

## Substantial Motion and Self-aware Soul: Does Mulla Sadra's "Substantial Motion" theory provide a reliable framework for the Explanation of the Relationship between Body and Soul?

Alireza Farnam<sup>1</sup>

Bahareh Deljou<sup>2</sup>

Neda Farzin<sup>3</sup>

### *Abstract*

One of the major challenges that humankind have not properly dealt with is Mind-body problems. Through which ways, an immaterial entity (Soul) emerges out of a material body, and the relationship that exists between these two entities have constantly stimulated proposed explanations to find novel models in this regard. Mulla Sadra's "substantial motion theory" suggests providing an extensive explanation concerning the relationship between mind and soul. Sadra considered "change" as an all-pervasive reality running through the entire universe including the category of substance. According to Sadra, in certain circumstances that have the potential to occur only in humans, for the aforementioned reason, matter changes essentially and converts to the soul. Mutational changes occur in the substance of matter like the emergence of life out of unliving matter, and self-aware soul's appearance out of unaware matter. Based on Mulla Sadra's perspective, contemplating, along with investigating the situations based on this fundamental transformation, endorses sufficient perception of the relation between spirit and body.

*Keywords:* Substantial motion, Self-aware soul, Mind-Body problem, Four categories (quantity, quality, position and place)

---

<sup>1</sup> Research Center of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran. / Professor of psychiatry/ Corresponding author, [alirezafarnam@yahoo.com](mailto:alirezafarnam@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Educational Psychology, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran. / Ph. D. Candidate of Psychology

<sup>3</sup> Uremia University of Medical Sciences, Uremia, Iran

## Introduction

Since the birth of philosophical thought, it has been an enigmatic issue that how immaterial (mind) and material (body) entities can exist simultaneously in human beings and be in such full accordance with each other. This issue, throughout the history of philosophy, is known as the "mind-body problem". This problem clarifies the relationship between the mental states, named as non-physical entities, events and processes—like beliefs, actions, and thoughts—and the physical ones in human bodies (Skirry, 2016).

In this field, there has been a variety of approaches. The majority of them are either dualist or monist. Dualism maintains a strict distinction between the realms of mind and matter. On the other hand, Monism declares that there is only one unifying reality, substance or essence, whereby everything can be clarified (Young, 1996; Robinson, 2011). Young (1996) and Robinson (2011) believed that the mentioned problem was remarkably addressed by René Descartes resulting in Cartesian dualism.

Despite the huge efforts of monists to overcome this "dualism", (from "Materialists" who deny the reality of "mind per se" and reduce it to physical phenomena of the body, to "Idealists" who consider the world as a merely mental or eternal entity which has been risen out of ideas, and deny the reality of physical matter,) none of their attempts has seemed to be genuinely successful, and thus, the dominant trend in this field has been Descartes' dualism. Descartes, indeed, divided the world into two independent essences. This kind of dualism sometimes is called "substance dualism". Chisholm (1911) states that Descartes believed the essence of mind is awareness- or as he called "thinking"- and the essence of the matter is a three-dimensional "extension" in space.

The implicit problem in the abovementioned view is the quality of the relationship between these two separate fields. In essence, the question with regard to the connection of these two entirely separate entities with each other remains unanswered. The resolution of Descartes which is identifying the Pineal gland as the connection point of these two entities could not attract much support from experimental sciences, and nor did other resolutions that have been offered by other dualistic philosophers in recent centuries (Searle, 2004).

As nobody has yet found an empirically identifiable meeting point between the non-physical mind and its physical extension, dualism has always had a serious problem which is the fact that many modern philosophers of mind claim that the mind is not something separate from the body. Addressing this problem, believers in monism have tried to find a solution to this problem. A Unitarian view (as the philosophers known as "positive philosophers" believe), considers the mind and brain as neither independent, nor the same, but as coordinated phenomena derived from one universal source (Jaegwan, 1995).

