from the same root as the word for knowledge, ilm. The lexicographers tell us that its primary designation of "world" is "that by means of which one knows." Thus, the "world" as a whole is a realm that is defined and designated by the fact that it can be an object of knowledge. So also, each world or level within the whole is defined by the type of perception that makes it the object of knowledge. The fact that there are three basic modes of perception derives from the fact there are three basic knowable realms.

One of Sadrâ's more detailed exposition of the worlds comes in a chapter of the Asfâr called "On the divisions of the sciences," that is, the "knowledges," or the modalities of knowing. There he explains that the reality of knowledge goes back to "formal existence," which is the realm of existence within which forms appear to perception. He then says that formal existence has three divisions—complete, sufficient, and deficient. Complete existence is the realm of the intelligible forms and the disengaged intellects. Sufficient existence is the realm of souls, also called "the world of imagination." Deficient existence is the domain of the sensory forms, which are "the forms that endure through matter and are attached to it" (3:501, 322.10).

Having described the three levels of formal existence, Sadrâ then speaks of a fourth level, that of bodily matter, which undergoes transformation and renewal at every instant. Because bodily matter is immersed in nonexistence, possibility, contingency, and darkness, it is unknowable, even if it is called by the name "existence." As examples Sadrâ cites time and movement.⁸

In explaining the differentiation among these four domains, Sadrâ tells us that they differ in terms of the intensity and weakness of their existence. The stronger a thing's modality of existence, the more disengaged it is from the transient world of matter. The more disengaged it is, the more intelligible it is, because it is more purely itself. Each of the realms lower than the world of completeness and intellect is immersed to some degree in the muddiness and obscurity brought about by multiplicity, dispersion, separation, and confusion.⁹

Presence

The key to understanding Sadrâ's concept of perception is his concept of existence. It needs to be kept in mind that the English word existence is not an adequate translation of the Arabic wujûd, nor will the situation be any better if use the term "being" instead of "existence." One important dimension of the discussion of wujûd that is immediately lost to sight in translation is the fact that the word itself demands consciousness and perception. The literal meaning of wujûd is "finding" and "being found," and this meaning was much stressed in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabî and his followers, with whom Sadrâ was thoroughly familiar and from whom he often quotes.

However, it is not only the Sufi theoreticians who insisted that existence demands consciousness and awareness. Even a straight Hellenophile philosopher like Afdal al-Dîn Kâshânî (d. ca. 610/1213), who had no connection with his younger contemporary Ibn al-'Arabî and who wrote most of his works in Persian, makes use of this double significance of the word wujûd to divide existence into two basic realms.¹⁰ The first of these realms is "being" (hastî) without consciousness and awareness. The second is being along with "finding" (yâft). Moreover, Bâbâ Afdal uses Persian yâft or "finding" not only as a synonym for wujûd in its higher sense, but also as a synonym for perception (idrâk). He explains that the realm of mere being appears to us through inanimate objects, while the world of finding and perception appears in the realm of souls and intellects.

Once we remember that perception and finding are already implicit in the word wujûd as employed by many of the philosophers, we see that any attempt to reduce existence to mere "being there" seems obtuse. Rather, existence in the full sense is not only that which is there, but also that which finds what is there. The more intensely something is there, the more intensely it finds. The fullest degree of existence is found in the fullest degree of presence, perception, and consciousness.

In a short gloss on the meaning of perception, Sadrâ says, "Perception is the existence of the perceptible for the perceiver" (al-idrâk `ibâra `an wujûd al-mudrak li'l-mudrik).¹¹ In the light of the dual meaning of the word wujûd, this can also be translated as, "Perception is the perceptible's being found by the perceiver." In several similar glosses on the word, Sadrâ often replaces the word wujûd with the word "presence" (hudûr) or "witnessing" (mushâda),¹² both of which are terms with long histories that can throw light on how he understands the nature.¹³

"Presence" is the opposite of "absence" (*ghayba*), and it is practically a synonym of "witnessing." Sadrâ sometimes divides the universe into two basic "perceptual" (*idrâki*) domains, that is, the world of life and knowledge, which is the realm of intellects and souls, and the world of death and ignorance, which is the realm of inanimate bodies.¹⁴ (These are of course equivalent to Bâbâ Afdal's "finding" and "being.") When Sadrâ makes this division, he is likely to employ the Koranic terms for these two realms, that is, the "absent" (*ghayb*) and the "witnessed" (*shahâda*). The "absent" is everything that we do not ordinarily perceive. The "witnessed" is everything present to our senses.

