

MULLĀ ṢADRĀ'S DOCTRINE OF THE PRIMACY OF EXISTENCE (AṢĀLAT AL-WUJŪD)

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Introduction

The subject of *wujūd* (Being and existence) is an important and central issue that is discussed in Islamic philosophy, especially Islamic metaphysics (*al-hikmat al-ilāhiyyah*). Historically, from the earliest phase of Islamic philosophy, this subject has been its main concern and this is reflected in the works, thought and perspectives of the Muslim philosophers themselves. This observation is most evident and best represented in the works and thought of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, more well-known as Mullā Ṣadrā, (d. 1640) whose whole philosophical perspective rests on the study of Being.

The discussion of Muslim philosophers on the subject of *wujūd* pertains to both the concept of *wujūd* in itself and its relation to *māhiyyah* (quiddity). The distinction between these two concepts constitutes the first step in ontologico-metaphysical thinking among Muslim philosophers and is basic and fundamental in Islamic philosophy. All other principles and doctrines that issue from Islamic philosophy and especially Islamic metaphysics are based on these two concepts, their distinction and their relationship. In Islamic philosophy, the understanding of the meaning of existence (*wujūd*) and quiddity (*māhiyyah*) together with their distinction and relationship provide the fundamental keys to an understanding of the nature and structure of reality.¹

In the history of Islamic philosophy, al-Fārābī (d. 950), the

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¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1971), 86, hereafter cited as *Concept*; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Existence (*wujūd*) and Quiddity (*māhiyyah*) in Islamic Philosophy," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1989), 413, hereafter cited as "Existence".

Muslim Peripatetic (*Mashshā'ī*) philosopher was the first to explicitly distinguish between existence (*wujūd*) and quiddity (*māhiyyah*). However, this distinction has been more closely associated with Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), since he made it the cornerstone of his ontology. Based on Ibn Sīnā's ontology, Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī (d. 1191), the founder of the school of Illumination (*Ishrāq*) constructed a whole metaphysics of essence. Suhrawardī's main thesis of the fundamental reality of quiddity, however, is based on a misinterpretation of Ibn Sīnā's view that existence is distinguishable from quiddity *in concreto* or in the external world. Ibn Sīnā actually establishes the dichotomy between existence and quiddity conceptually. The distinction between existence and quiddity is established as a result of a conceptual or intellectual analysis of concrete existent things. Hence, in this respect, Ibn Sīnā like that of his predecessor al-Fārābī, still worked within the framework of Aristotelian metaphysics which is primarily concerned with the "existent qua existent".²

The shift in focus in Islamic philosophy and metaphysics was brought about by Mullā Ṣadrā whose perspective emphasized *wujūd*; the "act of being" or "act of existence", instead of the existent (*mawjūd*). Mullā Ṣadrā's contribution is significant since most of the Muslim philosophers who came after him also focussed their attention on *wujūd*. The school which he founded during the Safavid period called the *al-Hikmat al-Muta'āliyyah* (Transcendent Theosophy), is the most dominant school of Persia until today. His doctrine of the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*), which is the subject of this paper, serves as the main principle of his philosophizing and the basis on which he constructed his vast system of metaphysics.³

I. The Foundation of the Doctrine of the Primacy of Existence (Aṣālat al-Wujūd)

As an introduction to this doctrine, it must be noted that Mullā

² Nasr, "Existence", 410-417.

³ Ibid.; Izutsu, *Concept*, 71, 103.