



# **Mulla Sadra, Hermeneutics, and Understanding God's Words**

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# Preface

## *In the Name of God, the Wise, the Knower*

**T**he interpretation of the Holy Qur'an began in almost the early years of the descent of revelation to the Prophet (æ) and then its transmission was started to the people of Mecca and then Medina. The first commentator and interpreter of the Qur'an was the Prophet (æ) himself. His way was later followed by Imàm 'Alí ('a), his cousin, son-in-law and successor. After them, Imàm 'Alí's children and grandchildren continued their work. The Prophet (æ) had predicted even their names and birthdates two hundred years before. Imàm 'Alí's descendants held the divine station of *Imàmât* or the political and religious succession from the Prophet (æ) and were granted permission to interpret the Qur'an.

Following the Prophet's demise, over the centuries Muslims were divided into various groups. From *fiqhi* point of view, they had been divided into five religious branches, including Shi'ite, Åanafí, Shàfi'í, Màlikí, and Åanbalí, and concerning their theological ideas, they had been divided into Shi'ite, Mu'tazilite, and Ash'arite branches.<sup>1</sup> These fell into two big religious groups: Shi'ite and Sunnite. The Shi'ite believed in the appointed succession of Imàm 'Alí ('a) and his descendants (designated and appointed on the day of Ghadír)

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<sup>1</sup>. The chronological order of their development has been taken into consideration here.

and were considered to be the Islamic orthodox. The Sunnites believed in an elective vicegerency system and aristocracy<sup>1</sup> and considered Abê Bakr to be the first vicegerent (Caliph).

These two main branches of Islam employed different methods in order to interpret the Qur'an. The Sunnites were often interested in interpreting the outward meaning of this Holy Book and seriously opposed esoteric exegesis. However, the Shi'ite leaders (Imàm 'Alí ('a) and the other Imàms, each in his own time) sought for deeper meanings between the lines of the Qur'an in addition to the interpretation of the outward meaning of words. A group of Shi'ite Muslims who were known as *Bàiniyyun* (esoterics) from the time of the 6<sup>th</sup> Imàm, Imàm J'afar Æàdiq ('a), onwards emphasized on esoteric interpretation of this Book.

The above-mentioned group, which was itself divided into various sects, later started a secret struggle against Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphs and provided the basis for the establishment of certain governments in Iran (*Ismà'îlî*) and in the north of Africa and Egypt (*Fà'imîd*). Their organization was destroyed with the Mongol's invasion of Iran and the downfall of the Abbasid Caliphate.

The Shi'ite *Bàinî* disseminated hermeneutics in the sense of accepting a free interpretation of the Qur'an among other Muslims. Even the gnostic sects of 'Sufism', some of which Sunnite and some Shi'ite, all followed the *Bàinî* school and esoteric exegesis. We can say that the *Bàinîyyah* were the very guards of the science of the Qur'anic hermeneutics among Muslims.

However, we should also emphasize that, every once in a while, some Shi'ite followers of certain Sunnite schools (such as Åanbalî) opposed any kind of esoteric exegesis and forced Muslims to limit themselves to the outward aspect of the words

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1. The so-called prominent members of the community.

in the Qur'an. Some of them (Ānbalís), in the guise of guarding the religion, wrote rebuttals and sometimes accused Muslims of atheism.

Nevertheless, the task of interpretation, along with esoteric exegesis or, in its modern sense, hermeneutics, was always common among Muslims. In the time of Mullà Āadrà and his master Mír Dàmàd, interpretation was officially combined with philosophical hermeneutics.

Although Mullà Āadrà's methodology is rooted in Sufism, it enjoys the color and flavor of his own philosophy. Not many books or essays were written on this issue in the past. However, some essays have been written in this regard recently.

This treatise contains two papers by, each written on different occasion and presented in different congress. They have also been published in *Kheradnameh Sadra Quarterly*. It is hoped that they provide interested readers with necessary information concerning the above-mentioned topic.

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## *Introduction*

**I**n all societies the mutual relations of society and family are naturally based on informing others of our thoughts and intentions. On the other hand, they also rely on the desire to understand others' thoughts and intentions. These are inherent in man like an 'instinct'. This instinct and the aforementioned relations, i.e. the desire to understand other people's thoughts, are obtained in the form of questions, similar to expressing our intentions, by means of words and through language.

This means that understanding others' thoughts and intentions, whether oral or written, has been important for man to the same degree that he has attached importance to expressing his own thoughts. This has been to such an extent that man has taken on assisting in comprehending others' words as a divine mission and prophetic role. In addition, he used to attribute myths and historical stories, rhetoric, and understanding discourse and philosophy to a representative of the God called Hermes in Greek mythology, or Idris (Enoch) in Islamic culture, and Hushang or Hormus, the first man in the mythology of ancient Iran. All of whom were famous in the civilizations that existed at the time.

Later, this myth reached Athens and, in its atheistic myths, Hermes was promoted to one of the gods of ancient Greece. Some words are even derived from the name Hermes,

namely 'herald' and 'hermeneutics'. Inspired by this name, Aristotle called a chapter in his books on logic, *Preherminas*, i.e. about hermeneutics, and Muslims have also used this title in their works.

The reason for the chapter on *Preherminas* in books on logic was the role of understanding in philosophy and particularly in arguing with dialecticians and the Sophists and due to this importance of which Socrates used to insist on exact and technical definitions of words and terms in philosophical arguments and scientific discussions and consequently, they affected Aristotelian works on logic in the form of the importance of 'definition and description' in logic.

In this process, understanding God's word has had its due significance among the followers of revealed religions. Experts or those claiming to be familiar with and possessing knowledge of these books, who have commonly been the clerics of that religion, devised certain rules and regulations, different from the Aristotelian logic, in order to better understand their own revealed book.

Although technically correct, the claim that comprehension revealed books is confined only to clerics resulted in certain abuses. For example, Jewish scholars or, according to Jews, the Jewish theosophers, altered the meaning of the Torah under the pretext of interpreting it. The Holy Qur'an has bluntly mentioned this issue.

Paying attention to the importance of understanding and interpreting texts, particularly the Torah and the Bible, has received renewed interest in our modern times. This can be observed in Schleiermacher's works in the form of traditional hermeneutics. For the first time, perhaps, this scholar tried to indicate that literary interpretation was a kind of discovering rules (natural and innate) similar to natural sciences and to build up a set of principles for it. After him, another philosopher called Dilthey (1832-1911) expanded the scope of interpretation

and paved the way for philosophical hermeneutics. The issue of discovering the rules of interpretation and understanding texts received a philosophical form, mainly on the centrality of understanding the existence of the interpreter or observer or something called 'Dasein', i.e. "being-in-the-world", in the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer.

These so-called discussions on interpretation (hermeneutics), and in fact ontological matters, should be separated from the science of interpretation in its traditional and religious senses. Differences between traditional and literary interpretation and the interpretation of the divine or revealed books also exist and should not be intermixed with hermeneutics as some European experts have done. Therefore, it is better to divide hermeneutics into three parts: a) interpretation or criticism of literary and historical works, b) interpretation or understanding religious and revealed books, and c) philosophical hermeneutics and the ontological interpretation of human understanding.

Muslims paid great attention to the issue of *tafsir*, i.e. interpreting revelation and God's words, from the very advent of Islam and the descent of the Glorious Qur'an, which was a real and actual example of God's words. Centuries before the time when Westerners considered interpreting religious texts as a distinct science or discipline, Muslims had perceived it as an independent science which, although never formally announced, was established in the form of a science. Among interpreters, that is, experts in Qur'anic commentary, and in their books, some methods of interpretation appeared. Certain schools were started in the realm of sciences, of which the most renowned was the school of '*ahl al-bà'in*' (esoterists) or '*ahl al-ta'wil*', (people of inner interpretation) which was established and expanded in about the second century A.H. (8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) by Imàm J'afar Æàdiq ('a), the sixth holy leader of Shi'ite Muslims, who did this work alongside his public and secret

political and military struggles against the Abbasid Caliphs. This school was soon able to bring all groups and well-known sects of Sufis and all the Islamic lands, i.e. Iran, Turkey, the sub-continent of India, north of Africa and even Andalusia in Spain, China and the Far East under its influence.

It is important to pay attention to the following two differences between *tafsir* in Islam and the relevant schools which appeared in it and the schools which have emerged in recent centuries under the title of hermeneutics, both in its traditional and philosophical forms.

Firstly, the subject matter of hermeneutics, as can be understood from its etymology, being, in fact, a reference to a sacred and divine message, functioned as unveiling 'a hidden divine message', or, in other words, 'unveiling the veiled'. This could be gained only from true texts which were sacred and had a divine source and not from any religious text by a religious preacher. A text which stems from revelation and has come down from God, Who possesses the highest level of knowledge, power and other attributes of perfection, entails meanings, concepts and dimensions well beyond man's power to comprehend. Thus, perhaps this significant difference has caused some contemporary scholars of hermeneutics to base their interpretation on the understanding of the very text and discovering its hidden secrets and not the discovery of the writer's intentions.

Secondly, there is a great difference, which, in turn, completes the first difference, between the Qur'an and the Scriptures of other religions. This is the certainty about the Divine source of the Holy Qur'an, that is, the originality of the text and its direct relation to God while neither the Torah nor the Gospels can be considered as the original texts revealed by God to the Prophets (Moses and Jesus) because the Gospels are the accounts the disciples wrote about 100 years after Jesus Christ. Moreover, their original Aramaic or Hebrew versions

are not available and we have the Greek translation of them in which it is quite probable that many mistakes were made while translating them. In addition, for more than twenty centuries the Torah has been altered by Jewish learned men and the Holy Qur'an explicitly informs us of these alterations.

The science of interpreting the Qur'an, is based on the fact that interpretation (or hermeneutic) cannot be anything but understanding the narrator's intentions, both according to *Bàiniyyah* (esoterists), who believed that divine Scriptures have many layers or *bain* (inner aspect) and we should move towards the depth of the content of a text via its outward aspect, and the rigid school of *Ĥahiriyyah* (literalism or exoterists), who used to rely on the outward aspect of a text.

It should be borne in mind that the Muslim interpreters of the Holy Qur'an do not hold that we can perceive all the intentions of its Revealer and the Author and reach the ultimate depth of all the vast meanings which are hierarchical and vertical (not parallel and cross-sectional) hidden in the Book. By the same token, no scientist holds that it is possible to understand and discover all the laws of this world. The reason for this is another feature which exists in Islamic interpretation; that is, the hidden adaptation of nature to the language and literature of the Qur'an, requiring detailed exposition. There are special characteristics and wonders in divine Words which will be referred to generally in the following sections.

First, whatever can convey a mental and inner concept to the audience is 'exposition'. Human beings and, possibly, some other rather perfect creatures can express their intentions and express their states and passions. In other words, there are certain phenomena in man and in the aforementioned creatures which enable them to indicate the existence of states or the intention to divulge their inner feelings.

