



2528-9705

*Örgütsel Davranış Araştırmaları Dergisi*  
Journal Of Organizational Behavior Research  
Cilt / Vol.: 3, Sayı / Is.: S2, Yıl/Year: 2018, Kod/ID: 81S2178



## THE MEANING OF VIRTUE THEORY IN THE MORAL SYSTEM OF MULLA SADRA

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### ABSTRACT

*In the current essay, a short discussion is provided of the divisions related to moral philosophy. Then the meaning of virtuism is explained. In the middle section of the essay the philosophical and anthropological roots of Sadra's philosophy are discussed and this section is related to theoretical philosophy. In the third part of the essay the moral ideas of Sadra will be presented and in the final section we will examine whether Mulla Sadra is a virtuist or not.*

**Keywords:** *Virtue, Virtue Centeredness, Anthropology, Transcendent Philosophy, Originality and Intensification of the Existence of Man, Felicity*

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the attention that our Islamic theosophers have paid to ethics but their studies have never been in line with the official divisions of moral philosophy. According to the scholars who have focused on comparative studies, Islamic thinkers in moral philosophy can be included among the proponents of virtue ethics. This is very true in view of the importance that Islamic philosophers have attached to virtue in practical philosophy. But the question that has motivated the author to undertake the current research is that if Islamic theosophers including Mulla Sadra share the same ideas with pro-virtue philosophers or there are some differences between them and other proponents of virtue ethics? The hypothesis of the author is that virtuism has the same meaning in both intellectual groups. But Sadra is not defending virtuism as an intellectual approach rather his virtuism is deeply rooted in his metaphysical and anthropological outlook in the domain of theoretical philosophy.

Key Words: Virtue, Virtuism, Anthropology, Transcendent Theosophy, Existential Primacy and Intensity of Man, Happiness.

#### ***Moral Philosophy: Classification of Theoretical and Philosophical Issues of Ethics***

Moral philosophy as a branch of philosophical knowledge deals with the nature and explication of concepts related to moral actions. Moral philosophy emerges when we undergo through a Socratic transition from the sphere where is dominated by traditional rules to a sphere where we can independently and exactly contemplate on the concepts (Frankena, 2004, p. 25).

We can divide the most important theoretical issues of ethics into four classes:

1. Analytical Ethics (or Meta-ethics): this branch of ethics consists of a set of issues of ethics that are of conceptual nature. Meta-ethics seeks to answer questions like the following questions: what are the meaning or application of morally correct or good expressions? How can one demonstrate or justify moral and normative judgements? Are they

justifiable at all? What is the nature of ethics? What is the difference between the moral and immoral? What is the meaning of freedom and responsibility? (Frankena, 2004, p. 26).

2. Normative Ethics: this branch of ethics discusses the extensions of ethical notions. The following issues are the examples: what is good? What is my responsibility? These issues might be raised in the form of certain judgements: I should not harass anyone; I should or shouldn't protest against the employer.
3. Descriptive ethics: this branch of ethics consists of a set of debates on ethics that are of descriptive nature. "Here the ultimate goal of discussions is the description or explication of moral phenomenon or a theory of human nature is sought to be reached in which the ethical issues are explained" (Frankena, 2004, p. 25).
4. Moral psychology (or moral science of soul): this branch of ethics consists of philosophical and empirical issues concerning human mental affairs that are undertaken by man as a moral onlooker. "Moral psychology in this context refers to the psychology of moral philosophy. Some basic issues of moral philosophy are either topics in philosophy of mind or directly involve such discussions. In fact, the ideas of moral philosophy must be consistent with the outlook of a justified psychology" (Williams, 2004, p. 76).

Among the above-mentioned debates, normative ethics along with analytical ethics are among the most important titles in moral philosophy. The end of research in this science is providing moral principles and rules and its propositions contain recommendation, encouragement, or moral injunction and ask the audience to act according to them (Warnock, 2001, p. 50).

Among the issues discussed in normative ethics, the most basic issue that has spurred an expansive volume of debates consists of "criterion of right and wrong".