### ***1. How an aware mind can arise from the matter's reactions and interaction?***

The main question remains unresolved: How the matter's reactions can produce an immaterial entity (i.e. aware mind)? This has conceptualized a "problem of consciousness" in the modern formulation of the ancient "mind\_body problem" (Churchland, 1989). In this paper, it has been tried to introduce an Iranian philosopher whose ideas called "substantial motion" can further shed light on the issue and propose a Unitarian view for a better understanding of the processes that during evolution, paved the way to the emergence of Self-aware mind out of the material brain. Şadr Addin Shirazi, also called Mulla Sadra (born *ac.* 1571, Shiraz, Iran—died 1640, Basra,) a leader of the Iranian cultural rebirth in the 17th century, was a philosopher. He, as the leading representative of the illuminationist (Ishraqi), the school of philosopher-mystics, is widely regarded by Iranians as one of the best philosophers in their country (Leaman, 1985). According to Oliver Leaman (1985), in the last four hundred years, in the Muslim world, the single most significant and influential philosopher is arguably attributed to Mulla Sadra. In fact, he brought a new philosophical understanding of the nature of reality and created a major shift from essentialism to existentialism in Islamic philosophy (Kamal, 2006; Nasr, 1977). Mulla Sadra's philosophy creatively synthesized Avicennism Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi's Illuminationist philosophy, Ibn Arabi's Sufi metaphysics, and the theology of Ash'ari school Twelvers Twelvers (Leaman, 1985; Rahman, 1995; Moris, 2003; Burrell, 2009; Kamal, 2009; Kharabi Masouleh & Sayari, 2014; Toussi, 2009; Moss & Joseph, 1996).

The Transcendent Theosophy in the "Four Journeys of the intellect", or simply "Four Journeys"<sup>1</sup> is his major work. Mulla Sadra's metaphysics gave priority to existence over essence. This signifies that in the light of existential "intensity", (and so, essences are not immutable), essences are determined and changed (Fathi, 2012).

One of the central concepts of Sadra's philosophy is the theory of "substantial motion" (**Arabic: *al-harakat al-jawhariyyah***) based on the premise that everything in the nature, due to the self-flow (*fayd*) and penetration of being (*sarayan al-wujud*) undergoes substantial change and transformation. Unlike Aristotle and Avicenna, who had accepted change only in four categories, i.e. *quantity*, *quality*, *position* and *place*, excluded the substance (*jawhar*) from any change and considered it a constant essence in the world, Sadra considers "change" as an all-pervasive reality running through the entire universe including the category of substance (*jawhar*). Furthermore, Aristotle and Avicenna claimed that in moving objects there is a stable essence (substance) which causes the object to remain the same at the end of the movement (i.e. the object at the end, substantially is the same as the one at the beginning of the movement). Concerning Sadra's belief which is the fact that the whole truth was not covered, he expressed that the change can occur not only in four categories but also in the substance itself. This shows that in the process of universal motion, the objects can bear a substantial change, hence they transform into another thing; a thing which is substantially different from what was at the beginning (Kalin, 2001).

Besides, Sadra maintained that in the world, there is a renewal of existence every moment caused by the continuous transformation of the substance of the material world. Thus, one of the philosophical effects of the substantial motion is the presentation of a new explanation for time and space. Sadra not only had any belief in the external and independent existence of time but also he held that time is the extent of substantial motion of the universe while considered its essential priority and posteriority. In other words, time is an attendant on the motion as it flows in all aspects of existence (even in its deepest components); consequently, the time appears as an extent of motion. On the other hand, space itself is not an independent

---

1. Mulla Sadra says, concerning the title and divisions of his book, that "the mystics and initiates have four journeys ahead: 1) a journey from the creatures to the Truth; 2) a journey in the Truth by the Truth himself; 3) the contrary of the second journey, for it is from the Truth to the creatures by the truth; and 4) the fourth is somehow contrary to the second, for it is a journey among the creatures by the Truth. (Fathi, 2012)

entity either, and it is being created due to three-dimensional expansion of substance as the universal motion begins to flow. Moreover, as continuance in three-dimensional geometrical form is not independent of continuance in the physical body, the continuation of time is not separated from the gradual continuance in renewing of corporeal substance by essence, and thus, "time" owns no independent existence from the renewing corporeal substance since it is among the analytical accidents of it. In this view, time and space are not considered as completely separated entities. In fact, they are interdependent subjects arising out of substantial motion. In Sadra's statements on the corporeal nature, there exist two extensions: one is gradual and the other is instantaneous, the former is the time itself, and the latter is the length, width, or the spatial extension of the body (Cooper, 1998). In this regard, we can consider the relation of his ideas with relativistic formulations of space-time by Albert Einstein!