Three methods for expressing man's intentions exist. It is done through either conventional codes, or signals; or natural

gestures and body movements; or the use of words and sentences. No other creature, only man, can express his intentions via the use of language which is one of his distinctive features. Accuracy and clarity of expression via language are much more than another means of communication, although it is sometimes said that the natural signification of man's movements and behavior (called the non-verbal language) is more expressive than language (verbal language). This is, of course, a matter of taste.<sup>1</sup>

Second, nowadays there are many languages spoken in various parts of the world and linguists usually relate them to some ancient languages. However, the issue under discussion regarding the genealogy of languages in the past and present is whether language has been made arbitrarily through conventions and man, due to his needs, invented it and it has gradually become more complete. Or is language a natural phenomenon, which, similar to other forces, God has put in man's nature innate-dispositional, *a priori* and has taken various forms with many ups and downs.

In the first instance, it may seem that this problem does not have much influence in transferring divine ords to mankind. It means that whether language is a direct divine creation or a man-made product is not important: God can convey His intended concepts to man. However, despite this doubt, the issue of natural language is of paramount importance and the function of these two theories in various dimensions cannot be negated. Language is one of the significant points in

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<sup>1</sup>. Logicians have divided significations into three types: a) natural signification (such as signification of fever of illness), b) conventional signification (such as the signification of traffic signs), and c) rational signification (such as the signification of effect of cause). These can also be classified into two categories: conventional signification and non-conventional signification, which includes rational and natural significations.

interpreting revelation and the Divine Book and Western and European philosophy has paid attention to this issue both in previous centuries and in modern times.

Language, as a social and specifically human phenomenon, can be viewed from two perspectives. The first one is that language is a creation of human experience which has come to exist gradually and through conventions. It has developed in a similar way to that in which man invented money for trade and economic transactions or created alphabets and writing systems. That is why Semitic languages are different from Aryan ones in many respects and the branches of these two, with certain variations, have been created by people in various periods of history. The variations are such that usually people speaking one language cannot understand another language.

The second point of view is that language is an instinctive and innate phenomenon peculiar to human beings. According to some Muslim theologians, jurists, and legal experts, who advocate this theory, language had a creational or genetic base (that is, it is natural and non-conventional). In other words, although man divided language into various branches and dialects later on and separated the dialects from one another, God created language with the first man and taught it to him.

According to this theory, language, similar to other natural and human phenomena, follows certain specific rules and is naturally harmonious with its origin, i.e. the whole universe. This issue was considered by ancient Iranian and Greek philosophers. That is why Plato discussed it in his treatise *Crito* in which there is a dialogue between Socrates and two other people, one of whom believes in words and names being conventional and the other holding that words and names are natural and innate. After lengthy discussion, he concludes that words and names have a fixed and natural origin (in Islamic

contexts, it is said that “the names have descended from the heaven”). He proves that words and names are the actual manifestations and real representatives of the quiddity of things. In other words, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the quiddity of the objects and the words representing them.

Among contemporary scholars, Chomsky and Pinker are advocates of this theory and demonstrate that child language acquisition is related to more innate aptitude and internal and psychological background than external (and social) data, because within the very short period of infancy (around two years), despite its mental weaknesses, a child is capable of learning grammatical rules many times more than the data it has received and can use them according to its innate creativity. This is nothing but the result of the naturalness and innateness of language in mankind. Chomsky calls this phenomenon ‘universal grammar’.

Pinker’s theory holds that, without being taught, a child is innately able to make names and verbs suitable for and homogeneous with one another by using the raw data it receives. It also can find the subject of a proposition and can naturally distinguish subjects from predicates.

Many experiments have been conducted on the *a priori* data given to children (human beings), all of which demonstrate that some grammatical principles, as well as the aptitude to process them, exist in man’s nature and are the basis on which the *posteriori* teachings of the child (with the guidance of the mother or school) is built up. This might be the reason why many experiments have shown that the best natural, exact time to learn a language is before the age of puberty. Children’s creativity in acquiring language is another reason for its being innate.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, regardless of the verb derivations people around them make and use, children memorize the fixed rule.

Third, as stated earlier, Muslim scholars have considered the innateness of language and the unity of the origin of all languages. For example, in *'ilm al-uæêl*, they have discussed that the convener of words (language) is God. The initial convention of words was carried out via revelation and inspiration to the first man (Adam). Later, the separation among tribes and geographical diversity caused the multiplicity in languages.<sup>1</sup>

There is evidence in the Holy Qur'an to confirm this viewpoint. For example, in Chapter *al-Raâmàn* (The Beneficent) we read: "God created mankind. He taught him *bayàn* (utterance)" (55: 3-4) these verses indicate that, firstly *bayàn* is learnable and not something that should be given; God has bestowed the power of language on man and, according to the Qur'an, "God has taught man". There are certain points in the word 'teaching' that are worth paying attention to and which are absent in bestowing and giving. This indicates man's awareness, aptitude, and intelligence. Secondly, it can be inferred from the sentence "God created mankind and taught him *bayàn*" that this teaching is different from training and education after creation. However, it is of the same sort as creation and is a part of it, that is, *bayàn*, the most sublime example of which is language, is a natural and innate phenomenon.

There is no consensus over the issue of how man has acquired *bayàn* or language. Some consider it as creation and the structure of mouth, tongue, and other vocal organs which enable man to produce sounds, and combinations of sounds, for making words thus creating the language. This interpretation is not in line with the word *'allamahê* (taught him) because giving pen, paper and writing facilities is very different from teaching writing.

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<sup>1</sup>. According to Isutzu, language is formed by man's world-view. In other words, various world-views create different languages.

Experiments have shown that the power of sentence construction using universal structures in various languages is in human nature. The fact that children can achieve this without being taught by their environment indicates that, besides the power of talking and using compounds instead of words, man is born with the natural power of sentence construction. That is why we can infer that the first man was able to, more or less, use the grammatical rules, which were approximately the same as today's ones.

Fourth, language is a deeper issue involving a relationship between it, the totality of nature and the origin of creation which can be investigated. As we know, a group of scholars and philosophers – from Pythagoras to Mír Dàmàd – believed that there is an intrinsic and ontological relationship between letters and numbers with open and hidden rules of physics, chemistry and natural sciences. This relationship has at times been introduced as 'the characteristics of letters' in which each letter is known to have some natural features as there are certain chemical and physical features for any plant or any other matter. This issue has sometimes gone beyond special books of the so-called 'Occult Sciences' and discussion of it has been deemed necessary in books on language. For example, 'Allàmah Ibn Manîêr (630-711 A.H.) in the introduction of his book entitled *Lisàn al-'arab* (Arabic Language) writes:

As to the characteristics of these words and letters, there are many things they can do. Some of them are for curing diseases, some are for talismans (natural magic) and they have close relations with the celestial spheres (the universe). If it were not for the fear of the criticisms which might be raised by the stupid, I would mention some of the relations between letters and the celestial spheres.

Mír Dàmàd, the Iranian philosopher who is the heir to both the sciences of the Holy Prophet's Household ('a) and ancient Iranian, Greek, and Alexandrian philosophers tackled these topics in his books. He even has a very interesting book especially about these subjects entitled *Jadhawàt wa mawàqít*.

Concerning the scientific and philosophical relationship between 'letters and words' and 'physical laws in the world', he says letters and numbers (which are basically one single thing and can be rendered into each other by the use of *abjad* (arithmetical arrangement of the Arabic alphabet), are similar to man's mind and his imaginative faculty in the universe (or, in other words, macrocosm). Just as a relationship between man's imagination and the real world exists, so there is a relationship between the natural facts of the world (physics) and letters and numbers. Mír Dàmàd explicitly states that numerical relations within the system of numbers are proportional to the physical and chemical forms of matters and are compatible with them.

Referring to the Pythagoreans, he says that we can find the status of creatures in the real world (as well as that of the incidents and phenomena) by the use of numbers and geometrical compositions made of numbers. Approximately the same ideas are to be found in Galileo. Collingwood (1889-1943), the British philosopher, in his book *The Idea of Nature* quotes from him: "Existence is a book in which philosophy has been written, but reading it is only possible through learning its language, i.e. mathematics and geometry".

Historically speaking, this issue was stated before the discovery of the relationship between geometry, algebra, and Cartesian mathematics. Years later, Descartes explained that any numerical relationship (algebraic and arithmetic) can be shown by drawing a graph and a line using the relative coordinates. The message of such a discovery is that in advanced mathematics, which man has not yet fully accomplished, it is possible to convert the geometrical form of

the world and its incidents into numbers and letters. For example, in the mathematics of the future, instead of ordering food and fruit, we will write a series of equations and hand them to the authorities. The discovery of topological geometry made the prospects of this event more probable.

This is not an exaggeration, because within the last centuries some experts have used the relationships among numbers called 'the science of numbers'. They have also combined and benefited from the transformations of letters in a field called the 'esoteric science of letters'. These are actually some established phenomena, although in the West (possibly from the time of Aristotle onwards) it has been confused with magic because ordinary people have found it far-fetched and very difficult to understand. That is why Western historians sometimes call ancient Eastern and Iranian philosophy preceding the Greek magic. These ideas, which are important in their due turn, enlighten us with the fact that language (letters, words, sentences, and structures) is not conventional.

Fifth, the other argument worth presenting here is the status of the 'divine Word' or 'Logos', which can confirm that language is not conventional and there is a close relationship between language, nature and the whole universe. Philosophers in the West have given various interpretations of 'Logos'. According to what we can understand from Muslim gnostics, however, we come to know that it is exactly the prime innovation and the first order of creation or/and innovation in the form of *creato ex nihilo* done by God. In the Holy Qur'an, the creation of Jesus Christ is said to be of this type. That is why Jesus is called 'Word' in the Holy Qur'an. In some cases, instead of 'word' the term 'be', in an imperative form, is used: "But His command, when He intends a thing, is only that he says unto it: Be! And it is".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. 36: 82; 2: 117; 8: 42 and some other verses

Muslim gnostics say that man's words are produced by the breath we bring up from our chests. It reaches the larynx, then the mouth, tongue and teeth in order to be articulated sounds. We make words by using these sounds. In fact, we create them and, by giving existence to them, manifest our mental meanings, which are hidden in our inner self. The creation of the whole universe happens in the same way. The overflow of divine effusion, which is called the 'Breath of the All-Merciful' by gnostics and which, at first, is in the form of unfolded being and is comparable to man's breath, manifests itself.

The contact of this Breath of the All-Merciful and unfolded being, generic existence, and divine will with those liable to come into existence (immutable archetypes, according to gnostics) present in Divine knowledge, and which are like letter bases, creates letters and words because letters are the building blocks of creatures and words are the first creatures that have been created from absolute non-existence. According to gnostic interpretation, the divine Word is the same as the creatures of the world and divine speech in the imperative form and when issuing *amr* 'order' means creation. Through this gnostic perspective, the large gap that ordinary people think exists between 'Word' and the existence (thingness) of things is eliminated and the existential relation between utterance and nature is discovered.

