

The analysis of the concept of free will in Mulla Sadra's viewpoint: a philosophical base for hope therapy

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to introduce a clear picture of the meaning of free will based on the foundations of the transcendental philosophy of Mulla Sadra (known as Hikmat al-Muta'alia). This illustrative image, which can resolve some of the ambiguities and challenges of the debate, has been achieved through three steps: 1. Finding all of the the meanings of free will discussed in the transcendental wisdom and categorizing them into proper categories, 2. examining the veracity of each of these meanings through their conceptual analysis based on the principles of Hikmat al-Muta'alia, 3. the exploration of the existential scope of the concept of will and the proof of its modulation. Out of this conceptual analysis, some important ambiguities and challenges were answered and these results were obtained: the clarification of the relationship between the concepts of "will" and "desire" (being synonyms or at least close in meaning) on one hand, and "will" and "knowledge" (being totally different in meaning) on the other; the discovery of a common and comprehensive meaning of will in God and the creatures (love and affection) which can prevent the refutation of the Devine Will; and at last, providing a firm rational base for rehabilitation from hard diseases through hopeful and positive thoughts.

Keywords: Free Will, Mulla Sadra, Free Will, Knowledge, Love, Hope Therapy

Introduction

The word "*ikhtyar*" (which is referred to as "free will" throughout this paper) as an effective concept in various fields of human life has always been the center of attention and has caused many challenges in the tradition of Islamic thought. The precise definition of the meaning of free will can help clarify the atmosphere of the debate and prevent the ambiguities there. Transcendental Philosophy or Hikmat al-Muta'alia, which is found by the great Muslim philosopher Mulla Sadra (1571/2 – 1640), is one of the most prominent representatives of rational thinking in Islam and has offered an innovative image of the concept of free will. The aim of this paper is to disclose such a

new interpretation of free will and find out some of its main results.

At first, it is necessary to mention two points:

- a. In the transcendent wisdom, and based on the originality of existence and its ontological priority to essence¹, any existential concept does not have essence and quiddity and does not fall into any of Aristotelian categories and therefore has no definite definition^[1]. Free will is also an existential concept and therefore is not expected to have an Aristotelian-like definition in Hikmat al-Muta'alia; rather a Sadrai definition could be offered through discovering preliminaries of a volitional action (an action caused by free will) and through discovering other concepts and realities which are closely related to such an action.
- b. The most important definitions of free will in Mulla Sadra's works might be categorized in three main categories:

¹ *Asalat al-wujud* is a doctrine based on the Avicennan distinction between existence and essence in contingent beings. Since the reality is unique and the mentally composed contingents are simple in the real outer world, then one element of the composition is active and ontologically prior and the other is only real and actual as far as its assumed participant is there and without it, it's nothing. Ishraqiyoon, led by Suhrawardi(1154- 1191), believed in the priority of the essence, and Mutalliheen, led by Mulla Sadra, advocated the originality of the existence.

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- a) Definition based on the relationship between the free agent and other agents
- b) Definition based on the relationship between the free agent and doing or abstaining, which includes two definitions:
 - i. The possibility of each of doing or abstaining
 - ii. The willing of the agent toward each of doing or abstaining
- c) Definition based on preliminaries of a volitional action which includes two definitions:
 - i. Multi- preliminary definition
 - ii. Bi- preliminary definition

Definition based on the relationship between the free agent and others

There are some phrases in Hikmat al-Muta'alia which apparently implies that all beings except God are deprived of free will. For instance, "The free action only belongs to the Necessary and other free agents just seem to be free agents."^[1], or "The pure and real *Mukhtar* [free agent] is only the one which is the essential agent without any motive that would subdue him, and it is but the Necessary Being [God] who is the ultimate cause and motive for all"^[2] Such statements can be traced back into previous philosophers like Ibn Sina (d. 1037) who clearly asserts, "Indeed the real free will belongs only to the Necessary being, and we humans are not real free agents"^[3]. The key to better understanding of such statements lies with the definition of free will which is based on the relationship between the free agent and other agents. According to this definition, free will is independence in action and negation of any passivity and submissiveness from others. Therefore, if the tendency of the subject to the action is not imposed by other subjects and the action is determined by the determination of the subject itself, not the determination of others and the agent is free from any condition, limitation or effect from the outside, then such an agent will be call a free one^[4]. The point is that the free will in this sense only belongs to God. Mulla Sadra argues that any agent except the Unique Necessary Agent is not free, because they are imperfect in their activity and dependent on many other outer and inner factors and causes, and also according to the hierarchic system of cause-and-effect, all beings are the effects of the First Cause and therefore are dependent on Him in any aspect of their existence and action^[1]. The conclusion is clear: no one except the Almighty God is free in this sense.

Free will in this sense is close to the modern concepts of "ultimate source" or "ultimate cause" which indicate the authority of the free agent and its being the last one that free from any outer factor decides and acts^[5]. As discussed before, this meaning of free will is specifically related to God and therefore if we want to reach to a common concept of free will which includes both that of the Necessary (God) and the contingent (creatures), it would not be a proper definition.