From one perspective, one can divide the criteria for moral right and wrong into two classes. First class includes the criteria that are merely focused on the action and arise from it. This criterion claims that whenever a certain action has specific set of conditions it can be declared moral; otherwise it will not be moral. There are two views regarding the nature of these conditions:

- A. Utilitarianism: "the view that the sole ultimate standard of right and wrong and obligation is the principle of utility, which says quite strictly that the moral end to be sought in all we do is the greatest possible balance of good over the evil (or the least possible balance of evil over the good) in the world as a whole" (Frankena, 2004, p. 86).
- B. Deontological theory: the view that considers doing one's "duty" the standard of right and wrong. In other words, right or wrong nature of an action is decided according to its obligatory nature.

"It is possible for an action or rule of action to be morally right or obligatory one even if it does not promote the greatest possible balance of good over evil for self, society, or universe. It may be right simply because of another fact about it or because of its own nature" (Frankena, 2004, p. 47).

Second class: standards and criteria that are more related to the agent of action and his personal traits although the action itself is also of relevance in this context. But this view considers the virtue related judgements as secondary and based on the virtue rules regarding the agents and their incentives and personal traits. Thus, if an agent has had a decent incentive for his action



this action will be of moral value and virtuous otherwise it will be immoral and wrong. Those who insist on this standard of right and wrong in moral actions and propositions are called virtue-oriented (Pincoffs, 2003, pp. 18-19).

Ancient moral science was more inclined to virtue-oriented ethics. Of course, this is not to say that it did not speak of the action rather it implies that the major emphasis was laid on the understanding of a noble concept. This emphasis was replaced by strict legalism in major parts of modern moral philosophy. In other words, the rules and principles are prioritized and continue to hold this primacy still today. However, among contemporary philosophers there is once again a new interest in virtue-oriented ethics; and most are of the belief that past masters and scholars were right in their insistence on virtue (Holmes: 66).

#### *Virtue-oriented-ness (Virtuism)*

Virtue is a type of desirable praiseworthy personal trait and virtue-oriented ethics is a form of reflection that allocates a specific place for such traits. In virtue ethics a special attention is paid to moral agent and his motives. Since these issues are also highlighted in moral psychology, the debate of virtue ethics also includes the psychological discussions of ethics.

Virtue ethics is considered to be the alternative for two normative theories of deontology and utilitarianism. Although in deontology and utilitarianism the virtues are not rejected or neglected it is very likely that a utilitarianistic theory to encourage a virtuous action in view of its desirable results. However, true understanding of moral theories depend on reasons that they offer for the actions not based on the action that they require.

Virtue ethics is a theory according to which the courageous and righteous nature of an action is the reason for its accomplishment and thus in this ethics mere virtuous action is not intended rather acting virtuously is of primary importance. An individual might be in a specific situation where he takes the same action that is undertaken by the virtuous man but he is not necessarily considered a virtuous agent. Based on this account the distinction between virtue-oriented ethics and its two other alternatives, i.e. utilitarianism and consequentialism. In utilitarianism the outcome of actions is merely of importance and in deontology the obligatory nature of a duty like the correspondence of an action with Kantian Categorical Imperative is underlined (Williams, 2004, p. 21).

McIntyre believes that Aristotle's virtue-oriented theory is of four aspects:

One: virtues are habits not only for action rather for judging and sensing based on firm rational rules and acting according to virtues for a prosperous life the fulfilment of which is the end of humanity. Having virtues implies acting good as a human individual.

Two: virtues are of two types; first, rational virtues represent the class of virtues that form special actions of reason; second, moral virtues that stand for the virtues of non-rational parts of the spirit. When these virtues are following reason can be acquired via habit and practice.

Three: since practical reason results in all type of right action, for acquiring it one should already have all virtues together because while the role of practical reason is to choose the right means these virtues can lead us to right ends.

Four: it is only through the city-state and living in it that virtues can be fulfilled. Without the education provided by the city-state specifically by the best city-states no man can ever reach the rationality that is required for virtues (McIntyre, pp. 288-290).