Sixth, interpreters of, and experts in, the Qur'an have discussed the phrase *Kitàb-i Mubín* (the Clear Book, i.e. the Qur'an). In Islamic philosophy and gnosticism, God's knowledge of the world, creatures, beings, and incidents has been assumed to be like a fixed page on which, away from time and the changes in the material world, everything is present for God. This hypothetical page is called the Qur'an. Following Mullà Æadrà and other interpreters, some experts have called it the 'Clear Book'. The Holy Qur'an says, "There is no small

particle in the heavens and on the earth, but it is (written) in the Clear Book". This 'Clear Book' is a phenomenon in which all phenomena, incidents, and facts existing in the past, present and future, as well as every small and big being in the world and the whole universe (the heavens and the earth) are registered or, in a sense, written. Using the word 'book' for such a thing is quite suitable as there is registering and writing in it by the use of letters, symbols or numbers. The word 'clear' has been chosen for its clarity and its being unambiguous and doubtless.

The astonishing point here is the repetition of this name for the Qur'an. Many believe that the 'Clear Book' is precisely the Holy Qur'an which we have at our disposal (References to some verses from The Holy Qur'an).

From the reference of the phrase 'Clear Book' both to the Qur'an and to the spiritual and celestial file in which all incidents of the world are written, we can understand that the Qur'an in which all incidents and all pre-destined happenings of the world are registered, is a compact disk taken from the celestial 'Clear Book'. This belief gets closer to being demonstrated when we read in Chapter 43, verses 2-4, "We have appointed a lecture in Arabic that haply you may understand. And lo! In the source of decrees, which We possess, it is indeed sublime, decisive".

What attracts a researcher is the aforementioned indications in the Qur'anic verses regarding the correspondence between the Holy Qur'an and the celestial and spiritual file which is a mirror reflecting the whole universe including all incidents and beings, whether big or small, and the trend of their life and evolution. It is one of the manifestations of the infinite knowledge of God. Understanding and interpreting the Qur'an, in fact, equals understanding and interpreting the

universe,<sup>1</sup> and we know that the very words of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet and that is not the case that the concepts are from God and the words are made by the Prophet. In that case the Qur'an cannot be considered a literary miracle.

In case we do not accept that the Qur'an is a name (Clear Book) for two separate things (a tablet of the universe and the existing Qur'an), we have to conceive of the Qur'an as one of the levels and ranks (the utterance and linear level) of the realities of the world (i.e. tablet disk of the pre-destined) and these two have a specific mechanism and a clear method for transforming into each other, exactly in the same way as the Cartesian system of coordinates found a solution for transforming geometry into numbers and vice versa. As the result of Descartes' innovation, we can show geometrical figures in the form of numbers. It is also possible to transform letters and numbers into each other by the use of *abjad*, i.e. the arithmetical arrangement of the Arabic alphabet, or transform a book into numbers and those numbers into geometrical figures. It is even possible to assume that animations (e.g. movies) can be rendered into numbers and letters by a highly qualified mathematician or an advanced mathematical engine.

Seventh, here there is a question: based on this fixed relation in the Qur'an, is there, or can there be, a direct relationship between the words and lines of a revealed book and the objective realities of the external world? This could be philosophically demonstrated in Islamic gnosticism and, probably, in ancient gnosticism because in their cosmology and ontology, besides the original source of being, who is the Necessary Being, i.e. Almighty God, from Whose Will all creatures have been created in various forms and levels, other beings have a number of levels and stages according to their

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<sup>1</sup>. This caused Mullà Æadrà and some others to change literary interpretation and hermeneutics into philosophical and ontological hermeneutics.

strength or weakness in existence. These stages are called imaginal existence, sensory existence, verbal existence.

In this classification, sensory existence is the same as material existence and all beings in this world. Imaginal existence is the world in which existence is stronger and it lacks the defects of the material world. Verbal existence (which stems from the power and existence of the disengaged soul of mankind) is at the lowest level of existence because realities are expressed by the use of letters and words<sup>1</sup> and no external existence can be assumed for them.<sup>2</sup> According to Islamic gnosticism, these grades always exist alongside each other and can be transformed into one another. That is why, instead of grades for these stages, the gnostics use the terms 'presences'.

Taking into account this accurate philosophical and gnostic 'ontological classification', it is because of the wonders existing in language and the process of revelation and issues relevant to them that the relationship between nature, the external word, and the Qur'an can be justified. There are some points in the relationship between language and nature which lead us to conclude that because there is a large difference between the divine Word and man's utterance, their issues are separate from each other and should not be mixed together. For example, having an infinite number of interpretations of the

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<sup>1</sup>. There is a kind of existence in man's mind called mental existence.

This level of existence is the mediator between the external existence and the verbal existence. Another grade is, therefore, added to existence which absent is gnostics' definitions.

<sup>2</sup>. This classification is a scientific one unless there is a doubt on generalizing the word existence to the mind and word and line, which is a linguistic argument and not a philosophical one. Talking is in fact giving existence to the concepts lying in the mind (called discourse of the soul by Muslim theologians) which spreads in the air in the form sounds and can be captured in written form. The written form itself can be considered a kind of existence (written existence).

divine Word (the sublime and complete case of which is the Holy Qur'an), provided that they do not contradict each other is correct. While in normal texts and man's utterances, this is not correct because (regardless of the author's intentions which have risen from his limited and insignificant knowledge) man's utterances and phrases cannot bear infinite meanings so that infinite understandings would be possible.

The scope of literary criticism and interpretation in any language is very limited and practically neither words nor rhetoric and semantics in each language allow us to consider them as having infinite meanings. The reality of language, no matter how vast it might be, is not unlimited; we can learn exactly about the streets and lanes of a city, no matter how large it is. However, even if the divine Word is in fact limited (as nature is also limited), it lies in an infinitely large arena in comparison to man's power of comprehension and interpretation, because it has come down from an Absolute Being Who is the source of all utterances and concepts. Man's understanding is like a fly moving around in an infinite space. As an example, the interpretation of the divine Word, which is related and connected to the depth of nature, has a gift for any miner and there is no end to it. The treasure of man's properties, no matter how deep and full it is, will finish sooner or later.

These reasons can be summarized as follows: language has a natural origin and is not basically conventional and man-made (although man changed it later).

- a) Revelation is a natural phenomenon by which God, using nature and the hierarchies of all forces available in it, sends down His message in certain periods to certain people who have specific potentials. It has a structure compatible with other structures in nature and is in harmony with the general system of nature.

- b) As revelation and the divine Word are natural phenomena and one of the laws of the world, logically they cannot be incompatible with natural laws including the relationship between language and nature. It should not be expected that the Creator of nature and language would offer His address (called revelation) if it did not harmonize with the total system of the world and nature.
- c) Since the divine Word has a natural origin, it can be rendered and interpreted through other natural various manifestations such as language, mathematics, and physics. Nature can be extracted from the language of revelation.
- d) Just as nature in this world has hidden and far-fetched depths, so it is normally impossible to obtain all the meanings of the divine Word, too, if it is known to be a written version of the world and nature and although it is interpretable.

Contrary to the beliefs of some people such as Gadamer, one of the points existing in the Qur'an (and real revealed books) is that neither time nor history can be considered as factors in its correct interpretation, because the text either, similarly to the Qur'an, belongs to all periods and is for all mankind and all understandings, or to a vast time, including various and multiple periods, traditions, histories on which it is not possible to rely in order to understand the divine Word. The reason for this difference is that God's address to mankind is absolutely and equally for all people of all different intellectual, traditional and historical perspectives and, therefore, it should be comprehensible in all evolutionary stages of societies.

According to Islamic philosophy, understanding the content of the Qur'an depends more on the interpreter's luminosity and his power of intuition, rather than man's historical evolution and the correspondence between the

horizons of an interpreter's modern traditions and the horizon of the relevant text. It is similar to the intrinsic power of a diver in discovering and finding pearls in the sea. This does not depend on his time and history; rather, it depends on his aptitude and practice. It is even possible that interpretations by previous interpreters are more profound than today's.

Mullà Æadrà and some other experts have bluntly said that there are certain conditions for interpreting the divine Word. Among its major conditions is inward purification and limpidness, i.e. the purification of the mind of wrong presuppositions and backgrounds, so that the interpreter is able to understand firstly the text and then interpret it. Interpretation contaminated by mental deviations is not pure. Man's understanding is like a mirror through which others want to see objects. The more contaminated it is, the more it decreases the viewers accuracy.

Some of the hermeneutic philosophers have stated that understanding a text requires empathy with its author and cooperation in his intentions, feelings and beliefs. This is a logical and correct point because empathy with the author facilitates understanding his objectives and the real meanings of the text and according to their well-known saying, the interpreter and the author share the same horizon.

As to understanding the divine Word, empathy with God should be defined. We have to create a method as to how it becomes possible to extend man's short and limited horizon to horizons to which intellect can never reach. In Mullà Æadrà's transcendent philosophy and in Islamic gnosticism, this empathy takes the form of a pure man's focused spiritual and intellectual harmony with the cosmos. In gnostic terms, this harmony is known to be the correspondence of man (known as microcosm) with the whole universe (macrocosm). Because man is a small particle in the macrocosm and is related to it.

Thus, he can harmonize naturally with it and can hear its voice and understand its purpose with his inner sense.

In the Islamic tradition, it is recommended that whoever recites the Qur'an, has to awaken in himself the feeling that the Qur'an has been directly revealed to him and he is the addressee of the divine Word.

# Mullà Æadrà's Principles of Hermeneutics<sup>\*</sup>

**W**ith the descent of God's revelation to the Holy Prophet Mo'ammed (æ) and immediately after some verses of the Holy Qur'an were revealed to him, questions were raised by some people with respect thereto. So the Holy Prophet (æ), upon the call of God (as is cited in the Holy Qur'an) expounded the holy verses, and thereby answered the questions. As a result, this process was followed, and led to the birth and development of *aa'diith*, and to the interpretation of the Holy Qur'an based on them. However, after the Prophet (æ), those *aa'diith* were transmitted to people in the following two ways.

Firstly: by the *Ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet's Household). These *aa'diith* were explained, mainly by Amír al-Mu'minín (the Commander of the Faithful), 'Alí ('a) who was the

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Prophet's son-in-law, and by Fà'imah Zahrà ('a) the Prophet's daughter and 'Alí's wife. These *aaàdíth* were passed onto ten successive generations through the Shi'ite Imàms (leaders).

Secondly: by the Prophet's companions (*Æaaàbah*). At that time, interpretation of the Holy Qur'an was limited to quoting the Prophet's exegetic *aaàdíth*.

