

## A Study of Learning Based on Mulla Sadra's Philosophy

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### **Abstract**

Theoretical and intellectual foundations in designing teaching and learning models cannot be overlooked in learning. This is because how we view humans, the human perception system, and the truth beyond the perception system are critical in shaping the learning process. Therefore, this paper examines learning based on Mulla Sadra's philosophical propositions in these areas. This is done through an analytical-textual approach and by producing propositions regarding the essence and purpose of learning and how learning is achieved. This article explains that based on the philosophical foundations of Mulla Sadra's philosophy, the central point of learning is creating existential unity and removing obstacles to this unity between the content of education (*ma'lūm*) and the learner (*'ālim*). Therefore, in designing the learning process, one should only have a discovery and facilitation approach and plan the prerequisites and conditions for acquiring knowledge, namely, creating existential unity. Thus, learning does not simply involve bringing the individual to act but has a dynamic aspect and provides a suitable environment for learning.

**Keywords:** learning, Mulla Sadra, knowledge, existential unity

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## Introduction

In his book, *Models of Learning: Tools for Teaching*, Bruce Joyce separates each learning model in terms of the objectives pursued by the designers of the learning models. Based on the prominence and type of attention given to one of the involved variables, he divides them into four families.

1. Information Processing Models (based on attention to content and how it is transmitted);
2. Social Models (based on attention to the type of collective interactions for learning);
3. Individual Models (based on attention to the learner's individuality);
4. Behavioral Systems Models (based on attention to behavior change based on learning).

Careful consideration of these four categories reveals that each has a specific approach to humans or knowledge, and they have designed the learning process based on their epistemology and anthropology. For instance, Joyce elucidates this when describing the family of behavioral system models:

The guide to designing models belonging to this family is a common theoretical basis often referred to as social learning theory. This theoretical basis is also known by other names and titles, such as behavior change, behavior therapy, and cybernetics. The position of these models regarding humans is that they consider him/her a "self-correcting" communication system that changes behavior in response to information that indicates his/her success in performing tasks and duties ...

Psychologists (especially Skinner, d. 1990) facilitate the ability to self-correct by exploiting knowledge related to how humans react to tasks and feedback (Joyce, 2009).

Therefore, one cannot ignore the role of designers' intellectual and ideological foundations in designing teaching and learning models. Therefore, producing educational models and curricula is based on a particular philosophical approach to learning and education. Accordingly, properly recognizing the philosophical foundations and definition of education and learning based on them becomes necessary (see Maleki 2015, 46). It can also be concluded that the learning model presented will be more precise and effective as the required theoretical foundations' analysis accuracy increases. Therefore, considering the proficiency of the foundations of Mulla Sadra's philosophy by the author and supporters of this intellectual school, exploring the ontology of education and learning based on Islamic philosophy holds a special place.

### **1. What Is Learning according to the Philosophy of Sadra?**

Despite the differences in defining the learning processes, emphasis is placed on the centrality of awareness, knowledge, and information as the primary variables. Therefore, how the concept of knowledge is interpreted in understanding learning is a determining factor (Maleki 2015, 55; Vaseti 2010, 26).

### **2. The Relationship between Knowledge and Learning**

Philosophers believe that knowledge either corresponds to reality and actual fact (*wāqeʿ wa nafs al-amr*) or not. If it does, it is true knowledge; if it does not, it is false. The “reality” refers to the truth of everything in its existence, whether mental or external, regardless of the perceiver’s perceptual understanding. The truthfulness or correspondence of human perceptions to reality is generally self-evident and does not require argumentation (Shirazi 1981, 1: 336). Based on the principle of correspondence, it can be concluded that if reality is not found, the assumption of error will not be possible, because errors are only revealed when humans know reality. Otherwise, errors will never be discovered. Therefore, according to the philosophical system of Sadra, the correctness of learning is the result of a process that the output of which should confirm the authenticity of the received narrative by the human perception apparatus (mind) from beyond itself (external existence) (see Shirazi 1981, 6: 16). Therefore, learning output should refine the perception of truth more accurately for learning to be proficient.

Furthermore, in Islamic philosophy, especially in Mulla Sadra’s wisdom, the “presence” element is central in analyzing the process of perception and knowledge (Shirazi 2001, 1: 135). Therefore, in the ontological definition of knowledge, it is said that knowledge is the presence of one reality (*maʿlūm*) to another reality (*ʿālim*) (Shirazi 1996, 70; Mozaffar 2005, 52). Presence becomes meaningful when the knower and the known are unified and have a kind of existential identity. The known, whether a part of the knower or his/her affairs or if it is something other than the knower, the implication of this statement is the parallelism between knowledge and existence. Because existence is parallel to unity, unity is the basis of presence; therefore, presence is knowledge, and knowledge is existence. Wherever existence has meaning, knowledge is also meaningful and vice versa (Shirazi 1981, 8: 164; 2003, 17).