Definition based on the relationship between the free agent and doing or abstaining

This definition enjoys two different interpretations; most theologians believe that in the case of a free act, both sides of acting and abstaining must be probable and possible^[1]. This might remind us of the modern concept of "alternative possibilities"^[5] which indicates that there must be more than only one option before the agent to decide. On the other hand and in harmony with the philosophers' interpretation, Mulla Sadra asserts that "the free agent is the one who does the action if he wills, and abstains if he does not will." For the superiority of the philosophers' interpretation over that of the theologians, he argues that the first one includes both agents whose will is accidental and may come from outside and is effected by numerous factors and may change due to any change in the outer conditions and factors (like the will of human beings) on one hand, and agents whose will is essential, fixed, pre-eternal, and necessary and is not effected by any outer factors (like God) on the other. However, the theologians' definition fails to include the will of both kinds of agents and only is true about contingent agents^[1]. Moreover, even in contingent agents as late as the will has not become fixed and definite and the possibility of alternative options is yet there, nothing would happen, because the agent has not decided yet; and when the will becomes fixed and definite, there would be no possibility and probability of other options^[1].

Definition based on preliminaries of a volitional action

• Multi- preliminary definition

In a common model in transcendental wisdom, four preliminaries are introduced for a volitional act, and thus, the free will is defined. "Knowledge" (ie. *Ilm* with its both kinds: *Tasawwur* (notion) and *Tasdiq* (assertion)), "desire or tendency" (*shawq*), "will" (*irada*), and "stimulation of the acting faculty (*al-quwwat al-amela*)" are the four preliminaries of free will.^[1, 3, 4, 6] Mulla Sadra explains the four-level process this way: 1. at first, the free subject conceives the act and its usefulness and then he acknowledges and asserts its usefulness, 2. after that, the tendency and desire toward the action emerges, 3. then this tendency becomes intensive and leads to the will, 4. and finally, the acting faculty gets excited and begins to act through limbs and organs of body^[1].

As for the "acting faculty", it should be noticed that first of all, this property is only found in the animal and the human being and is not true about God, because He is more glorious to possess such physical and corporeal faculties. Secondly, even in human and animals it is only true about physical acts, and does not include inner intellectual or spiritual acts or any act which does not require physical means, like the very act of "using the physical means and faculties"^[1].

As for the "tendency and desire", there has been an old debate about whether it is the same as "will" or they are different in essence. Most of the Mutazilites believe that (intense) tendency and will have the same essence.^[7] Mulla Sadra disputes this belief in *Asfar* and narrates some of the most important criticisms,^[1] but in his other works he emphasizes the unity of intense tendency and will, "the will in us is an intensified desire which is proceeded by the motivation that is caused by conceiving and asserting the benefit of an act"^[8] and finally he clearly affirms that "the truth is that there is no difference between them except with intensification and debilitation. The *shawq* [desire or tendency]

may be weak and then strengthens and becomes determined, the determination and completeness of the tendency and desire is called *irada* [will]".^[9] Therefore, although desire in its physical sense and human-animal usage cannot be attributed to God, the reality and the completeness of it (i.e., will) could be ascribed to Him.

• Bi- preliminary definition

After deletion of "stimulation of acting faculty" from the wide and common definition of free will and also after acceptance of the unity of the reality of *shawq* with *irada*, there remain only two items: knowledge and will. That's why Mulla Sadra sometimes names only these two criteria for the volitional action^[1].

Therefore, the only appropriate definition which is accepted by Mulla Sadra and is based on the principles of Hikmat al-Mota'alia is this common wide meaning which includes both the Necessary and contingent being: any action which is done out of knowledge and will is considered to be a volitional action. Now it's time to discuss these two features based on the viewpoints of Mulla Sadra's transcendental philosophy.

• Knowledge

As for knowledge, there are two important points. Firstly, here, by knowledge they mean the knowledge which is effective in the action and motivates the subject into that action; in fact, the knowledge of the goodness and usefulness of that action is meant here^[4]. Accordingly, knowing about another person's act and its goodness or having the information about the number of his own heart beats per minute is not a criterion for the volitional act, since these perceptions do not play role in the occurrence of those actions.

Another important point concerning knowledge is the question of whether it is the same as will or not. Some of the Mutazilites approve the unity of will and knowledge.^[10] Mulla Sadra argues against this view and in one of his arguments says: "Sometimes there is belief in the goodness of the action, but it doesn't lead to will and action, and on the other hand, sometimes the action and will are there, but there is no belief in the benefit of the action, even sometimes there is belief in its harm"^[1] like a person who is addicted to smoking. So belief and knowledge cannot be equal to will.

• Will

It seems that the main criterion for the volitional act is being done out of will of its agent. Also the most eminent difference

between Mulla Sadra's viewpoint about free will and that of other philosophers lies with the special meaning and explanation he offers for will.