**In later centuries, technical, analytical or literary genres of writing commentary became common. Three main schools or methods of interpretation (theological interpretations of Shi'ites, Mu'tazilites, and Ash'arites) appeared, including the well-known interpretative schools of Medina, Mecca, Kufa and Basra, some of which paid attention to creed and theological issues, some to jurisprudential and legal matters, and others to rhetorical and literary or gnostic issues.**

In the contemporary period, some commentators have even interpreted the Holy Qur'an from the point of view of new experimental sciences and modern findings. Certainly the closer a commentary is to the contemporary age, the more complete the exegetic methods will be. An outstanding example of a complete commentary on the Holy Qur'an is *al-Mízàn fì tafsír al-Qur'àn* by the well-known contemporary philosopher and commentator, 'Allàmah Ìabàìabà'í who commented on the Holy Qur'an with the aid of the Qur'an in a scientific and technical way. His commentary, which consists of 20 volumes, contains philosophical, social and narrative issues, in addition to literary points.

**An analysis of the different styles of Qur'anic interpretation would, of course, be imperfect without alluding to the great commentator of the Qur'an, Mullà Æadrà. In fact, his method of interpretation is one of the best interpretive methods of the Holy Qur'an.**

Æadr al-Dín Moâammed Shíràzî (979-1050/1571-1642), entitled Æadr al-Muta'allihín and known as Mullà Æadrà, is one of the greatest Iranian Muslim philosophers, like Avicenna. He lived in the Safavid era. He wrote nearly fifty books on philosophy, interpretation and *âadîth*; the most famous among them being *al-Asfâr al-arba'a* (the Four Intellectual Journeys) – a complete course in philosophy – consisting of 9 volumes, which is considered as a standard textbook.

In philosophy, he founded a well-known school, called the Transcendent Philosophy (*âikmat al-muta'alliyah*), in which he mixed important ideas from the Peripatetic and Illuminationist schools, with ancient Iranian philosophy, Sufism and Islamic philosophy to form a single school. At the same time, inspired by the Holy Qur'an and *âadîth*, he brought Islamic philosophy to its culmination.

Mullà Æadrà's commentary consists of interpretive segments. Starting from *Âyat al-kursí* (approximately 1025 A.H.) and the Light Verse (1030 A.H.) he continued by commenting on *Yâsín*, *al-Âadíd*, *al-Wâqî'ah*, *al-A'là*, *al-Ìàriq*, *al-Zilzâl* Chapters, and finally, late in his life, he decided to make a complete commentary on the Holy Qur'an and commented on some verses of *al-Baqara*. Death, however, did not permit him to finish this book.

Mullà Æadrà does not follow one single method in his commentary. In commentaries such as the ones on the Light Verse (1030 A.H.) and *Âyat al-kursí* (1025 A.H.), he depends mostly on gnostic and mystic points, and at the same time pays attention to *âadîth*. Furthermore, he is not very interested in literary and verbal points.

But, after settling completely in Shiraz, he decided to write a comprehensive commentary on the Holy Qur'an, from the beginning to the end, in which his slightly hasty method was replaced by the usual methods of the Qur'an's commentators.

That is, firstly, he discussed the word, its exterior, and its derivatives. Being indifferent to the majority of issues common among the commentators and theologians of that time and before, he described gnostic and Qur'anic connotations, based on his own special and personal intuitions.

To avoid repetition he wrote *Mafâtîâ al-ghayb* (Keys to the Unseen), before beginning to comment, so that he would refer to it as an introduction to, or a philosophy for, his Qur'anic interpretation, on which some of his more brief points were based.

He seems to pay no attention to the majority of commentaries on the Holy Qur'an, but he refers to certain commentaries such as İabarsî's *Majma' al-bayân* and sometimes refers to Fakhr al-Dîn Râzî, Nîshâburî and Zamakhsharî's commentaries as free of prejudice, and quotes their views to complete his own viewpoints (Mullà Æadrà, *Tafsîr*, Vol.11, p. 176). In addition, he sometimes also disproves their views (Ibid., p. 191).

Mullà Æadrà's commentary is, basically, a gnostic one. However, since he was an expert in all the sciences of his time, he sometimes paid attention to some subjects that other commentators had already investigated. In addition, as he was well versed in Arabic literature, he occasionally discussed literary points as well.

According to Mullà Æadrà, since the verse "Look at every thing in the heavens and on the earth" is a command, then observing that command is a religious duty. So cognizance of cosmology and of the apparent and hidden realities of the world is obligatory from a religious point of view. Therefore, commentary of the Holy Qur'an must seek out the realities of the world and the issues related to man's spirit. Consequently, commentators who merely look for literary and outward

meanings in the Holy Qur'an, in fact, lower the worth of their work to the level of a purely literary one (*Asrâr al-àyât*, 6).

On the other hand, just as ignoring the realities of the world means ignoring their creator, so ignorance of God is also considered a cause of ignorance of all things, and a deviation from human nature (Ibid., p. 1, p. 5).

In terms of the method of interpretation, Mullà Æadrà divides commentaries on the Holy Qur'an, into the following categories.

First: commentaries which discuss literary techniques, verbal meanings, and rhetorical points of the Holy Qur'an.

Second: commentaries that derive jurisprudential and ethical commands from the outward meanings of the words of the Holy Qur'an and content themselves therewith.

Third: commentaries that turn away from the outward meanings of the Holy Qur'an, impose wishful thinking on its interpretation, and call the process *ta'wîl* (hermeneutic interpretation) or gnostic commentaries.

Fourth: commentaries that accept the exterior meanings of the words of the Holy Qur'an, but look for their underlying mysteries and secrets with the help of reason, intuition and divine illumination to discover the realities hidden thereunder. Mullà Æadrà is among the fourth group, since he accepts only this kind of commentary and considers it correct. Æadrà follows certain rules and principles in his Qur'anic exegesis, which can be designated as the principles of Sadrian exegesis. To arrive at the depth of the thoughts of his interpretive school we must analyze his definitions of the world, man revelation and the Qur'an.

Firstly, the levels of the world. In order to be ordered hierarchically, the world must be defined, Mullà Æadrà thus divides the world of being into three worlds:

1. the material and the physical world

2. non-material and the imaginal world, and
3. intellectual or supra-imaginal world.

As we will discuss in this paper, all there is in the material world is, in fact, an exemplification or manifestation of non-material world which is the locus of the higher realities; and such realities which are in the non-material world, have manifestations in the world of matter. For example, the term “pen”, mentioned in the verse “He taught by the pen” exists in the material world in one form, and also in the world beyond matter (i.e. the other world) in another form, while in both worlds, the pen is one and the same reality (*Mafâtîâ al-ghayb*, p. 95).

Secondly, the levels of man: in addition to five senses, man has other levels of being and worlds, too, which must be divided into three groups: 1, the level of sense, i.e. sensing with the instrument of the five senses; 2, the imaginative or ideal level, in which the same senses do exist, but without material instruments, and in which man can see without eyes and hear without ears; 3, the intellectual or universal level (in its platonic sense) in which the realities of objects continue to exist, but are free of physical matter, time and imaginal matter. This is the highest level of the human soul, which is next to the world of heavenly intellects.

Thirdly, the levels of revelation. Since the Holy Qur'an is revelation and God's speech, the meaning of such revelation must be known. According to the definition given in the Holy Qur'an (verse 51: 42), revelation is the direct and unmolested speech of Exalted God to the Prophet. Hence, revelation is called God's Speech. And according to the above-mentioned verse, the speech is solely of three kinds. It must be known that God's Speech is not separate from its “understanding” and the “speech” is in union with the Prophet's spirit (*Mullà Æadrà, Asfâr 8/7*). However, for people other than the Prophet, God's

speech is always indirect and is transmitted to them only through words and letters. Therefore, it can be said that ordinary people can only deal with God's book rather than His speech.

Mullà Æadrà says God's speech is other than His book. It seems that his intention is something other than what some hermeneutic philosophers say these days and for a number of reasons he makes a distinction between writing and God's speech.

In Mullà Æadrà's opinion, God's speech is simple and far from and over and above word-combinations. It belongs to the world of supreme command (a stage in which matter is absolutely non-existent, and has no involvement). It is timeless, instantaneous, and not gradual. On the contrary, writing or divine scripture is a phenomenon of a lower material world, which was issued and descended gradually and in a combination of words. Therefore, what we can see in the Holy Qur'an is the God's book, and not the divine speech (*Asfâr* 10/7).<sup>10</sup>

Despite declaring this opinion, Mullà Æadrà finally accepts the unity of writing and speech and says that this duality is exoteric and mentally-posed as the result of our own mental analysis. Consequently, it is not real and there is, therefore, no distinction between the speech and the writing of man. His explanation for the unity of speech and writing or their duality, is as follows. At one end, writing always emanates from its author and is not separate from him, nor is speech from its speaker, and their relationship, in philosophical terms, is one of necessity. At the other end, writing is connected with and subject to things other than its author or speaker (i.e. paper, book and its reader). It can, therefore, be considered separate

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<sup>10</sup>. Elsewhere, he says that the Holy Qur'an is God's speech, but the other divine books are only God's books (*Asrâr al-âyât*, pp. 16-20).

from its author philosophically speaking it possesses the level of possibility. He considers this phenomenon as true, both in divine and human orders. Furthermore, he adds that the unity of speech and writing, despite their apparent separation, are of the author's own unveilings.

The revelation is an intricate and non-material phenomenon. It descends through certain stages until it appears in the form of the Qur'an presentable to man. Mullà Æadrà says: "When the Prophet (æ), given the levels of man's soul and the world, ascends from the material and sensible stage with his spirit and heart, and, passes through and beyond the imaginal world, and is being released from matter, and divests himself of temporal and material dimensions, and observes and travels through the signs of Exalted God's heaven, a light of knowledge which is incarnated in the form of the Holy Spirit called Gabriel of religions illuminates his heart. And in *al-Najm* (Chapter 53: verses 2 to 18) God describes and introduces Gabriel and calls him *Shadîd al-Quwà* (prolific of much power) and this is what in philosophy is called Active Intellect" (*Asfâr*, Vol.7, pp. 24-25).

After observing the Holy Spirit named Gabriel (which in philosophical terms means union with the Active Intellect) the Prophets hears and receives the divine speech and revelation in the form of words, which cannot be heard through external ears and air waves. Then, in the same way that he ascended to the world of the intellects, he would conversely descend to the world of matter by passing through the imaginal world.

The words heard by the Prophet (æ), in each stage of the world of imagination and the world of matter, come down in a form suitable for that stage. And once arrived in the world of senses and the physical world, revelation and the spiritual words are transmuted into human words and writing so that people can hear and see them.

As is mentioned in the Chapter *al-Najm* and as was seen and heard by the Prophet (æ) with inner eyes and ears, Divine Speech is pure reality, and above any suspicion of error.