The necessity is that knowledge is achieved in existence, and pursuing it is meaningless. In other words, presence is the same as knowledge, and whenever there is presence, knowledge is achieved; not that the possibility of studying it is provided, but presence is the same, and knowledge is also the same (Shirazi

1981, 6: 416). However, not every existence is present to every other, and as a result, it is not knowledgeable about it.

Therefore, the realization of presence has certain conditions, which are discussed below:

Having an existential relationship that is presumed in two ways: (a) Identity (total unity; *ittiḥād-i tāmm*) between perceiver and perceived, such as the knower's knowledge of himself; (b) Unity between perceiver and perceived, like the knowledge of cause and the effect about one another (Shirazi 1984, 109).

Based on Sadra's final analysis in the discourse of causality, the scope and depth of this unity find a wide range. Because, in his final view of the cause, he considers all the effects, which are all possible existences, as identical to their cause; consequently, their cause also resides exclusively in the Necessary Existence of the Real. According to this view, the effects become the aspects of their cause, and a kind of existential unity among the effects, based on their direct connection to their cause, is established. In other words, because all entities become aspects (*shu'ūn*) of the Necessary, therefore, in the network of existence, due to their existential connection with their cause, a unity among all possible entities is also represented. Relative to the intensity and weakness, quantity and quality of the existential unity of the effects with their cause and their connection to their real cause, there is also an existential unity among the effects. Following this unity, which justifies knowledge, the knowledge of the effects of each other becomes possible to the same extent and proportion (*Hukm aḥad al-muttaḥidīn yasrī ilā al-ākhar*). This extent of existential unity even encompasses acquired knowledge, which will be discussed later.

### 3. The Immateriality of the Knower and the Known

Based on the positioning of existence for knowledge and its negation from materiality, as mentioned above, and in line with equating existence with knowledge, conceiving knowledge concerning materiality and knowledge for material things becomes a matter of inquiry. Because, on the one hand, existence is also applicable to materiality and it is equal to knowledge, and on the other hand, due to their extent and lack of collective existence, how can we conceive the concept of knowledge, that is presence, for material things?

According to Sadra's *gradational* (*tashkīkī*) outlook on existence, presence and, consequently, knowledge, too, become gradational (*mushakkak*); therefore, material entities, even in the weakest state of existence, have a corresponding degree of presence and knowledge. No matter how immersed in materiality, a material entity has a weaker knowledge of itself and its cause. This weakness is to the extent that, in a non-philosophical view, knowledge at that level is denied to that entity and is not considered a "knower" (Shirazi 1981, 6: 340).

This absence of the application of knowledge is because in material matters, due to the existence of extension and dimensionality within them—whether it is physical dimensions and divisibility or temporal dimensions—presence, which is a condition of knowledge, indeed the very essence of knowledge and perception, does not take form. However, from a trans-temporal perspective, material matters exist collectively in a horizon and landscape where space and time are meaningless and form a unified reality. As a result, even for immaterial entities without spatial and temporal dimensions, knowledge of the material becomes meaningful. Therefore, there is no obstacle to the existential comprehension of physical entities, and as a result, the presence of physical matters for the immaterial entities in the trans-temporal landscape (Shirazi 1981, 1: 26; Suhrawardi 2009, 1: 283, Shirazi 1996, 534).

In addition, another method for acquiring knowledge from material entities is referred to as “acquired knowledge.” In this type of knowledge, due to the duality of the known and the knower, humans, equipped with a coherent set of discovery tools—namely, the perceptual apparatus—become connected, related, and unified with and acquire the awareness of the external world. As a result of this awareness, they gain access to the truths outside of themselves. Thus, the acquired knowledge results from the narrative function of the human’s reception apparatus (mind) beyond itself (Shirazi 1981, 6: 160). Therefore, within the core of the acquired knowledge (the process of correctly discovering other truths), two major components are involved: the human *perceptual apparatus* and the *reality* beyond the perceptual apparatus—namely, the “external” (world), meaning external to the narrative component, which the narrator reflects within himself.