When we ask if it is possible to perceive and witness the "absent" world, the philosophers will reply that of course it is. We do so precisely by perceiving those things that the senses are unable to grasp. However, in order truly to perceive the realm of absent things, we need to strengthen our perceptual faculties and to learn how to see through the darkness of the corporeal and sensory realm into the domain that lies beyond it. The absent realm must come to exist for us and to be found by us. In other words, it must come to be present in the self and be witnessed by it.

Perception, then, is a mode of existence, or it is existence itself, which is precisely "presence"—being there and being found. Perception is the existence of the perceived object within the perceiver. It follows that in perceiving both the external and the internal worlds, the degree of perception coincides with the degree of existence. To perceive something more directly is to participate in existence more fully.

Mental Existence

When Sadrâ says that perception is for the perceptible "to exist" or "to be found" within the perceiver, he clearly does not mean that the thing exists in the same mode internally as it does externally. He explains that when the mind perceives something, it comes from potentiality to actuality, and this actuality of the mind is the presence of the thing's intelligible form in the mind. This presence is called "mental existence" (*wujûd dhihnî*), an expression that we can also translate as "mental finding." However, as long as the soul remains the soul and has not become an intellect in act, the soul's mode of perception and existence is weak, and everything that is perceived and exists within the soul is even weaker. Sadrâ writes that because of this weakness, the specific acts and traces that are ordered upon the soul and come into existence from it have the utmost weakness of existence. Or rather, the existence of the intellectual and imaginal forms that come into existence from it are shadows and apparitions of the external existences that emerge from the Creator, even if the quiddity is preserved in the two existences. Hence the traces that are ordered upon the quiddity in the external realm are not ordered upon it in respect of [its existence in the soul]. . . .

This existence of a thing upon which traces are not ordered while it emerges from the soul in this modality of manifestation is named "mental" and "shadow" existence. The other, upon which traces are ordered, is named "external" and "entified" existence. (1:266, 65.27)

In short, the things perceived by sense-perception exist with a true existence in the mind, but their mental existence is a shadow of their external existence. However, as the soul gradually actualizes its potency to know the higher realms, the objects that it perceives undergo a corresponding increase in intensity. At the stage of true intellectual perception, the intellect that perceives is identical in existence and consciousness with the forms that are its perceptibles.

The Potency of the Soul

Perception takes place within the soul—nafs—a word that means literally "self." Discussion of self or soul begins at the level of plants and extends to the highest reaches of human perfection. The human soul can be described most simply as "all the potencies" (8:221, 777.31). By this Sadrâ means that the rational soul is "the one that perceives with all the perceptions attributed to the human potencies" (ibid.). The human soul, in other words, is pure potency, and as such it has no actuality. The actuality of the soul comes about through perception. When the soul perceives something, the thing comes to exist within the soul in the appropriate mode of existence, and the soul itself comes to actualize in itself the corresponding mode of mental existence.

The goal of human existence is to bring the soul's potentiality into actuality. At the beginning of its creation, the human self is empty of the knowledge of things. In contrast, other things are created with actualized knowledge of things, and this fixes them in their specific identities. Since the human soul is created knowing nothing, it has the potential to know everything. It is this characteristic alone that allows it to be transmuted into an intellect in act.

God created the human spirit empty of the realization of things within it and [empty] of the knowledge of things. . . . Had He not created the human spirit for the sake of the knowledge of things as they are, the spirit would necessarily be, at the first of its created disposition [fitra], one of those things in act, and it would not be empty of all. . . .