Fourthly, the multiple levels of the Qur'an. According to Æadrà's definitions of the world, man and revelation, the Qur'an (that is Divine Speech and writing) is not merely what is seemingly seen or heard. Rather, according to the triple stages of the world of being and man's soul, the descent of the revelation through the spiritual world into the physical world, has levels and stages. As a man has a body and a spirit, so does the Qur'an. In addition to its physical expression, paper and cover, that can be said to be its outward aspect, the Qur'an has at least seven inward layers of meaning (It is said in prophetic *âadîth*, that the Qur'an has intricate layers, ranging between seven and seventy in number (Mullà Æadrà, *Mafâtîâ al-ghayb*, p. 45)).

The outward aspect of the Holy Qur'an can be understood by man's outward being, but its inward aspect can be understood only by the supra-sensual human senses or man's so-called inward being. Superficial attention to the words and their outward meanings is the same outward aspect of the Holy Qur'an. Of course, this assertion has legal and jurisprudential validity and, in jurisprudential terms, constitutes external proof (*âujjat*). However, beyond this outward aspect, there are concepts in the Holy Qur'an which are not possible for everyone conversant with the Arabic language, to understand, because such understanding is reserved only for those who can transcend the limit of words and their own exterior senses (five senses).

Mullà Æadrà believes that as the worlds have three physical, spiritual and supra-spiritual levels, the Qur'an, too, has the same levels, and is the "locus of manifestation" of all these three levels. Its first level is of verbal category, and all

those who are familiar with the Arabic language understand it. But the other levels are spiritual, hidden and “esoteric” and understanding them is possible only in a realm other than the realm of words.

To demonstrate the spiritual levels of the Holy Qur'an, Mullà Æadrà with reference to a Qur'anic verse likens it to food, descended from Heaven, which he so describes:

“the Qur'an is like food, which has been descended from Heaven, to nourish the soul. While this heavenly food is sought and assimilated by the men who are capable of so doing, donkeys and cows seek and assimilate only the straw; the oil and the kernel of the seeds are for men, the straw and the shell are for them”.

Mullà Æadrà calls the Holy Qur'an “the light”, so does the Holy Qur'an itself, which is the detector and revealer of hidden realities. This issue will be dealt with later in this chapter.

## **Mullà Æadrà's interpretative method**

Having become acquainted with the four phenomena, the world, man, revelation and the Holy Qur'an, it is now time to turn to Mullà Æadrà's interpretive method. He believes the following to be the best method of commenting on the Holy Qur'an. Just as the Holy Qur'an descended to the Prophet (æ) as revelation, and in the process of descent went through different stages (consisting of the world of the intellect, the world of the souls and imaginal world, and the physical world) through which heavenly meanings have changed their forms and taken the shape of earthly words, so a commentator of the Holy Qur'an has to follow the same path to understand its depths.

Firstly, he has to begin with the outward meanings and understand them, and then take leave of the exterior senses, delve into the inward ones with the help of the soul's higher faculties and in so doing go as far as to even take temporary leave of his body (*khal'e badan*) in order to be able to make full use of his spirit's power. Then he must journey to Heaven to obtain the unveiled and transparent meaning of the Holy Qur'an.

Most existents of the material and physical world can be sensed by the five senses. However, one can not ascend up to higher levels of being with these senses. There are ways and instruments to help us understand each of these three physical and supra-physical worlds. Material and non-material realities are corresponding and communicating – in Mullà Æadrà's words, “correspondent” (*mu'ā'ābiq*) - but they are not truly like each other, since there is, in fact, a great difference between them.

Hence, to understand all the Qur'anic realities, or so to speak, “in commenting the Holy Qur'an”, one must not be content with its outward and verbal meanings. Rather, one must plunge into the never-ending depth of these meanings, since just as the non-material world is hidden to a number of people, so the Holy Qur'an, being the manifestation of those worlds, also has esoteric and deep inner meanings which are hidden from man's bodily senses. Therefore, understanding and commenting on the mere outward meanings of the Holy Qur'an cannot be considered a true and all-pervasive understanding and commentary.

One who is content with words, or with their literary and artistic aspects when commenting on the Holy Qur'an, can only understand the beauty and euphony of the words, and their literary and verbal aspects, or at the most, extract the legal and

jurisprudential connotations from the outward meanings of the book. Or else he may imagine God as having hands, eyes, throne and seat, as Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite theologians and some of the Hanbalite jurists may do (*Asfâr*, Vol. 9, p. 299).

Following the ancient Iranian Illuminationist school, Mullà Æadrà considers "light" a non-material reality; the same as "being". He says "light and being are the same, and their difference is in their conception; whereas the Holy Qur'an is also light (Qur'an 7:157, 5:15, 4:74), therefore, this book is the locus of manifestation of the world of being and contains both the visible and the invisible (Qur'an 6:59)", (*Asrâr al-âyât*, p. 35). In other words, four centuries before the advent of the new European hermeneutics, Mullà Æadrà's hermeneutics upgraded the interpretation of the text (and the commentary on the Holy Qur'an) by pulling them out of the domain of mere words to the realm of existents and the phenomena of the world. Like those who, nowadays, consider interpretation of texts as equivalent to recognizing psychological, sociological, and historical phenomena, he, too, considered the Holy Qur'an's interpretation equivalent to the interpretation of the world and man, and hidden and apparent truths.

Muslim gnostics, among them Mullà Æadrà, believe that the world of existence originated in the divine command, through the word "*kun*" (become!) (according to a Qur'anic verse). They call this word "ontological fiat", that is, with a simple copula the existence and the divine speech occur at the same time and become one. They also consider existence equal to light philosophically – a light that illuminates the external non-existents (originally known to God), and makes them apparent, embodied and existent.

Ibn 'Arabí sometimes takes "*wujêd*" (existence), which is cognate with "*wijdân*" (finding), to be synonymous with the

latter. Mullà Æadrà also considers “wisdom and knowledge of the Holy Qur’an” as an opening to the world of realities. He believes that every existent has knowledge to the extent of its existence; and whatever has knowledge, will be resurrected. So, all objects, even inanimate being, will enjoy resurrection (*Risàla al-âashr*).

The knowledge of the inner meanings of the Qur’an acquired by a commentator is, in fact, perceived by him through his inner senses. In other words, the commentator establishes a kind of union and communion with the world of existence. The ancient gnostics call the world of existence “cosmos”, and the divine speech as “Logos”.

According to gnostics and Mullà Æadrà, perhaps, each person can find a meaning in the Holy Qur’an quite apart from those found by others. Moreover, each person can find something in the Holy Qur’an according to her/his capacity. Some hermeneutic philosophers believe in this point, the only difference between Mullà Æadrà and them being that hermeneutic philosophers do not believe in mystical intuition and illumination as he does; and although Mullà Æadrà believes in reason, he does not believe in personal predilections that we parade as reason, especially, if such are strange to the text and quite remote from it. Here, it is worth examining the principle of *ta’wil* (hermeneutic interpretation).

## **Hermeneutic interpretation of the Holy Qur’an**

The term “*ta’wil*” is used several times in the Holy Qur’an. Its literal meaning means “return to the origin of the word”. In contemporary hermeneutics, sometimes the interpretation of the text, or understanding the intention of the

text, is beyond the realm of the speaker's will, and is subject to the reader's judgment.

Mullà Æadrà and a number of other commentators undoubtedly do not view interpretation, in this sense, as correct. As we will indicate, Mullà Æadrà does not allow any deviation from the true purport of the words of the Holy Qur'an to occur. According to him, commentary must be such that the meaning should not be allowed to go beyond the word's sense, its realm and the generally-accepted meaning of that word. In other words, the commentator of the Holy Qur'an (and probably of any other religious text) is its trustee and must observe the terms of the trust.

According to Mullà Æadrà, *ta'wíl*, is a necessary tool for interpretation. It has connections with the world of existence, far beyond the verbal and outward meanings of the Holy Qur'an. There are many secrets, mysteries and meanings, which cannot be understood or explained by verbal commentary. In addition, the outward meanings of the words are not sufficient for us to allow comments on those intricate and mysterious realities (*Tafsír-i àyat al-kursí*, p. 176). Therefore, a true commentator must interpret those words accurately, and in doing so, he has to plunge into the words and extract the depth of their inner meanings. Furthermore, he sometimes even has to draw aside the veil of the material world and the physical senses, and obtain deeper meanings through reason, intuition, unveiling or other faculties. The Prophet's special progeny Imàm 'Alí (the Commander of the Faithful) and his Household have placed the deepest meanings only at the disposal of the confidant of mystery and true gnostics. The hermeneutic interpretation of the Holy Qur'an is not the opposite of its outward meaning, rather it supplements it: the inner meanings of the Holy Qur'an are like the cores of

seeds, and its outward meanings are like the shells of seeds (*Tafsír-i àyat al-kursí*, p. 176). On the basis of this simile, *ta'wíl* is undoubtedly, not a free or wishful interpretation beyond the outward meanings of the words, nor an arbitrary commentary. Rather, it gives a real and thorough commentary on the intended meaning of the word or sentence. The Holy Qur'an says: "the Qur'an explains everything to us", whereas, in commenting on the Holy Qur'an we should not be content with its verbal and outward meanings, otherwise everything or "*kull-i shay*" cannot be perceived. Consequently, the real meaning of the Qur'an is realizable only through its real interpretation or *ta'wíl*.

But *ta'wíl*, in the true sense of the term, means approaching the Holy Qur'an, plunging into it, and discovering its depths, different layers, and inner meanings. By correct *ta'wíl* we mean going beyond the outward meanings of the words to unveil their inner meanings (which are hidden by the former) with the help of illumination and reason. *Ta'wíl* and esoteric interpretation is a kind of validating reason.

## **The role of reason in *ta'wíl***

There are three ways of finding the meaning of the Qur'anic text: First, by referring to a dictionary and a grammar book; second, through intuition and immediate, direct knowledge; and third, by discovering the meaning of the text with the help of reason and its "truth-finding" power.

Therefore, *ta'wíl*, in the view of the Holy Qur'an, means neither turning away from the verbal meaning of the word, nor depending on the purely unseen, nor being heedless of reason. Even those like Mullà Æadrà who consider intuition the main factor or the most important factor in the gaining of knowledge,

appreciate reason as a divine grace, serving as light to help in the acquisition of knowledge, while regarding it inabsolute and below revelation.

The new hermeneutics, despite having been given appealing and uproarious publicity, have attained nothing more than that of Muslim gnostics, and are, therefore, at the beginning of the way.

### **The role of the outward meaning of the word**

Mullà Æadrà says: “in hermeneutic interpretations, the departure point begins at the words of the text and their outward meanings”. Unlike some exegetes, he attaches much importance to the outward meanings of the words of the Holy Qur’an. He says: “religion commands that nobody shall unduly overlook the outward meanings of the Holy Qur’an, nor reason; and every spiritual or intellectual finding, as well as commentaries and interpretations arising therefrom must all be in harmony with the rules governing the language of the text”.