Due to its unity and identity with the human soul, the essence of this narration is a kind of true known (*ma’lūm-e ḥaqīqī*) for the human being, to which there exists a presential knowledge. Despite this, these types of awareness also provide knowledge of the external world because of their mirror-like and narrative nature. Therefore, we have two types of knowns in this method of knowledge acquisition: the “known by essence” and the “known by accident” (Shirazi 1981, 6: 151; Tabatabai 1388, 85).

In this method, the essence of knowledge, i.e. presence, still exists. To clarify, “knowledge by presence”—i.e. the presence of a known entity before the knower—is subject to gradation, depending on the intensity or weakness of this presence. In other words, the degree of the knower’s existential encompassment (*iḥāṭa*) of the known and the unity between them, and the presence of the known before the knower, determine the intensity or weakness of the knower’s knowledge-based encompassment of the known. This encompassment of the knower can sometimes be without instruments, akin to the complete identity of the knower and the known. In this case, the presence and knowledge are com-

plete. Sometimes, it is mediated, and a union between the knower and the known occurs. In this situation, the stronger the capacity of the mediums union, the greater the presence and the more complete the knowledge-based encompassment (Shirazi 1981, 3: 480).

Therefore, the human soul, with its illuminative attribution, makes material matters present for itself, and through its perceptual system, in which the soul has a presence, it unites with material entities. Consequently, the conditions for the realization of knowledge, that is unity, and, as a result, presence continue to persist. As pointed out, knowledge is not acquired but is achieved and realized upon the existential union between the knower and the known.

In learning, too, one must have a discovery-oriented and facilitative attitude and lay the groundwork for obtaining knowledge, i.e. creating existential unity. In other words, in the philosophy of Sadra, a human is not a recognizer, but his existence is the very presence. The corollary of this point is that the educational model and curriculum merely organize the conditions for learning and are a prerequisite for acquiring knowledge. With this approach, we should face modeling in the field of education, not that we consider the educational curriculum as part of the process of producing and creating knowledge. Put differently, the educational process is not knowledge-making but provides the conditions for producing knowledge.

The reflection of this philosophical analysis of the ontology of knowledge in education and learning results in a shift in the general attitude towards this concept, positioning it as a focal point in curricular planning and the creation of educational models. In other words, knowledge acquisition is facilitated by creating a union and removing barriers in the existential union between the teaching content (known) and the learner (knower). It is necessary to view education and learning from this perspective and invest efforts in this point.

With this overarching perspective on the nature of knowledge, and consequently, the focal point of education and learning, the difference of this perspective from other attitudes towards the nature of knowledge, and hence, educational approaches, become apparent in the philosophy of science. These include humanistic and positivist attitudes towards the concept of knowledge and subsequent learning, which, in generating educational content, based on their views, consider other variables as essential and centralize them in education.

As explained, "presence" plays a central role in realizing knowledge; therefore, the educational process, which is the process of realizing knowledge, must also play a central role in this principle. The education and learning process should be organized based on the abovementioned conditions to achieve this principle.

Furthermore, based on what has been said, it becomes clear that learning is valid and reliable if it either directly unifies the learner with the content, or ac-

completes this by using mediums that connect the content as it is with the learner or more precisely, creates an existential union. Therefore, in learning, we should use those scientific and educational methods and tools that, in reflecting reality (the union of the learner with the content), perform best.

#### **4. How to Achieve Learning based on the Principles of Sadra's Philosophy**

Based on the acceptance of the notion of knowledge with the centrality of the principle of "presence" as a pivot point in the learning process, and subsequently the principle of unity between learning content and the learner, we must maximize the learner's exposure to the learning content (existential unity). In other words, the quality of the learning process improves proportionally with the level of existential unity between these two elements. Put differently, depending on the type of training content, the learner should have the maximum possible exposure to that content. For example, if the training content is skill-based, like driving instruction, the learner should have as much exposure to the car as possible to feel more present in the learning conditions, thereby ensuring the best possible learning outcome. Put differently, the correct and suitable learning method is determined by the level of the learner's exposure and encounter with the subject of learning. Any method that can make the learning content more present to the learner takes precedence over other methods.

In this regard, learning and teaching tools, including textbooks, will gain more authenticity based on the level of "presence" they can provide for the learner from the learning content, depending on its nature. This principle will also affect the learner's level of presence with the instructor in the learning process. Therefore, after illuminative presence, physical and face-to-face presence has priority over other types of presence such as auditory, virtual, written, etc. Furthermore, according to Sadra's viewpoint on the love movement and its direct relation to capacity and existential unity (Shirazi 1387, 170), the more the love relationship between the learner and the teacher, the greater their unity will be, and as a result, the principle of presence will be more pronounced, leading to the optimal achievement of knowledge acquisition.