The meaning of will in transcendental wisdom is love, affection and contentment. Sadra explicitly finds the will equal to love and believes that they are a unique reality which encompasses all the grades and instances of the existence. Thus there are two special features for the will in Sadra's viewpoint: will is equal to love and contentment, and will and its equivalents are graded realities.

As for the first part, he argues, "The existence and its attributes are loved and desired in all things, so that the perfect existence is intrinsically desired for itself in every aspect, and it loves and is content with itself essentially and as a result, loves and admires everything that belongs to and is emanated from its essence, like its existential attributes or its acts and effects. The incomplete existence, also, as far as it is endowed with the benefit of existence, loves itself and its cause or causes essentially and thus loves its existential attributes, acts and effects as a result."^[1] Many of Sadra's followers approve the equality of will, love and contentment; past and today Sadraii thinkers like Sabzevari,^[11] Zonuzi^[6], Isfahani^[12], Khomeini^[13] and Javadi.^[14]

For the second part, Mulla Sadra points out some premises and principles, most important of which is ontological originality and primacy of existence (*asalat al-wujud*) and gradation or modulation of existence (*tashkik al-wujud*)²^[1]. According to *asalat al-wujud*, existence encompasses all the reality and real things and thus, every perfection or real quality, including will, ontologically returns and is equal to the existence. Based on this principle and the concept of *tashkik al-wujud*, Mulla Sadra concludes that as the existence is a unique but graded truth which encompasses the entire universe from Necessary to contingent and from substance to accident, its existential qualities are also graded and modulated and encompasses the whole universe. Therefore, the ultimate nature of knowledge, will, power, and other existential perfections, like existence itself, does not distinguish strictly between the Necessary and contingent, though the quality, quantity and intensity of each one in every grade and instance is different. Therefore, there is no need to deprive Almighty God from the attribute will in excuse for the assumption that will is always and anywhere a mental quality and God does not have any mind and soul and thus, does not have any mental qualities³^[4]. It is concluded from the above statements that what is sometimes called will, sometimes love, sometimes desire, is with and within every instance of the existence, though sometimes such names are not assumed to it either because it's not common to do so or most people cannot find and understand the effects of will in that

² According to this principle, though one simple reality, existence comes in grades in a similar way that sunlight and candlelight are the same reality of different grades. Mulla Sadra says, "The instances of existence are [the same in their reality but] different in terms of intensity and weakness, priority and posteriority, and nobility and baseness".

³ With the very assumption, Tabatabaee has refuted the essential will for God and only believes in actual will

case; similar to knowledge which is within the corporeal and inanimate bodies, though most people do not find it there and thus, do not name them to be knowing entities^[1].

A philosophical basis for rehabilitation through hope

Apart from philosophical results of Sadra's analysis of the reality of will, it seems that it is capable of being a firm philosophical base for "hope therapy". Nowadays one of the effective ways to cope with illnesses and hardships, along with fighting them through pursuing serious medical treatments, is to pay attention to positive and promising thoughts. This way, especially in the face of severe diseases, is much more effective. Of course, the hopeful thoughts should not be false and absurd; rather, it should be consistent with the reality of the patient's condition. Here Mulla Sadra's analysis of the concept of "will" can provide a solid rational foundation for the effect of hopeful and positive thoughts on enduring and coping with hard diseases and regaining health. According to Sadra's view, every existent loves itself and its works and acts and whatever belongs to it; therefore, instead of thinking of the problems that we cannot solve, we just have to pay attention to our possessions and what we have, [numerous divine bounties we possess], then the existential rules automatically begin to work, and we will definitely enjoy ourselves and our possessions, because they are part of our existence and, as a result, are loved and desired; we just have to see them and take them into account. If the patient tries to concentrate and attend to his existential possessions (or if the therapist help him to do so), certainly a hope and motivation for life and health will be provided in him.

Conclusion

Among the most important definitions of free will in Hikmat al-Muta'alia, only one of them is acceptable due to its wide scope and being compatible with principles of this philosophy, especially the principles of primacy and modulation of the existence. According to Mulla Sadra and Sadra'i's philosophers, a free and volitional act is the one which is done out of knowledge and will of its agent. Here, the emphasis is more on will [*Irada*] and it's the key to understand the reality of free will. Mulla Sadra argues that will has two main features: 1. it's an existential concept and reality, 2. like the existence itself, will is a graded reality and encompasses all the instances of the existence from Necessary to contingent. Those who have neglected these two characteristics have fallen into difficulty defining the reality of will. Because of this wide range of scope

of will, they have falsely assumed that it is always and anywhere equal to either knowledge, or desire and tendency, or a single mental quality of human beings. After refuting other viewpoints about will, Sadra offers his own innovative analysis which is enthusiastically accepted by most of his followers; based on the principles of his philosophy, he argues that will is equal to love and contentment. This novel analysis affects either scopes of theory and practice. In the theory sphere, it facilitates a clear explanation for the wide meaning of will which is common between God and creatures. In the realm of practice, it helps us to enjoy a firm rational base for enduring the hardships of life, especially hard diseases, through hopeful and positive thoughts.

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