The divine, Satan-free intuitive vision bestowed on the heart is certainly valid, but is reliable only when it can supplement the outward meaning of the Holy Qur’an, the words of which must always be predicated by their own real meanings, and not through metaphors or similes used therewith.

It is at this juncture that he points to the triple worlds of existence and to their coincidence and correspondence with one another. He asserts that everything that exists in this sensible world has certainly a similar manifestation in the imaginal world; and that the outward and temporal meaning is similar to and coincident with the inner and spiritual meaning.

### **Unveiling and intuition**

Here, we must cast a glance at intuition and Mullà Æadrà's opinion about it. The reflection of realities in the human heart, that is to say, the act of seeing the non-material world through the non-material eye is intuition or unveiling. Mullà Æadrà divides intuition into two main categories.

First, symbolic intuition: He calls this kind of intuition, "formal intuition", which can find the meaning of symbolic form of realities (non-sensible realities) through inner (and not bodily) senses. He says that just as man's body has sensory organs through which he can see, hear and touch material objects so the human spirit also has corresponding non-material senses (*Mafâtiâ al-ghayb*, p. 49).

This kind of intuition arising from inner senses can decipher the symbolic form of realities. However, the Prophet (æ), in a state of intuitive vision, saw knowledge drinking milk. Therefore, Mullà Æadrà says that hermeneutic interpretation (*ta'wîl*) is like interpreting a dream. This analogy is not surprising, since material life as compared with life in the other world is like a dream and the Commander of the Faithful, 'Alí ('a) said: "People are asleep and they will wake up upon death".

Second, cognitive intuition: Mullà Æadrà calls this kind "spiritual intuition". This is an intuition which is not symbolic. Instead, man's mind and spirit perceive the realities from a phenomenon or a sentence not perceivable in a normal state, i.e. like a key, by the turning of which the doors of a garden are opened and a hidden reality is suddenly revealed to the observer (*Mafâtiâ al-ghayb*, p.151). This is the intuition, which is called "inspiration" or "sacred faculty".

Following the Iranian Illuminationist school and the schools of Socrates and Plato, Mullà Æadrà believes in the imaginal world, and based on this, he says that the reason for belief in this kind of "discovery of realities" is that everything and every phenomenon existing in this material world, has a

“spiritual image” or an archetype in the other world, because the material world is just the shadow of the other world. There is nothing in this world which has no corresponding counterpart in the other world (known as “spiritual essence” *Mafàtiã al-ghayb*, p. 94).

With regard to the intuitions explained above, the other world has two shapes: one is the world which we see in the form of a symbolic transformation system, and the other is the world of “special intellectual meaning” which manifests itself in its real form in this world.

Mullà Æadrà says that it must not be thought that the “other world” is housed in a space or a place far from this world, since “special intellectual realities” are here in this world and very close to us. They are not concealed and hidden at all the reason they are hidden from our sight and senses is that we do not have the necessary means of perceiving them (i.e. a polished mirror of pure spirit and heart).

Likening man’s spirit and heart to a mirror has a long history in Persian and, particularly, gnostic literature. Also, somewhere else, Mullà Æadrà has pointed to the “mirror of the heart” as a transparent instrument for non-sensory perception. He has said a “chaste and virtuous heart is, like a mirror, clear and free of rust and opaqueness. Such a heart, when facing the realities of the worlds, can perceive them to the extent of its capacity for perception and reflection (Mullà Æadrà, *Tafsír*, 2/299). Such perception and reflection over the realities is called intuition.

### **Conditions of *ta’wíl***

It behoves us to indicate another principle in Mullà Æadrà’s Qur’anic hermeneutics. He says that there are pre-conditions which have to be met before we are enabled to

perceive and interpret the depth of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an. In addition, not all men are equal to the task. The main pre-conditions are: turning away from the material world and its pleasures, exercising spiritual discipline, and possessing intrinsic preparedness for the task. Only such people can conceive the hermeneutic realities by integrating themselves with the spirit of the world, or the Holy Spirit (which Mullà Æadrà calls the Holy Father). If a person is not equal to this task, and has no self-restraint, he must not try to seek out meanings beyond the Holy Qur'an's outward aspect (*Tafsír*, 3/298 and *Tafsír-i àyàt al Qur'an*, p. 168).

Perhaps, one of the meanings of the verse: "Nobody else shall touch it other than the chaste ones" (Chapter *Wàqi'ah*, Verse 79), is that which was just said by Mullà Æadrà; since the term "*mass*" (which in Arabic means "to touch"), in its wide sense, can mean more than merely touching the Holy Qur'an, and, therefore, can also mean commenting on the realities of the Holy Qur'an.

This point leads us to another principle of the Qur'anic hermeneutics laid down in Mullà Æadrà's exegetic school. That is, although it is the divine message, the understanding of the text of the Holy Qur'an, depends on the commentator's personality, his spiritual rank and preparedness, and also on his mastery of literary nuances of the language, which can be infinite in number as is true in the case of the message of the Holy Qur'an. It is to be noted that Paul Ricoeur maintains the same opinion concerning the infinite realm of the message of the text and the art.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we can sum up the principles followed by Mullà Æadrà in the interpretation of the Holy Qur'an, as follows:

1. The text of the Holy Qur'an contains messages and meanings, of which a part can be elicited from the outward meanings of the words and the other part through rational methods and intuition. Opting for self-coined meaning and imposing the same on the Holy Qur'an is dishonest and cannot be considered as the true meanings of the words of the Holy Qur'an. Therefore, in Mullà Æadrà's hermeneutics, the reader is not free to impose meanings of his own liking on the text. He, therefore, has to seek out the speaker's meanings and intention.
2. The text of the Holy Qur'an, being the mirror of divine speech, is, in the ultimate analysis, in union with divine knowledge and divine command (which is the origination of the world and its existents) with the former being the locus of the manifestation of the latter because there exists no separation among the divine attributes on the one hand and between them and the divine essence on the other hand. The Holy Qur'an, therefore, is a mirror of both this material and the other non-material worlds. As a result, a true commentary on the Holy Qur'an must ultimately lead man to a true recognition of the world of being. It is to be noted that Qur'anic hermeneutics are intended to establish relations and connections with the realities of being, i.e., with man, and up to the

farthest phenomena of the world, and has in itself ontological dimensions.

3. Authentic religious texts such as the Holy Qur'an must be explained not only through the outward meanings of their words but also through their other meanings which are only perceivable by the hidden intellectual faculties of man. Therefore, in making use of true hermeneutics with regard to the Holy Qur'an one must not content oneself with the use of outward senses. To appreciate the divine speech and book, one has to resort to his own spiritual power.

4. The commentator's personality can have a determining influence on the depth of his perception and interpretation of the Holy Qur'an, so can his spiritual chastity and bodily mortification.



# Understanding God's Word in Mullà Æadrà's Philosophy

**U**nderstanding and the interpretation of God's Word or Speech has always been a topic of debate among scholars. It has also been tackled in Islamic philosophy and gnosis from different angles. The Holy Qur'an refers to 'word' as *àyat* (sign). This sign, which is, of course, meaningful, is comprehensible through the following ways:

1. Natural indications: such as natural but extraordinary events, including eclipses of the sun and moon, earthquakes, etc.
2. Human languages: such divine Words, which are called revelation, descends only to those people who possess the necessary qualifications and potential to receive it.
3. Speechless expression: in the form of inspiration and direct transmission of concepts to the mind and heart of the addressee.

From another angle, however, all the phenomena of the world are caused by God's command, creation. In other words these are His acts and words whose denotation are essential and natural.

In this regard, the first leader of the Shi'ites, Imàm 'Alí ('a), says: "When God wills to bring something into existence, He says to it, "Be, (*kun*) so there it is. The word of God is His act, and it is not in the form of "call" or "voice" audible to the physical ear".<sup>1</sup>

This saying of Imàm 'Alí ('a) paves the way for our discussion and leads us to its central point. It separates the divine Word not only from the domain of human speech (which demonstrates an arbitrary and commonly agreed means of expression created by the intermingling of the human voice and air) but also from the puns exclusively used in the philosophy of language. It takes the divine Word to the realm of natural phenomena and the phenomenology of divine revelation. As a result, the hermeneutic interpretation of the Qur'an is done mainly within the domain of philosophical rather than traditional hermeneutics. Accordingly, Mullà Æadrà's interpretation and hermeneutics may be considered as a bridge connecting and reconciling those two kinds of hermeneutics, as well as the foundation of philosophical hermeneutics.

The word "be" (or "become", or "come into existence"), which is frequently used in the Qur'an,<sup>2</sup> represents the 'Divine's will' and 'the Divine's command' and is taken to mean "God's Word" objectively existing in the external world. In fact, the external existence of objects, or their existence, as it is called by Heidegger, depends on the divine Word, "be". It seems that this word, which Muslim gnostics, quoting from the Holy Qur'an, call 'existential being'<sup>3</sup> is the same as 'Logos', which had been used in the Illuminationist philosophy of ancient Iran and in ancient Greek philosophy.

Consequently, the world together with all the existents contained therein (which are sometimes called the macrocosm) are one Book and one divine address, and all the things in the world have interpretable and meaningful signs to help man perceive divine intensions and purposes. This fact, however, does not prevent God from communicating with man through conventional and verbal signs called 'revelation'.<sup>4</sup> Verbal speech or 'revelation' is not only related to the existential word, but, as viewed by Islamic gnosis and Mullà Æadrà, is also regarded as a level and grade in the hierarchy and domain of the existential word (or Logos). It seems as if God speaks to the microcosm through the microcosm and the symmetry,<sup>5</sup> or perhaps the union, of these two 'men' in existence reveals the divine intentions and purposes to mankind through different signs. While man's speech is intended to express his innermost meanings, the divine Word aims at revealing both the hidden features of being and the objective and external existence of the divine will.

Therefore, the divine Word appears in the form of both external existents in the world of creation and in revelations. It descended to the Prophet (æ) in his own language and utterances intelligible to him (but without any mediation of voice or of anything else), and was absorbed by his understanding—an understanding—perception which was never separate from his intentions - which confronts with realities through knowledge by presence.

The important point is that these two types of divine Words (genetic and spiritual) are in fact two faces of the same reality. Muslim gnostics and Mullà Æadrà, however, go further by saying that existence has a hierarchy and domain consisting of certain vertical and horizontal levels, grades and levels. Intellectual existence, which is at the top of this hierarchy and domain, together with imaginal, objective, and external existences which follow thereafter respectively have the highest

priority in the said hierarchy. Then mental<sup>6</sup> existence occupies the middle level, and “verbal existence” of mental concepts, as well as its corresponding written existence, stands on the lowest level.