Another condition mentioned for the attainment of knowledge is the abstractness of knowledge. If we want to reflect this condition in the field of education and learning, we must first emphasize the maximum abstraction of the content from material matters (if they are material); because in learning, the more the learner can be brought closer to the abstract dimension of the content, the easier and more accurately the knowledge is received; because the essence of knowledge is abstract. Therefore, the more the known is detached from mate-

rial matters, the more it has in common with the abstract dimension of the human soul (the knower), facilitating the learning process.

In addition, based on the ontological analysis of the foundation of theories on self-evident truths (axioms), the more we can clarify the trajectory of these affirmations in humans, the more the recognition of that affirmation phenomenon within humans will be reinforced. In other words, since every science indicates an existential connection with the known, tracing this connection is necessary for theoretical propositions, too. The more transparent the process of this connection is for humans, the clearer the discovery of reality becomes. Based on logical and cognitive literature, this approach is the same as the foundation of theoretical propositions on axioms.

In the education process, teaching and learning must occur based on the arrangement of concepts and the type of reasoning mentioned; therefore, the teaching and learning process should start from the general and fundamental concepts previously mentioned. The starting point of reasoning and the arrangement of issues should be designed from axioms to establish learning in the learner's mind properly.

With this statement, one of the critical discussions about the content of education and the arrangement of concepts used in education becomes clear. In other words, not all concepts are equal, and it is not the case that, like materialists, we consider the mind only a pure mirror and the rest of the concepts as illusions, or like Kant, we presuppose a set of concepts, regardless of the primary intelligible, for the mind (Kant's twelve categories), but if we pay attention, each concept presents special features from the outside (educational content). Therefore, concepts should be arranged for the learner based on understanding the arrangement of concepts and the type of content to be presented.

## **5. Relationship between Willpower and Learning**

A person can deliberate about carrying out several actions and choose from among them. This freedom of choice is based on the actor's knowledge; hence, the person is referred to as a "voluntary actor" or an "intentional agent." Therefore, to reach the goals of the learning process, which is to achieve behavior and action consistent with the learning process, it is necessary to examine the relationship between knowledge and voluntary action.

In each stage of the realization of voluntary action, a certain truth of knowledge, i.e. the existential union between the learner and the learning content, is established. Therefore, each stage demands its educational content (guidance for achieving union with the learning content), and each content also needs its sources of acquisition (finding unity with that content).



As such, the essence of all stages of voluntary action is knowledge, and each one is immersed in the truth of knowledge. Therefore, each stage of voluntary action should be paced according to the existential union between the learner and the learning objectives. In other words, at each stage, based on the principles of voluntary action, the learner should come into closer contact with the existential dimensions of that behavior.

In conception, action unites with the conceptual (mental) dimension of the intended behavior and action (conceptual unity with behavior). In affirming the utility, that behavior's existential effects and necessities are understood (conceptual unity with the necessities and effects of that behavior). In creating enthusiasm, the learner becomes emotionally in sync with the behavior or, in other words, the existential void of that behavior within the learner is realized (the learner's existential unity with the absence of that behavior). In the stage of intensifying desire, the necessity of the behavior, or the damages resulting from the lack of that behavior, are realized (existential unity with the effects and necessities of the absence of that behavior). Finally, with the establishment of obligation, all of the person's faculties strive for true unity with that behavior (real unity between the learner and the behavioral objectives of education and learning), and as a result, stable behavior emerges.

Similarly, since the process of knowledge influences the learning process, the macro rules in the domain of knowledge value also govern the field of learning. Accordingly, the philosophical space of epistemology should shape the understanding of the limitations of perceptual and educational tools and the error-detection mechanisms in teaching and learning. The designs set up in the field of educational evaluation should also be planned based on the value of cognition and the error-detection mechanism of cognition.

The reflection of the result—that various perceptual tools cover each other in reducing the perceptual error coefficient—in education and learning is that all perceptual and educational tools should be maximally involved in the learning process to decrease learning errors to the same extent. This should also be done by focusing on reason, as it is the most robust human acquisition tool, playing the most significant role in error detection. Engaging all perceptual layers and educational tools not only immunizes perception from errors but also increases the learning process's reliability coefficient, thus increasing learning's value. This should be adjusted concerning the complexity of each educational content.