## **2. What does "motion mean in "substantial motion" theory?**

Sadra maintained that it means moving from "potentiality" to "actuality". Everything in the world has a potentiality to seek the full actualization; every creature is in a special combination of potentiality and actuality in every moment. From Sadra's point of view, the world is in a ceaseless becoming and being is just a momentary stage in the flow of existence. From Sadra's perspective, becoming is the only authentic item and being, as a static construct, thought to be an illusion. Sadra believed that motion acts on the deepest level of the world, i.e. essence and substance (Soroush, 2010).

One important conclusion which could be derived automatically from the substantial motion theory is the meaningfulness of the processes of the world. The movement needs a target and by accepting that the material world has an intrinsic movement, we admit that the world follows a target and there is an implicit "road map" in the worldly existence (Soroush, 2010).

## **3. What is the Sadra's solution for the emergence of immaterial Self-awareness (Soul) out of the material body?**

Mulla Sadra considers the soul as the product of the substantial motion of the body. He claims that the soul, in its origins, needs a material setting, and by passing through the stages of the corporeal form, vegetative soul, and animal soul, reaches finally to the status of the rational human soul. All these stages exist in its material substance potentially (For the explanation of this intrinsic

pattern of development deep down the material world, we can refer to the "self-similarity" phenomenon related to Chaos theory). The soul by passing the mentioned phases releases itself from matter and potentiality, and attains the state of immateriality and actuality, owing to its substantial motion. Ultimately, the substance of the soul arrives naturally after the substance of body; in fact, it is because of the natural continuation of the body; therefore, the human form is the final stage of bodily perfection, and the first stage of the perfection of the soul. In this regard, based on Sadra's words, there is a very famous philosophical rule "The soul is corporeal in temporal origination and spiritual in continuance". As a modern metaphor, it can be considered as a rocket which is in the need of the earth to be built, but after being launched it becomes free from its earthly base, insofar as it completely escapes from the earth's gravity. Logically, the relation of the soul to the body is absolutely natural. Each body has its own soul which is specific to it, originated from its background and is the product of its substantial movement. In consequence, it is wrong to think that every person has a soul that comes along with one person from the beginning of one's life to its end, for the soul obtains perfection and actuality gradually, and its identity is created step by step through its deeds and what it gains (Mulla Sadra, 1410).

It should be noted that when Sadra remarked that the soul is the product of the substantial motion of the body; this does not mean that the soul is the effect of the body or it is completely dependent on it; rather, it means that the body is a background for the realization and actualization of the soul. Although, It is an essence that needs material ground to come into existence, in its continuation and development it does not need this ground; as Mulla Sadra confirms, "The truth is that the human soul is corporeal in its temporal origination and in its acts and deeds, but it is spiritual in its development and is intelligible". Unlike the corporeality of the soul's acting in bodies, both intelligibility and agency, regarding its essence, are spiritual. It appears that according to Sadra, self-aware soul in humans is a transitory period during which, soul, concurrently, has effect both on the body through its remnants of corporeal origin, and on the possessing of a completely spiritual component, which comprises its intelligibility for its essence and when its spirituality completes, it leaves the body forever (Mulla Sadra, 1410). Human life, in

Sadra's perspective, is the meeting point of two philosophical categories of material and immaterial<sup>1</sup>( McGinn,1989).

In the light of substantial motion, the soul intensifies in its essence and entity, next moves from one state to another one. The more the soul intensifies existentially, the less it pays attention to the body; subsequently, the body and its faculties weaken, and then the soul reaches a stage of substantial perfection and existential independence that eventually its relation to the body discontinues, and natural death occurs. Therefore, the extinction of body's power and its faculties does not lead to natural death; it is the body that follows the soul instead, and the separation between the two is caused by the soul's existential intensification, perfection, and independence (Mulla Sadra, 1410).

It is assumed that based on Sadra's belief, every humankind reaches to the predetermined severity of the soul before dying, and death occurs due to the completion of the soul's intensification. In consequence, it appears from his opinion that every life attains a kind of perfection before dying, and life events help for obtaining this completion.

A Unitarian framework is brought by his substantial motion theory for the understanding of the relationship between the material body and the immaterial self-aware soul.

Sadra's utterance regarding "freeness" can be presumed to mean an escape from the restrictions of time and space. From this view, self-aware mind (with its almost unlimited linguistic and imaginal capabilities) could be a satisfactory compromise between the matter which is struggling to escape (due to its intrinsic substantial motion), and the restricting forces of Time and Space.