Although at first . . . the human spirit is a sheer potency, empty of the intelligibles, nonetheless it is proper for it to know the realities and become conjoined [ittisâl] with all of them. It follows that true knowledge [irfân] of God, of His spiritual realm [malakût], and of His signs [âyât] is the final goal. . . . Knowledge is the first and the last, the origin and the final goal. (3:515-16, 326.2)¹⁵

Perception actualizes a potential knowledge of the soul. Actuality demands activity, and Sadrâ tells us that those philosophers who have spoken of perception as the soul's becoming imprinted with the perceptibles have missed the real nature of perception, because perception is much closer to activity and actuality than to receptivity.

The relation of the perceived form to the knowing essence is the relation of the made thing [maj`ûl] to the maker [jâ`il], not the relation of indwelling [hulûl] or imprinting [intibâ`]. (8:251, 785.32)

Relative to its imaginal and sensory perceptibles, the soul is more similar to an innovating actor [al-fâ'il al-mubdî'] than to a receptive dwelling place [al-mahall al-qâbil]. (1:287, 70.35)

In his discussion of vision, Sadrâ provides a specific example of how the soul comes into act through perception. After rejecting the theories of the natural scientists, the mathematicians, and Suhrawardî, he writes,

Vision takes place through the configuring of a form similar to the thing, by God's power, from the side of the world of the soulish, spiritual realm. The form comes to be disengaged from the external matter and present to the perceiving soul. The form endures through the soul just as an act endures through its agent, not as something received endures through its receptacle. (8:179-80, 768.8)

Having said this, Sadrâ extends the argument, showing that vision is one instance of the general rule in perception, which is that the perceiver comes to be unified with the perceptible. This is the same principle that he demonstrated previously under the rubric of "the unification of the intellect and the intelligible" (ittihâd al-'aql wa'l-ma'qûl), which he considers one of the cornerstones of his philosophy. He is especially concerned to prove this principle because Avicenna and his followers had denied it.

What we demonstrated concerning the unification of the intellect and the intelligible applies to all sensory, imaginal, and sense-intuitive perceptions. We called attention to this issue in the discussions of the intellect and the intelligible. We said that sense-perception in an unqualified sense is not as is well known among the generality of sages, who say that sensation disengages the very form of the sensible thing from its matter and meets it along with its surrounding accidents; and, in the same way, that imagination disengages the form with a greater disengagement¹⁶. . . . Rather, perception in an unqualified sense is obtained only from the Bestower's¹⁷ effusion of another, luminous, perceptual form through which perception and awareness are obtained. It is this form that is *sensate in act and sensible in act*. As for the existence of the form in matter, it is neither sense-perception nor a sensible. However, it is among those things that prepare the way for the effusion of that form. (8:81, 768.10)

Thus, the perceptible is a form that is effused upon the soul by God. Investigating Sadrâ's elucidations of the theological implications of this statement would demand another study, so here it is sufficient to understand that God's effusion of the form actualizes the soul's potential to know. In coming forth from potency to act, the soul gains a mode of mental existence that coincides with the external existence of the perceived thing. The known thing is precisely the intellectual or imaginal form, and the form's presence to the soul is its mental existence within the soul, an existence that is identical with the existence of the soul itself, since there is no plurality of existences in the soul. Rather, the soul's consciousness of the form is the same as the form's existence for the soul. In mental existence, perception and existence are one thing. It follows that, as Sadrâ frequently tells us, the perceived object is always of the same kind as the perceiver. Through touch, taste, and vision the soul perceives objects that are of the same kind as

itself, for these objects are the forms of the touched, the tasted, and the seen things actualized in the soul.¹⁸

When Sadrâ says that the soul is "all the potencies," he means that the human self is an unlimited potential for knowing. The soul's good lies in its actualization of its potential, and this potential cannot be circumscribed. The soul, as Aristotle says at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, yearns for omniscience, because its potential is precisely to perceive all things.¹⁹ But all things can be found only in pure intellect, where they subsist as intellectual forms. Thus the highest stage of perception is for the soul to become an intellect. In other words, the soul comes to perceive in the fullness of its own capacity, and it comes to exist in the fullness of actual finding. Once it realizes the station of full perception and full existence, all things are present to it in act. This is to say that all things are present to the intellect in the clarity of their real, intellectual existence, not in the obscurity of their sensory and imaginal existence.