#### **DEFINITION OF MAN AND EXAMINATION OF HIS NATURE IN SADRA'S PHILOSOPHY**



Before turning to the study of the general moral system of Sadra we need to mention some outlines of Sadraen anthropology along with his definition of human being. Like his ancestors, Sadra defines man as *animal rationale* and understands *rationale* as the logical ability of man to understand the universals; this human ability is the true differentia of human rational soul and is a specific quality of humanity; because knowledge and perception are among the attributes of incorporeal beings and knowledge is nothing but the “presence of an incorporeal being by an incorporeal being” (Shajari, 2009, p. 86).

The difference of Mulla Sadra as compared to other philosophers lies in the fact that he does not consider human reality complex. Having criticized the view of those who claim that human reality is composed of natural forms and triple plant, animal and human forms, Sadra argues that although man is of various grades and status, he represents a unique existential identity, which starts from the lowest station of existence and gradually evolves through a variety of stations and finally reaches the station of Noble Intellect, i.e. its Origin.

In the third volume of *Asfar* he writes: “You need to know...” (Asfar, 2004, vol. 9: 98).

Man is one of the natural beings, which are one of the personal unity of their specific species. He is continuously evolving through the lowest grades to reach the highest grades by retaining the unity of his personal identity. While other species are not of such a nature because they have a matter that carries their form and the latter could be separated from the matter and be replaced with another form from other species.

Then the first characteristic of human being, according to Sadra, consists of his essential unity. This unity simultaneously involves the unity of faculties and unity of soul and body. “Body is the lower degree of the soul while the latter is the nobler degree of the body” (Shajari, 2009, p. 87). The second characteristic of human being as understood by Sadra, is “analogical gradation of human nature”. Sadra argues that there is a group of enlightened scholars who do not believe in the unity of human nature in all existential spheres rather they suggest that through existential evolution man acquires various identities.

The soul in each one of these stages has a specific identity with its special rules and effects. Of course, multiplicity of these stages does not indicate their total heterogeneity. Rather there is a type of existential causal relation between them. The difference of cause and effect is in their perfection and deficiency (Shajari, 2009, p. 91).

“Verily the man...” (Hassanzadeh, 1992, p. 565).

Along with the two aforementioned features, a third characteristic of man is acquired in Sadra’s philosophy that can be described as the “stability of human nature in all stages of descent and ascent”.

According to Mulla Sadra, although man has a universal essence that can be predicated to numerous extensions the doctrine of primacy of existence suggests that man is a continuous fluid reality of a unique personal identity that ascends to perfection through the lower degrees of deficiency and the nature of man is abstracted from this unique identity and personality. Of course, in each stage a separate identity can be inferred for man in the course of his existential evolution. However, this abstraction of various essences does not render the unity impossible. Because essence is the limit of existence and a concept that is abstracted from the descended existence. And being in every stage will have the essence relevant to that stage (Shajari, 2009, p. 98).



In Al-Shawahid al-Rububiyah, Sadra states this point in the following words: “since human soul is a heavenly entity its unity is an integrated unity (i.e. a unity that besides simplicity includes all inanimate, plant, animal and rational stages at the same time) that is a shadow of the Divine Unity. Then human soul in its essence is reasoning, imagining, sensing and growing and also moving with the body and exists in the physical body” (Mulla Sadra, 2006: p. 337).

#### *Definition of Sadraen Ethics and Place of Virtue in Sadraen Thinking*

Muslim scholars have divided human knowledge into practical and theoretical philosophies. Ethics belongs to the practical philosophy. Because practical philosophy is a science whose end is the achievement of an action or knowing the quality of a certain action. Of course it is better to define a science based on its subject matter because end is outside the science itself. Thus conceived, practical philosophy consists of knowledge of the affairs whose existence depends on human will and action (Mulla Sadra, 2003, vol. 1: p. 23).