Indeed, Sadra's formulation can lead to the following conclusions:

- 1) The Self-aware soul is the product of the ceaseless intrinsic substantial motion of the matter during evolution (since the beginning moment of the world i.e. Bing Bang). (In this regard Sadra's idea has similarities with Henry Bergson's "Creative Evolution" concept and its propulsive vital force "Elan vital".)
- 2) The appearance of the self-aware soul is, in fact, a transitional period within the process of substantial motion, the matter's struggle to escape from the

---

2. Consciousness is like in this respect. We know that life evolved from inorganic matter, so we expect there to be some explanation of this process. We cannot plausibly take the arrival of life as a primitive brute fact, nor can we accept that life arose by some form of miraculous emergence (McGinn, 1989).

restrictions of Time and Space (and the accompanying natural forces, like gravity) occurs, and the human self-aware soul is not the final product, so the struggle continues.

- 3) The essence of Self-aware soul is motion, not quiescence, and thus, the structure of it along with its accompanying organizations such as personality cannot be static structures like buildings, but dynamic organizations, for the most part similar to vortexes or fountains. In spite of the apparent fixity of these structures, it is not static, and these constructions preserve form due to flow of matter in a distinct pathway.
- 4) Nevertheless, the Self-aware soul has been freed relatively from the restrictions of space, during evolution (the history of evolution is considered the account of the mobility of living creatures during which they step by step become more mobile and more vigilant; similarly, humans, through discovering fire and using animal fur for their covering, could create "microenvironments" that free them from dependency on African plains, and they could go to higher circles of the earth), it is strongly restricted to Time. As Martin Heidegger (1962) points out Dasein is an essentially temporal being. Heidegger (1962) defines the "Dasein" as "the being for whom the being is a question". Dasein's temporality, mortality, and understanding of the inevitability of confronting death cause "anxiety", hence for Heidegger, "Existential anxiety" is the inseparable companion of the self-aware soul. Could we consider "Existential anxiety" as a sign of intrinsic unrest, pushing forward the self-awareness to free itself completely from the restrictions of Time and Place and their companion forces like gravity?

In other words, could we consider the "existential anxiety" as the propulsive motor of the self-aware soul toward growth and freedom?

If we could, then as anxiety has "withdrawal" for its "behavioural", could we say that any disciplinary attempt to transcend the self-awareness (for instance, psychotherapies) should chiefly emphasize on "what we shouldn't do" rather than "what we should do"?

It is implied that presently, psychotherapy disciplines have too much relied on "should do" instructions and less attention was given to what "we shouldn't do".

- 5) In Sadra's view, Life is the process of transformation of matter (potentiality) into the immaterial soul (actuality). Then, Sadra thinks that personal life (no matter how aberrant or safe it could be, i.e. even those peoples' courses of life are not socially safe and acceptable, finally reach the existential target; no personal life can be regarded as futile; therefore, this can shed a new light on the issue of personality disorder. Perhaps the aberrant behaviours of

personality-disordered people are their material composition's unique way for the release of the soul) is in the course of growth and development. (i.e. according to his ideas the outcome of any life is the release of matter in the form of soul from restrictions of maternal forces; consequently, every life finally reaches the destined target, and there is no difference among humans in this regard although human souls differ in what Sadra calls "severity of soul". In fact, human life is not an independent entity; it is just a part (perhaps the final part) of the long journey which matter has begun from crassitude (indelicacy) toward elegance (tenuity). Accordingly, each kind of life is the particular way of the matter, through transforming into the soul, to become free.

- 6) One important philosophical result of the Theory of Substantial Motion is the concept of "continual Creation". According to this theory, every material being is changing and renewing in its substance, and its existence in every moment is different from that of the previous moment, i.e. not only in appearance and exterior but also in its existence and identity, the world is in a state of flux, and in every moment we are confronted with a new world. Therefore, the world is not a fixed entity with small changes in every moment, but in every moment life disappears and then appears again. Not least, one main experimental hypothesis regarding the nature of consciousness (self-awareness) gives clues in support of this concept. This hypothesis suggests that a 60-cycle-per-second sweeping process extends from the thalamus to the neocortex. This sweep may serve to bind representational processes together in the internal experience of consciousness. Processes that are active at the time of the sweep then become linked within consciousness. Then, it can be assumed that at least, in human consciousness, the world is being created every moment all over again. In other words, with the pass of each wave in humans, the representation of world appears, and after its passing, the representation disappears waiting for another wave to reach, i.e. a continual creation and destruction of the world's representation.