When the soul becomes an intellect, it becomes all things. Right now also, it is unified with everything that it has made present in its own essence—I mean the forms of those things, not their entities that are external to it. This does not require that the soul be compounded of those external affairs, nor of those forms. Rather, the more perfect the soul becomes, the more it becomes a gathering of things and the more it gains in the intensity of its simplicity, because the truly simple thing is all things, as has been demonstrated. (*Asfâr* 8:253, 786.16)

It needs to be remembered that for Sadrâ, existence is primary, and quiddity is secondary. The quiddities are what Ibn al-'Arabî calls the "fixed entities," and they are "fixed" because they never change. What changes is formal existence, which undergoes intensification and weakening. The levels of perception are differentiated by the weakness or strength of the existence to which they correspond. In Sadrâ's words, only when existence reaches the level of "the simple intellect, which is entirely disengaged from the world of bodies and quantities, does it become all the intelligibles and all the things, in a manner more excellent and more eminent than the things are in themselves" (3:373, 293.32).

At each level of perception, the soul disengages perceptible things from matter and the other conditions of the ontological levels. Even sense perception necessarily disengages the perceptibles, because the external matter does not enter into the soul. But, when the soul disengages the perceptibles, simultaneously it becomes disengaged from the conditions of the lower worlds. The movement from sense-perception, to imagination, and then to intellection is a movement from frail existence and weak perception to strong existence and intense finding. Every time the soul actualizes its own potential through knowing, it gains in the strength of its existence, and when it becomes an intellect in act, it has gained full and everlasting existence.

Sadrâ is critical of the expositions of the earlier philosophers concerning the meaning of "disengagement." His rejection of their positions helps explain why "abstraction" is not a proper way to translate the term into English.²⁰ He writes,

The meaning of disengagement in intellection and other perception is not as is well-known—that it is the elimination of certain extraneous things [*zawâ'id*]. Nor is it that the soul stands still while the perceptibles are transferred from their material substrate to sensation, from sensation to imagination, and from it to the intellect. Rather, the perceiver and the perceptible become disengaged together. Together they withdraw from one existence to another existence. Together they are transferred from one configuration to another configuration and from one world to another world, until the soul becomes an intellect, an intellecter, and an intelligible in act, after it had been potential in all this. (*Asfâr* 3:366, 292.1)

Contrary to what was thought by some of the earlier philosophers, disengagement does not imply a rejection of the body. This is because the essential reality of the body is formal, not material. The more the soul is strengthened, the more the body's intellective form is intensified and the more its existence is consolidated. Sadrâ writes,

Among the things that are necessary to know is that here [in this world] the human is the totality of soul and body. These two, despite their diversity in waystation, are two existent things that exist through one existence. It is as if the two are one thing possessing two sides. One of the sides is altering and extinguishing, and it is like the branch. The other side is fixed and subsistent, and it is like the root. The more the soul becomes perfect in its existence, the more the body becomes limpid and subtle. It becomes more intense in conjunction with the soul, and the unification between the two becomes stronger and more intense. Finally, when intellective existence comes about, they become one thing without difference.