## **6. The Proposed Strategies of Mulla Sadra's Philosophy for Presenting a Learning Model**

Based on the outlined philosophical foundations, the essence of learning is based on creating existential unity between the content and the learner. Accord-

ing to this existential unity, a method must be adopted for stages that require appropriate behavior from the learner, which maximizes this unity. The method that can make the educational content more present to the learner takes precedence over other methods. Since learning aims to produce relatively stable behavior in the learner, the intended method should make changes in the behavioral domain, and since behavior is derived from the theoretical realm, the proposed model should move from theoretical knowledge toward practical behavioral change in the context of voluntary action principles.

The Human being can accelerate or slow down his substantial movement with his choices; he can speed up or slow down his perfection journey, whose goal is to connect with the active intellect. Accordingly, the more he nurtures intellectual forms in himself and grows his intellectuality through theoretical and practical choices towards *acquired intellect (intellectus adeptus)*, the higher his existential degree will be, and he will speed up reaching his goal, which is the acquired intellect. This statement necessitates that the extent of a human's existential growth depends entirely on the extent of his intellectual growth. This statement in education implies that intellectual aspects in learning and teaching should be prioritized and organized, aiming to focus on thought and intellectual growth in the learner. Therefore, regardless of the educational content, which is closer to this goal, the more intellectual it is, intellectual cultivation and thinking should be the main focus of the proposed teaching method. In other words, the real education and growth of a human being are directly related to his wisdom cultivation. Therefore, in education and training, intellectuality and wisdom cultivation should be the primary basis (Shirazi 1981, 5: 265).

Based on what has been said, the proposed learning method is entirely thought-oriented and based on argumentation, demonstration, and wisdom cultivation. Therefore, two paths for wisdom cultivation can be considered: individual wisdom cultivation, in which the learner is self-taught and follows the stated stages step by step in line with an intellectual process, or an external agent—such as an educational designer or a teacher—activates wisdom cultivation in the learner.

Also, based on philosophical principles, this comparison can be made that focus and attention, which are emphasized in all learning and teaching methods, are, in fact, the intensity of existential unity with a specific object, and this unity is the philosophical reading of focus and attention. In other words, in each learning process, the learner strives to achieve a specific type of attention based on an existential unity that varies based on the existential dimensions of the learning object and the intended learning goals. Therefore, since the focus in each stage of the intentional act is, to some extent, a sign of greater unity with that specific dimension, the necessary existential unity in each of the stages in creating an intentional act is recognized by reason, and the necessary tool for facili-

tating this existential unity is employed based on the type of content. Thus, the unity created with the learning object is detailed in each stage and process of learning and teaching. Therefore, the way to achieve the goals in each of the stages of voluntary action is designed with rational arguments and a demonstrative method, and the steps of the proposed methodical approach are organized as follows:

1. Creating existential unity (focus) between the learner and the learning content (the learning content is the subject of learning which should modify the learner's behavior in correspondence with it).
2. Creating existential unity (focus) between the learner and the effects of action.
3. Creating existential unity (focus) between that action and the learner's existential void that is compatible with the action.
4. Creating existential unity (focus) with the reality of behavior and the absence of its adjunct.

Based on this, during the teaching process, the learner must be confronted with a problem so that the customized passage of the problem activates the learning process—which is, solving the problem in a specific process. So, the learner should initially face a subject that creates a problem (beneficial interaction). Therefore, the learning subject is the phenomenon that the learner has encountered and has a beneficial and sustainable interaction with it. Hence, the existential union with the subject of learning makes the learner understand the problem. In each stage of learning, the problem becomes more profound, and based on the micro-objectives in each stage of learning and the learning method based on Islamic philosophy, solutions to the problems emerge.

## **Conclusion**

The non-functioning of a human soul on a single plane suggests that various possibilities exist for psychic beings, and by directing these souls, we can lead them toward specific paths. The possibility of this direction in the general sense of education, namely changing behavior, is valid and proves the possibility of learning and education for souls. Therefore, the notion of education and learning is a voluntary human action since the roots of learning fall under practical wisdom.

Based on the foundations of transcendental theosophy, learning is not bringing an individual to action; instead, it has a stimulating aspect and prepares an appropriate groundwork and framework for the learner, and based on the conception of perfection in action, it creates a void within the individual concerning that action, and the necessity to fill that void by executing the action allows the

learner to personalize the way to execute that action and actively strive to achieve it.

The focal point in educational planning and learning model design is to create an existential union and remove barriers between the educational content (the known) and the learner (knower); therefore, in the learning process, one must maintain an exploratory and facilitating approach and pave the way for the prerequisites and conditions for acquiring knowledge, which is to establish an existential union. Therefore, educational planning merely organizes the conditions for learning and serves as a preparatory aspect for acquiring knowledge (union).

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