Existence at this stage is like an object, the image of which is reflected in several mirrors. These mirrors are in fact the aforesaid levels on which the different dimensions of existence stand according to their validity, grades and the degrees of their strength.<sup>7</sup> In the view of Mullà Æadrà,<sup>8</sup> existence seems to revolve around itself and shows a new face on each of these existential levels (i.e. intellectual, imaginal, objective, mental, verbal and written). This deceitful and luring idol puts on different appearances at different moments. Therefore, this leads us to revert to our opening remark by saying that existence is in fact God's book, whose beginning and end are the same, and whose whole being is only one ‘Word’ which appears differently on different occasions. It might be due to such various manifestations of existence or ‘Word’ that philosophers have sometimes interpreted “Logos” as cosmos and sometimes as God's Word or Speech.

According to the above discussion, revelation is the same God's Word or Speech. It passes through all the levels mentioned above and changes itself into words which are incarnated in the mirror of the Prophet's mind, as if God were whispering the same into his ear. Consequently, we can consider the Qur'an to be the verbal form of the true and objective realities of the macrocosm. This holy book has a meaning as vast as the universe in its oral form and, like other realities of existence, is an ‘*āyat*’ or sign of God, embracing His holy words. The Qur'an frequently refers to this symmetry and equates itself with “*Kitāb-i Mubīn*” or “the Manifest Book”.<sup>9</sup>

The Prophet's perception of revelation, or his understanding of God's Word, is exactly the same as the reflection of the eternal realities and the phenomena of the

universe on the Prophet's soul. God's Word, after descending through all the existential levels, is received in the form of verbal messages, consisting of exclusive words with exclusive meanings whose depth and esoteric aspects are perceivable only through exalted intuition.

At the time when revelation descends to the Prophets, it seems that their senses are not "on the alert", and that the divine Word is perceived only through their presential and intuitive knowledge. Perception of the divine Word happens automatically, and no other factor contributes to the Prophet's perception of revelation. The existence of some common verbal signs to be exchanged between the Sender and the receiver of revelation, exactly like the signs and codes used in transmitting messages, is the only prerequisite needed in order to allow the perception of revelation to happen. The language of the Qur'an is Arabic, and so was the Prophet's (the fact that is frequently restated in the Qur'an),<sup>10</sup> therefore, the philosophy of common language has been the basis of perception of God's messages.

Contrary to contemporary hermeneutic philosophic theories, the interference of the horizons and presuppositions of the commentator or his interpretations in bringing the revelations into being, is totally invalid since such assumption will undermine the validity of such revelations; thus rendering them short of the pure Word of God.<sup>11</sup>

The prevalence of a rational atmosphere over him which has enabled his perception to be free of matter, thus enabling him to receive the Word of God as revelations, is another reason why the Prophet's perception of revelation is pure and free from any interference. As was mentioned before, existence embodies material, imaginal and supra-imaginal (rational) levels. We can find the same existential levels in mankind, including the Prophet (æ). That is to say, man lives in a world and in an aura full of sense impressions and matter and he possesses the imaginal faculty as well as an imaginal level (i.e. supra-material

level) that is equal to and consistent with imaginal existence in the cosmos and the universe. He also possesses a supra-imaginal faculty (wisdom or a rational faculty) that is equal to and consistent with the supra-ideal universe or the rational universe. According to Mullà Æadrà and the gnostics, the existential levels of ontology are not accidental, rather they follow the general order of creation and represent the relation between the macrocosm and microcosm. Revelation should be recognized not only through the position taken by the Prophet (æ) in relation to the wording of the Qur'an, but also through gaining knowledge of the total process of its descent. The reason why the word "descent" has been chosen is that it implies the downward journey of revelation through all levels of existence. As was mentioned before, although verbal existence (and then written one) are recognized by Islamic gnostics to be the lowest of all existential levels, there are still a few people who do not consider them as levels of existence.

## Understanding God's Word

Now that inquiry into the process of the perception of revelation and the divine Word (the Qur'an) by the Prophet Moâammed (æ) has been completed, it is now time to explore the philosophy of understanding (and understanding the Qur'an) by commentators and ordinary men. To accomplish this end, it is necessary here to tackle in brief the nature of "understanding".

In its general sense, understanding means what man's faculty of perception comprehends from a verbal phenomenon or other things. The "understanding of a speech" (or written text), as per its well-known definition, means understanding the intended meaning of the speaker (or the writer) through his words. However, this definition has been set aside in contemporary hermeneutics, and a new definition has been

given instead. In this definition, there are only two sides: the interpreter (addressee) and the text (the word).

Heidegger does not conceive of perception as a simple process, but as one of the modes of existence in the universe. This means that understanding is rooted in an existence which is over and above man's existence, but since man has awareness and a manifest existence, he is, therefore, the only existent who is able to understand and interpret the horizons (macrocosm and microcosm) within the realm of his own existence. Like most Western philosophers, Heidegger does not give any reason for his theory. In this theory, phenomenology and hermeneutics are intertwined and understanding and interpretation are equated with the manifestations of existence. In the literature of Islamic gnosis, this is called the natural language of existents and represents the first divine language or Logos.

If Heidegger's theory is exactly what was described above (i.e. that the three-fold levels of man's ontology correspond to the three-fold levels of existence in the universe, and that, unlike other existents, man can harmonize himself with all existential levels at every step, and as a result can receive and perceive the message of existence whether in the form of revelation or art or human language), then Heidegger's claim concerning the relation between man's understanding and the mode of his existence in the world (Dasein) is demonstrable and acceptable; otherwise, we would have a very long way to go.

Unfortunately, Heidegger's approach is different from that of Mullà ʿEadrà. He is even unable to comprehend the spirit of Plato's words. Heidegger seems to have been influenced by Sophists whenever he considers man or Dasein as the exclusive center and criterion of truth. That is why the relativism existing in Sophism also emerges in the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger's school of thought, and understanding and

interpretation of each text and works remain relative, infinite, and unfinalized.

The word 'horizon' in Heidegger's school of thought is not gradational.<sup>12</sup> But the horizon of people are different. According to this theory, all concurrent contradictory horizons, understandings and interpretations are considered true and real. Consequently, the importance of man's role in the perception and interpretation of the universe is questioned, and considered false and illusory. According to such insight "Absolute Being" (i.e., God) has no role and the chain of existents in the universe does not end up in Him. According to Islamic philosophy and Mullà Æadrà's school of thought, any understanding of existence will be untrue and incomplete, and will face a deadlock unless it accepts the Absolute Being (God), who is the Necessary Being.

Another defect in Heidegger's hermeneutics is that the domain of his horizon-finding hermeneutics is material and confined to the world of sensible things. This is because he does not conceive man's understanding of the universe (or his questioning about existence) as anything beyond uttering the words of a text or the appearance of a phenomenon. Unlike Mullà Æadrà's hermeneutics, he never goes beyond the borderlines of matter and sensible things. Rather, he aims at going beyond what is before him to gain a deeper understanding. This is like trying hard to place a big object into a small container wherein there will remain neither the container, nor the content.

Heidegger's occasional attempts at interpreting and comprehending existing phenomena following Plato's method, which are out-of-cave observance of reality, have been concomitant with some misunderstanding. The reason is that the state of Plato's out-of-cave observance is in fact the state of being beyond the aura of matter and sensible things. This is

exactly what Mullà Æadrà believes in, i.e. belief in the imaginal world and supra-images.

Henry Corbin had grasped this point, and thus called hermeneutics “the unveiling of the veiled”, which in Islamic Gnosis is considered equal to the Platonic concept of existence or idea.

Mullà Æadrà believes that the best way of reasoning in order to prove that “understanding or interpretation” and “Dasein or human existence” are interrelated, is to find an existential relation between the microcosm and macrocosm. He also maintains that perceiving the classification of existential degrees, starting with objective and ending with verbal existence is the best way of proving the relation between language and existence on the one hand, and the manifestation of existence in language on the other. This is because without existence, and benefiting from existential degrees, man would have been unable to adapt himself to nature, speak languages, interpret nature, and approach, discover, and experience new and real horizons.

In Gadamer's definition, understanding a text or word, or hermeneutics, is a synthesis resulting not only from the dialog between the two horizons, but also from their dialectics. These two horizons consist of the interpreter's horizon and that of the text. This theory (which is based on the existence of presuppositions, traditions, historical background, as well as conditions shared by the interpreter and the addressee) intends both to demonstrate the interference of the interpreter's horizon with all its dimensions and content, as something inevitable, (scientific), and necessary, and to impose such interference on the philosophy of hermeneutics to show that with the interference of the interpreter's mind or horizon, there no pure content and meaning in the realm of interpretation will exist.

It is to be noted that this theory is, in fact, far from reality, because it imposes on man some kind of automatic,

unconscious deterministic mechanism which is totally inconsistent with the state of consciousness admitted to be in man. It is crystal clear that unlike other existents, man, through his knowledge and the domination of his natural free will over him, can overcome a great part of nature's determinism, and can overrule his own experiences and even presuppositions.

In unconscious situations, man is influenced by traditions, social experiences, his so-called personal horizon, and even his constitutions; Moreover, he ventures to draw on his presuppositions in order to help him in the interpretation and perception of things – things particularly having artistic traits. However, he is, through his freedom of thought and consciousness, able at the same time, to guard against the impact of interference on his interpretations. In other words, if this theory is true in particular cases, it is generally false in general cases, otherwise total belief in determinism would make a free and independent man a powerless and submissive existent.

We do not wish to expound supernatural phenomena such as telepathy and correct prophecy here. However, among the simple daily analyses made around us, covering religious texts, legal, physical or mathematical rules, we can find certain examples in which the interpreter, rather than surrendering to his presuppositions or social traditions, is in searches to discover the intended meaning of the speaker and the physiognomy of the writer in the mirror of the text in order to interpret the text. Even the incentive to understand the ultimate meaning of the author, rather than reading a series of questions and seeking their answers in the text, is what motivates people to read Gadamer's books.

According to what was discussed before, man's understanding is a complicated process that cannot be limited to a general principle. The only acceptable general principle on the

basis of which interpretation and understanding of phenomena, whether natural, verbal or artistic, can be made is the one stating that a common, absolute, real, ultimate or a so-called universal understanding, according to which every human being thinks of himself as sharing with others in the understanding of a specific phenomenon, exists in the world.<sup>13</sup>

It is possible to demonstrate the validity of this general principle through the correspondence existing between the macrocosm and the microcosm. With regard to art, the writer believes that a work of art, which is the creation of an artist, is the reflection of a manifestation of the macrocosm in the soul of that artist, and that his work is not merely an innovation because everyone else under the same conditions and inspired by the soul of the universe or the macrocosm could have created the same artistic phenomenon with all the meanings it bears.

The illumination experienced by a mystic wayfarer and the words uttered exceptionally (and not habitually) by a someone who foretells the future are, in fact, phenomena welling up, and simultaneously not welling up, from within.