The affair is not as is supposed by the majority—that, when the soul's this-worldly existence alters into the afterworldly existence, the soul withdraws from the body and becomes as if naked, throwing off its clothes. This is because they suppose that the natural body—which the soul governs and acts upon freely by an essential governance and a primary free-activity—is this inanimate flesh that is thrown down after death, but it is not like this. Rather, this dead flesh is outside the substrate of free-activity and governance. It is like a heaviness and a dregs that drops down and is expelled from the act of nature, like filth and other such things. Or, it is like the hair, fur, horns, and hooves that are obtained by nature external to her essence for external purposes. This is like a house. A man builds it not because of existence, but to repel heat and cold, and for the other things without which it is impossible to live in this world. But, human life does not pervade the house. (9:98, 846.8)²¹

Conclusion

We have now discussed ten basic points that should be sufficient to clarify Sadrâ's overall depiction of how perception moves from the lowest to the highest level by a process of disengagement. These can be summarized as follows:

1. Perception is to gain knowledge of a thing by encountering its quiddity, which is its form or intelligible reality.

2. There are four basic levels on which perception occurs, though these can be reduced to three: the senses, imagination, and intellect.
3. The levels of perception are defined by the intensity of perception's disengagement from matter.
4. The three basic perceptual levels correspond exactly with the three basic worlds that make up the cosmos.
5. The reality of existence is inseparable from the reality of knowledge and perception, so the levels of existence are identical with the levels of perception.
6. The mental existence of the perceptibles is a shadow of the external existence of the things, except in intellectual perception, where intellect and the intelligibles have become one through an existence that is permanent and everlasting.
7. The human soul comes into existence empty of knowledge and actuality, so it has the potential to perceive all things. Perception is the soul's actuality and activity.
8. The more intensely the soul perceives, the more intensely it exists. The more intensely it exists, the more it takes on the attribute of the simple reality of existence that gives rise to all things.
9. The soul's disengagement of things through perception is at once its own disengagement through the intensification of existence and consciousness.
10. The soul's disengagement does not involve shucking off the body, but rather transfiguration of the body and all bodily perceptibles.

In conclusion, we can see that for Sadrâ, the final goal of perception is for the human self to see things as they really are. This can only occur when the soul actualizes its unlimited potential to know. This potential is the ability to perceive all things dwelling on all levels of formal existence. The potential can be turned into actuality through a gradual disentanglement, disengagement, and separation (*mufâraqa*) from all embodiment and materiality and a return to the intelligible reality of the soul, which is nothing but the intellect in act, or the intelligence that perceives all things as they actually are in existence itself. This does not mean that the soul will no longer have any connection with the things of the external world. Rather, it means that it will have come to perceive things clearly, wherever they may be the levels of existence. It will no longer fall into the nearsightedness of perceiving the forms as anchored to the various locations in which they become manifest to the perceiver, locations in which the forms appear through the dark glass of sense-perception and imagination. Having perceived self and all things for what they are and having found itself to be one with all things, the soul attains to its final goal.

Notes:

1-I provide page references both for the nine-volume edition of the *Asfâr* (Tabâtabâ'î edition, which began appearing in Qom in 1378/1958-59), as given on the CD-Rom "Nûr al-Hikma 2" (Qum: Computer Research Center of Islamic Science; and for the lithograph edition (Tehran: 1282/1865-66); in the latter case, I also provide the line number. Since the lithograph edition is only partially paginated, I follow the pagination established by M. Ibrâhîm Ayatî in *Fihrist-i abwâb wa fusûl-i kitâb-i Asfâr* (Tehran: Dânishgâh-i Tihârân, 1340/1961). The latter has also been published in S. H. Nasr, *Yâd-nâma-yi Mullâ Sadrâ* (Tehran: Dânishgâh-i Tihârân, 1340/1961), pp. 63-106.

2-Sadrâ does not use the term quiddity here, but he does allude to it by his use of the term isithbât, or "achieving fixity." This word derives from the same root as thâbita, "fixed," as in the term 'ayn thâbita, the "fixed entity" made famous by Ibn al-'Arabî and often discussed by Sadrâ. In both Ibn al-'Arabî and Sadrâ the term is taken as a synonym of quiddity.

3-Asfâr 3:360-61, 290.27.