### 3. Conclusion

Mutational changes, occurring in the substance of the matter, provided an adequately robust impetus that affects the matter in a critical period. The emergence of life and self-aware soul are instances of such substantial motion. In this paper, forasmuch as the mind-body problem from Sadra's

view can shed new light on this problem, many unresolved questions can be answered.

### References

- Burrell, D. B. (2009). Mulla Sadra on 'Substantial Motion': A Clarification and a Comparison with Thomas Aquinas. *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*. Vol. 2 Issue 4, p369-386.
- Chisholm, H. (1911). *HYPERLINK "https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911\_Encyclop%C3%A6dia\_Britannica/Parallelism,\_Psychophysical" "Parallelism, Psychophysical". HYPERLINK "https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encyclop%C3%A6dia\_Britannica\_Eleventh\_Edition" \o "Encyclopædia Britannica Eleventh Edition" Encyclopædia Britannica (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press: p. 762.*
- Churchland, P. S. (1989). *HYPERLINK "https://books.google.com/books?id=hAeFMFW3rDUC&pg=PA548" Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain*. MIT Press.
- Cooper, J. (1998). 'Mulla Sadra (Sadr al-Din Muhammad al-Shirazi)', in E. - Craig (ed), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Vol. 6, Routledge, London and New York: pp. 595-9.
- Fathi, H. (2012). A Comparative Survey on the Stages of Philosophical Training in Plato's Allegory of Cave, in the Four Mystical Journeys, and in Mulla Sadra's al-Asfar. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*. Volume 6, No.11
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time, Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson*. New York, Harper & Row.
- Kalin, I. (2001). "Sadr al-Din Shirazi (Mulla Sadra) (b. 1571-1640)". *HYPERLINK "http://www.cis-ca.org/voices/s/sadra.htm" Resources on Islam & Science*.
- Kamal, M. (2009). Rethinking Being: From Suhrawardi to Mulla Sadra. *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*. Vol. 2
- Kamal, M. (2006). *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy*. Ashgate Publishing.
- Kharabi Masouleh, A & Sayari (2014). Survey of Mulla Sadra's Interdisciplinary Approach to Ontological and Epistemological Issues. *World Applied Sciences Journal 30 (Innovation Challenges in Multidisciplinary Research & Practice)*: 38-42.
- Kim, J. (1995). *HYPERLINK "https://books.google.com/books?id=sI4YAAAAIAAJ&dq=editions:qiO-uKvXxpQC" "Emergent properties". The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Leaman, O. (1985). *An introduction to medieval Islamic philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.
- McGinn, C. (1989). "Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?", in *Mind*, Vol. 98, No. 391, pp. 349-366

## فصلنامه پژوهش‌های نوین روان‌شناختی

ویژه‌نامه اولین کنفرانس دوسالانه تازه‌های روان‌شناسی و علوم رفتاری دانشگاه تبریز ۱۶ و ۱۷ مهرماه ۱۳۹۸

- Moris, Z. (2003). *Revelation, intellectual intuition and reason in the philosophy of Mulla Sadra, an analysis of the al-Hikmat al-Arshiyya*. 1st Edition. Routledge: London
- Moss, L.S., & Joseph, A. S. (1996). *Historian of Economics: Perspectives on the History of Economic Thought. Papers from the History of Economics Society Conference (1994)*. Routledge: London.
- Mulla Sadra. (1410). *Asfar, Beyrut, Dar Al- Ehya Al-Torath*. Fourth Edition, 9 volumes.
- Nasr, S. (1977). *Post-Avicennan Islamic Philosophy and the Study of Being. International Philosophical Quarterly*.
- Rahman, F. (1995). *The philosophy of Mulla Sadra*. first edition. Published by state university of New York, Albany, Library of Congress
- Robinson, H. (2011). *HYPERLINK "http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/dualism/" "Dualism"*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/>, retrieved March 4, 2015.
- Ross, D. (2005).
- Searle, J. R. (2004). *Mind: A brief introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skirry, J. (2016). *HYPERLINK "http://www.iep.utm.edu/descmind/" \l "H4" "Rene Descartes: The Mind-Body Distinction"*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Soroush, A. (2010). *The Restless Nature of the Universe*. Seventh edition. Serat cultural institute. Tehran, Iran.
- Toussi, S. (2009). *The Central Importance of Spiritual Psychology in Mulla Sadra's Philosophy. Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*. Vol. 2 Issue 4.
- Young, R.M. (1996). *The Mind-Body Problem. Companion to the History of Modern Science*. Taylor and Francis: Milton Park.