It is equally possible for everyone to understand the work of an artist and the words of a mystic poet in its general sense and up to a certain extent despite all their complexity, ambiguity and vastness of meaning. This is because all people possess a common spiritual element enabling them to understand one another and to perceive nature. The existence of a universal understanding is also in full conformity with the wholistic practical theories and the theory of mystic Oneness (*tawâid*).

## **Revelation**

Phenomenology of revelation is also possible by the same way. Revelation is the most complete and powerful type of dialog between the macrocosm and the Prophets, and is the

reflection of existential realities in their soul. The macrocosm can be considered as one of the means and causes of revelation and expression of the divine Word to mankind. Thus understand revelation should be, to the same extent, possible for the people of a language, since in addition to its being a commonly agreed means of expression and communication, language is a human phenomenon. Thus, it is an existential phenomenon which has been introduced more or less in Heidegger's theory and in the theories of some contemporary hermeneutic philosophers.

## **Human understanding and interpretation**

At the outset of this paper, reference was made to the hierarchy of existence (covering rational, imaginal, material, verbal and written existences). Reference was also made to the existence of a sensible, imaginal, and rational hierarchy in man.

Mullà Æadrà solved the problem of man's understanding of God's Word through the same way. He believes that the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an necessitates referring its utterances and words back to known realities and to the unknown realities beyond them, with a view to discovering the depth of the meanings underlying them. Gnostics call this process '*ta'wil*'. Literally speaking, *ta'wil* means the returning of everything to its primary and original position. This is a process of ascent (in contrast with revelation, which is one of descent); that is, a flight from words towards rational realities.

Generally speaking, understanding of God's word (the Qur'an and revealed texts), which have been revealed to the Prophet (æ), is realized only after completion of the following two independent stages.

The first stage, which is called verbal interpretation, and which means paying attention to man's verbal and commonly

agreed signs while observing all their literary, literal and rhetorical aspects, is called by Schleiermacher as syntactical or grammatical interpretation. This stage is also the domain of regular and popular literary criticism, aiming at the creation of the desired meanings from combination of words. This stage corresponds to the lowest level of existence (i.e. written or verbal existence).<sup>14</sup>

The second stage is hermeneutic interpretation (*ta'wíl*) which means going beyond the limit of the words, outward meanings with a view to discovering the innermost purports and the intention of the speaker. This phenomenon is like going beyond the material and sensible world and entering the innermost spirit of the world. This innermost spirit is hidden to the senses, but is the origin of deep sense impressions and is higher and more powerful than ordinary sense impressions at the existential level. Superficial understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an, though limited in scope, is considered as comprehension of God's word; but according to Mullà Æadrà, it cannot be considered as true interpretation and deep understanding of the word. As has been stated in *âadîth*, God's word embodies seven to seventy shades of deep inner meanings.<sup>15</sup> As a result, to confine oneself to its narrowest shade, and verbal meaning denotes failure to perceive the essence of the speaker's meaning and intention, and falls short of rendering worthy interpretation. Contrary to the existing Western hermeneutic schools of thought, any search for connotations of words beyond their outward meanings, far from being an irresponsible, whimsical or temperamental action, is made independently of the presuppositions, horizons, and background knowledge of the interpreter, is the exact intention of the speaker, which is realized, and does exist, in the stages of revelation and in the supra-material world, and which can be perceived only by those people who have transcended the realms of matter and material laws, and observe the imaginal

realities with the aid of their immaterial soul, and inward intuition, philosophically known as microcosmic world of imagination.

This stage, too, consists of different degrees or levels which, like those of existence and light, are either ascending or descending; depending on the rise and fall of the interpreter's immaterial soul and inward purity.

The mystical interpretation of the Qur'an, or the perception of the depths of its concepts is possible only through the ascending journey of perception from sense and matter (the world of speech) to higher and higher stages, that is to the imaginal and rational stages of the soul, and attaining the reality. As Mullà Æadrà says: "Both the Qur'an and man possess outward and inward aspects. In other words, they have both evident and hidden aspects."<sup>16</sup> The inward aspect of the Qur'an is its spirit, which should be perceived by man through his soul, that is, through employing a power beyond his outward senses.

What is beyond the outward sense is veiled and hidden, thus the hidden meanings of the Qur'an cannot be deciphered through the senses and the outward meaning of its words. Like man, the Qur'an has some levels. The lowest level, i.e., its words, can be perceived by means of man's lowest degree (sense) of existence, while its higher levels can only be grasped through man's highest levels of soul, of which intellect or wisdom is one. The Qur'an calls the highest level of perception of its word, as well as the perception of other Divine Words, "*qalb*" (heart). Considering Qur'anic terminology, "*qalb*" is the same as love, which is linked with the highest kingdom of the soul and intuition.

Mullà Æadrà emphasizes that comprehensive interpretation of the Qur'an and true understanding of God's words should begin with the understanding and interpretation of its words. Therefore, any interpretation of this holy book which

goes against its outward meaning, or which ignores the book is incorrect.

The next stage is realized through intuition. In other words, through the union of the spirit of man with the spirit of the world, the macrocosm and the vast space of immaterial existence. At this stage the words are unveiled and truth emerges; a truth which is the same as the realities of the world, and which corresponds to the supra-material existence. That is why Mullà Æadrà has given the title of “*Mafàtiã al-ghayb*”, meaning the keys to the invisible world, to his book on the philosophy of interpretation.

Though generally accepted by Muslim philosophers and gnostics, Mullà Æadrà's definitions of hermeneutic interpretation or *ta'wíl* have been refuted by scholars sticking to the outward meanings of language (literalists). These scholars believe that interpretation means the literal study of the Qur'an. However, according to Mullà Æadrà, these scholars have deprived themselves of perception of the hidden realities and hidden beauties of this holy book.



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## *A note on the Author*

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## Mulla Sadra

Mulla Sadra also known as Sadr al-Din Shirazi as well as Sadr al-Muta'allihin was born in Shiraz in southern Iran in 1571 into an influential and well known family and spent the early years of his theological training in that city. He died in 1637 and his final resting place is in Najaf.

Later he traveled to the city of Isfahan to expand further his intellectual horizons. While in Isfahan he studied under a number of eminent scholars like Shaykh Baha' al-Din Amili and Mir Damad.

He then left Isfahan to devote himself to a life of asceticis, and inner purification. Mulla Sadra considered spiritual training to be the essential condition for those aspiring to gain the True Knowledge of hikmat-I-illahi (literally theosophia).

After completing his spiritual training, he returned to his native city of Shiraz and spent the last period of his life in teaching. Most of his major works were completed during this period. During this period he trained a number of well known scholars and philosophers including Mulla Mohsen Fayz Kashani, Fayaz, Tonkaboni and Haj Mulla Hadi Sabzevari.

Mulla Sadra is the supreme example of that class of sages who combine intellectual discipline with spiritual experience and whom Suhrawardi had called the Muta'allih. It is for this reason that Mulla Sadra was given the highest title possible within the tradition of Hikmat, the title of Sadr al-Muta'allihin, meaning foremost amongst the Muta'allihin or that group of men who are themselves the elite among all who seek the knowledge of divine.

The writings of Mulla Sadra range from the monumentals such as *Asfare Arba'eh*, *Shawahid*

al-Roboobyeh, Masha'ir, 'Arshyyeh, Mabda' wa Mo'ad, Tafseere Qur'an and sharhe Usoole Kafi to treatises of a few pages. Because of their immense importance most of them were printed in lithographed editions nearly a century ago in Tehran. Some have appeared in new editions during the revival of interests in Mulla Sadra during the past decade, but most still remain to be critically edited and printed in editions that would make the contents of these works more easily accessible.

Mulla Sadra created a new school in philosophy by fusing together the views of the major Philosophical and Irfanic schools before him such as Ibn Sina, Sohrawardi and Ibn 'Arabi.

His inventive presentation of his Philosophical views, like the fundamental reality of Existence and its Unity, the Trance Substantial Motion, the Union of Intelligent and the Intelligible, Allah's Knowledge the Truth and its

Simplicity contains all things, the Soul being materially Temporal and spiritually Substant, the Soul in its unity being all of its faculties and the Bodily Return has transformed his school into a dynamic philosophical school that has a profound impact on the current Islamic Thoughts.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup>. *Nahj al-Balaghah*.
  - <sup>2</sup>. At the end of 'Al- Yas' Surah (Chapter).
  - <sup>3</sup>. *Mafātiã al-ghayb*, Mullà Æadrà, third *Fàtiãa*, first *Miftàã*.
  - <sup>4</sup>. In the Qur'an, revelation has sometimes been used in a particular sense.
  - <sup>5</sup>. Ibn 'Arabí, the treatise of *M'arifat al-'àlam al-akbar wa al-'àlam al-asghar*.
  - <sup>6</sup>. The mental and ideal types of existence are usually considered to be at the same level in this classification.
  - <sup>7</sup>. Unlike some of the contemporary hermeneutic philosophers, Mullà Æadrà views the written existence as being weaker than the oral existence. *Asfâr*, vol. 7.
  - <sup>8</sup>. *Asfâr*, vol. 7, p. 24.
  - <sup>9</sup>. In the Transcendent Philosophy, *Kitàbi Mubin* is a hypothetical book recording all the future and past events and phenomena, and presenting a timeless picture of the world of creation.
  - <sup>10</sup>. Surah: *al-Dokhan* verse 58, Surah: *Maryam* verse 97, Surah: *al-Qamar* verse 17.
  - <sup>11</sup>. Refer to Surah: *al-Najm*.
  - <sup>12</sup>. *Nafs al-amr* means pure reality or the level and limit of the essence of things.
  - <sup>13</sup>. According to Muslim philosophers, acquired reason and the union with Active Intellect refer to the highest level of understanding and knowledge, as well as to a common point for real and *nafs al-amri* perceptions.
  - <sup>14</sup>. All people who are acquainted with Arabic language and literature understand this stage to some extent. Refer to the Holy Qur'an: Surah: *al-Dakhan* (Chapter): verse 58: "This (which) We recite unto thee is a revelation and a wise reminder". Surah: *Maryam* verse 98: "So We have made this (the Qur'an) easy in our own tongue (O Moãammed æ), only that you may give glad tidings to the *Muttaqên* (pious and righteous persons - See V, 2:2), and warn with it the *Ludda* (most quarrelsome) people". Surah: *Al-Qamar* verses 17, 22, 32, and 40: "And We have indeed made the Qur'an

easy to understand and remember, then is there any that will remember (or receive admonition)?”.

<sup>15</sup>. Mullà Æadrà, *Mafâtîâ al-ghayb*, Tenth *Fâtiâa*, First *Miftâh*.

<sup>16</sup>. Mullà Æadrà, *Mafâtîâ al-ghayb*, p. 39.