4-The basic problem with "abstraction" is that the word totally loses the sense of the intensification of existence and reality that takes place as the degree of disengagement increases. Cf. my discussion of the word in The Heart of Islamic Philosophy (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

5-"As for sensory perceptions, they are contaminated by ignorance. Attaining them is mixed with failure to find, for sense-perception attains only the outward side of things and the molds of the quiddities, without their realities and their inward sides." (Asfâr 3:367, 292.14)

6-Asfâr 3:361-62, 290-91.

7-Asfâr 3:362, 291.

8-For a division of the worlds into three in terms of the soul's three "perceptual configurations" (nasha'ât idrâkiyya), see Asfâr 9:21, 826.18. In discussing these four domains of existence, Sadrâ continues by explaining that they are four worlds, and each is one of the divisions of knowledge, because at each level the known forms pertain to a different domain of existence. Then he describes the sorts of "possible perceptibles" that pertain to each while also clarifying what he means by dividing the first three levels into complete, sufficient, and deficient: "The first sort of perceptible is 'complete' in existence and knowability. These are the intellects and the intelligibles. Because of the intensity of their existence, luminosity, and limpidness, they are quit of bodies, apparitions, and numbers. Despite their manyness and their plentifulness, they exist through one, all-gathering existence. . . . The second is the world of celestial souls, disengaged apparitions, and quantitative images. These are 'sufficient' through their essence and their intellectual origins because, by means of their conjunction with the world of divine forms that are complete in existence, their deficiencies are mended and they are affiliated with them. Third is the world of sensory souls, the lower spiritual realm [al-malakût al-asfal], and all forms sensible in act and perceived by the tools of awareness and the organs, which also belong to the lower spiritual realm. These are deficient in existence as long as they pertain to this world. However, they may be elevated beyond this world and become disengaged from it—as far as the world of disengaged apparitions—by following along with the human soul's climb to it.

Fourth is the world of bodily matters and their forms, which are transient, disappearing, transforming, and undergoing generation and corruption." (3:502-3, 322.12)

9-In one passage, Sadrâ explains that the obscurations from which people need to disengage themselves in order to achieve the intellection of a thing are "alien accidents" (a'râd ghariba). He writes, "The alien accidents from which the human needs to disengage himself in intellecting a thing are not the quiddities and meanings of the things, since there is no contradiction between intellecting a thing and intellecting another attribute along with it. In the same way, the [alien accidents] from which one must disengage oneself in imagining something are not their imagined forms, since there is no contradiction between imagining something and imagining another guise [hay'a] along with it. Rather, the preventer of some perceptions is certain modalities of the existent things. This preventer is dark and accompanied by nonexistences that veil their own absent affairs from the perceptual means. An example is being [kawn] in matter, because the situational matter necessitates the veiling of the form from perception unconditionally. So also is being in sensation and imagination; these also may prevent intellectual perception, because they also are a quantitative existence, even if the quantity [miqdâr] is disengaged from matter. But, the intelligible's existence is not quantitative existence, because it is disengaged from the two realms of being and stands beyond the two worlds." (Asfâr 3:363, 291.9)

Dānīshgāh-i Tīhrān, 1340/1961). The latter has also been published in S. H. Nasr, *Yād-nāma-yi Mullā Sadrā* (Tehran: Dānīshgāh-i Tīhrān, 1340/1961), pp. 63-106.

² Sadrā does not use the term *quiddity* here, but he does allude to it by his use of the term *istithbāt* or “achieving fixity.” This word derives from the same root as *thābita*, “fixed,” as in the term *‘ayn thābita*, the “fixed entity” made famous by Ibn al-‘Arabī and often discussed by Sadrā. In both Ibn al-‘Arabī and Sadrā the term is taken as a synonym of quiddity.

³ *Asfār* 3:360-61, 290.27.

⁴ The basic problem with “abstraction” is that the word totally loses the sense of the intensification of existence and reality that takes place as the degree of disengagement increases. Cf. my discussion of the word in *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁵ “As for sensory perceptions, they are contaminated by ignorance. Attaining them is mixed with failure to find, for sense-perception attains only the outward side of things and the molds of the quiddities, without their realities and their inward sides.” (*Asfār* 3:367, 292.14)

⁶ *Asfār* 3:361-62, 290-91.

⁷ *Asfār* 3:362, 291.

⁸ For a division of the worlds into three in terms of the soul’s three “perceptual configurations” (*nasha’āt idrākiyya*), see *Asfār* 9:21, 826.18. In discussing these four domains of existence, Sadrā continues by explaining that they are four worlds, and each is one of the divisions of knowledge, because at each level the known forms pertain to a different domain of existence. Then he describes the sorts of “possible perceptibles” that pertain to each while also clarifying what he means by dividing the first three levels into complete, sufficient, and deficient: “The first sort of perceptible is ‘complete’ in existence and knowability. These are the intellects and the intelligibles. Because of the intensity of their existence, luminosity, and limpidness, they are quit of bodies, apparitions, and numbers. Despite their manyness and their plentifulness, they exist through one, all-gathering existence. . . . The second is the world of celestial souls, disengaged apparitions, and quantitative images. These are ‘sufficient’ through their essence and their intellective origins because, by means of their conjunction with the world of divine forms that are complete in existence, their deficiencies are mended and they are affiliated with them. Third is the world of sensory souls, the lower spiritual realm [*al-malakūt al-asfal*], and all forms sensible in act and perceived by the tools of awareness and the organs, which also belong to the lower spiritual realm. These are deficient in existence as long as they pertain to this world. However, they may be elevated beyond this world and become disengaged from it—as far as the world of disengaged apparitions—by following along with the human soul’s climb to it.

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from matter. But, the intelligible's existence is not quantitative existence, because it is disengaged from the two realms of being and stands beyond the two worlds." (*Asfār* 3:363, 291.9)

10 Lest we think that Bâbâ Afdal's works, mostly written in Persian, were unknown to Mullâ Sadrâ, we should remember that Sadrâ translated one of them into Arabic. This is *Ikhsâr al-'ârifîn*, a translation of *Jâwidân-nâma*. See the introduction to my edition and translation of *Ikhsâr al-'ârifîn*, forthcoming.

11 8:40, 732.31; cf. 8:165, 764.3; 8:251, 785.31.

12 For example: "Perception is the presence of the perceptible for the perceiver" (4:137, 377.6). "Perception consists of the existence of something for something else and its presence for it" (6:146, 635.11). "Perception consists of the existence of a form present at an existent thing whose existence belongs to itself" (8:163, 764.3). "Perception is nothing but the soul's regard [*iltifât*] toward and its witnessing the perceptible" (6:162, 573.22).

13 The discussion of "presence" in the context of perception is directly related to the issue of two sorts of knowledge often discussed in later Islamic philosophy—"presential" (*hudûrî*) and "obtained" (*husûlî*). The fact that "presence" is synonymous with "witnessing" is typically ignored in the secondary literature, and this helps obscure the connection with the whole issue of "witnessing" in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabî and his followers. For them, witnessing is synonymous with "unveiling" (*kashf*) and "direct seeing" (*'iyân*). Moreover, it is also a synonym of *wujûd* when this term is used to designate the highest possibilities of human perception, as in the common expression *ahl al-kashf wa'l-wujûd*, "the folk of unveiling and finding." On Ibn al-'Arabî's use of these terms, see my *Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

14 He goes on to point out that these two designations—the absent and the witnessed—pertain to our limited, this-worldly point of view, in which the intellect has not been actualized in its full splendor. In actual fact, he says, the afterworld is more intense in its existence than is this world, and everything more intense in existence is also more intense in presence, witnessing, and manifestation. "Every stratum of the Gardens that is more intense in quittance from this cosmos and greater in disengagement from and elevation beyond matter is more intense in manifestation and greater in gathering" (6:152, 571.20).

15 One might object that the human soul is not in fact a "pure potentiality," because it is born with instincts or innate knowledge. I think Sadrâ would reply by reminding us that what we call by names such as "instincts" do not pertain to the human soul, but rather to the vegetal and animal souls. It is true that there can be no human soul without a vegetal and animal soul, but the discussion of unlimited potential pertains strictly to the human soul, not to other dimensions of human existence. The "humanness" of the human soul is precisely that point where human beings are indefinable and unfixed and, by that very fact, capable of becoming all things.

16 Compare this passage: "When the soul perceives the universal intelligibles, it witnesses them as intellectual, disengaged essences. But this is not by the soul's disengaging them and its extracting [*intizâ'*] their intelligible form from their sensory form—as is held by the majority of the sages. Rather, it takes place through a transferal that belongs to the soul—from the sensory, to the imaginal, to the intelligible; and through a migration from this world to the afterworld, and then to what lies beyond it, and through a journey from the world of bodies to the world of images, then to the world of the intellects." (*Asfâr* 1:289-90, 71.18)

17 "Bestower" (*wâhib*) is one of the divine names. More usually, Sadrâ employs the phrase "Bestower of the forms" (*wâhib al-suwar*), and it is clearly this that he means here. This is a common philosophical designation for God, and it is equivalent to the Koranic divine name *musawwir*, "Form-giver."

18 *Asfâr* 1:387, 96.7; 8:160, 763.10; 8:253, 786.13; 8:301, 798.27.

19 The reason that the soul is potentially all things is that it is an image of existence per se. This, in philosophical terms, is the meaning of the saying, "God created Adam in His form [*sûra*]." Sadrâ employs some of the standard theological language in this explanation of the soul's nature: "The Author

is the creator of the existents, both the innovated and engendered [i.e., the spiritual and corporeal]. He created the human soul as an image [mithâl] of His Essence, His attributes, and His acts—for He is incomparable with any likeness [mithl], but not with an image. Thus He created the soul as an image of Him in essence, attributes, and acts, so that knowledge of it would be a ladder to knowledge of Him. He made the soul's essence disengaged from engendered beings, spatial confinements, and directions. He made it become the possessor of power, knowledge, desire, life, hearing, and seeing. He made it possessor of an empire similar to the empire of its Author. 'He creates what He' desires 'and chooses' [Koran 28:68] for the sake of what He desires. However, although the soul derives from the root of the spiritual realm, the world of power, and the mine of magnificence and ascendancy, it is weak in existence and endurance, because it has fallen into the levels of the descent, and it has intermediaries between it and its Author." (Asfâr 65.22, 1:265-66)

20- In criticizing the earlier philosophers on the issue of disengagement, Sadrâ no doubt wanted to avoid the severe criticism leveled against the concept by Ibn al-'Arabi. See, for example, Chittick, Self-Disclosure of God (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), pp. 346-47. Compare the critique of the philosophical position quoted from Ibn al-'Arabi's disciple, Sadr al-Dîn Qûnawî, in Sachiko Murata, The Tao of Islam (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 222.

21- Compare this passage: "In short, the state of the soul in the level of its disengagement is like the state of the external perceptible when it becomes a sensible thing, then an imaginalized thing, then an intelligible thing. It is said that every perception has a sort of disengagement, and that the levels of perception are disparate in respect of the levels of disengagement. The meaning of this is as we said: The disengagement of the perceptible does not consist of throwing off some of its attributes and leaving others. Rather, it consists of the alteration of the lower, more deficient existence into the higher, more eminent existence. In the same way, the human's disengagement and transferal from this world to the other is nothing but the alteration of the first configuration into a second configuration. So also, when the soul is perfected and it becomes an intellect in act, it is not that some of its potencies—like the sense-perceptual—are stripped from it and that others—like the intellectual—remain. On the contrary, as the soul is perfected and its essence elevated, the other potencies are likewise perfected and elevated along with it." (Asfâr 9:99-100, 846.18)