Now if we look at practical philosophy from this point of view as the science that regulates and forms a human individual's states we reach to ethics. Accordingly, ethics is the science of human actions and states. In a comprehensive definition, Mulla Sadra describes ethics based on its subject matter and end as follows: “ethics is the knowledge of affairs that are related to the regulation of states of an individual in self-discipline and mental purification. By means of self-discipline and mental purification a man becomes ready to receive the theoretical sciences through which he can achieve the true prosperity” (Mulla Sadra, 2003, p. 21).

Before continuing the debate, we need to remind a number of points. First, our previous discussions including the meaning of virtuism and the outline of Mulla Sadra's notion of human being and his definition of ethics based human virtue. We indeed sought to provide the ground to present Sadra's moral thought as a version of virtue ethics.

Second, we need to know that what has been referred to by the classic scholars as the moral science and ethics is in fact the branch of knowledge that today is known as “moral philosophy”. Our reason is that ethics is closely related to epistemology and metaphysics; this close relation with the pure philosophy qualifies this branch of studies to be declared an example of x-philosophy.

On the other hand, examination of the general essence of some issues and also the fundamental explanation of some notion in ethics as conceived by Islamic scholars specifically by Sadra is an endorsement of our idea that moral science and moral philosophy refer both to the same thing. As we mentioned earlier, the end of moral science, according to Sadra, is the achievement of prosperity. However, prosperity is achieved when justice prevails human existence and creates balance between the mental faculties. The discussion of prosperity will be shortly undertaken in the last section of the paper. Justice is the chief virtue among all social virtues. Mulla Sadra has divided virtues into wisdom, courage and modesty a la previous scholars.

#### *Place of Virtue in Mulla Sadra's Practical Philosophy*

According to Mulla Sadra, virtue and good as notions are related both with existence. Every existential attribute is a perfection in view of its existential nature and all of them are metaphysically explained in the light of monotheistic vision of the doctrine of primacy of existence; but some of these existential attributes cause a number of specific perfections to be wiped off the pure and noble souls while some others add to the nobility and value of souls. The attributes whose existence in the soul results in the promotion of it are virtues and their opposites are vices (Asfar, 2004, vol. 4: p. 205).



In Sadraen ethics, virtue and vice are not genus of their own extensions and do not constitute them rather the extensions are abstracted as such. In other words, the virtues are abstract and “inferred from the very essence of the thing”.

Two notions of virtue and vice due to their existential nature are gradable. The predication of these notions to their extensions is analogically graded and is not univocal. Value and virtue of human actions depend on the effect that they have on human heart. Every action, which purifies human nature, is of priority. An action would impress someone due to his heart’s purity while it cannot have the same impact on another man (Mulla Sadra, 2006, vol. 1: p. 293).

It is clear now that virtue is the foundation of righteous action and guidance of a virtue is existential as it is nothing but an existential perfection. As we mentioned earlier, virtues include courage, modesty and wisdom. Wisdom contains both courage and modesty (Asfar, 2004, vol. 9, p. 117).

Like other moral theorists, Mulla Sadra considers virtues the middle term of two basic vices of extremism and negligence. In other words, courage is the middle term of two vices of temerity (extremism) and fear (negligence). Modesty is the golden mean of fornication and puritanism while wisdom is the middle term of slyness and stupidity (Asfar, 2004, vol. 4: p. 206). Of course, wisdom in this context is not tantamount to knowledge rather it refers to a state of will that is close to fact.

As we mentioned in our discussion of human soul’s qualities, human identity is analogically graded. To put it otherwise, since primacy is with existence and the latter contrary to essence is of intensity and weakness a being can evolve either in positive way or negative way while it retains its identity.

Virtues and vices are defined within the framework of this vision. Thus conceived, as we mentioned, virtues are existential perfection and are graded and have intensity and weakness. They are categories that play a key role in human existential intensification while vices hinder soul from perfection due to their extremism and negligence. Extremism in one attribute may cause harm to knowledge while negligence might deprive the soul from certain goods (Asfar, 2004, vol. 4: p. 205).

Sadra has considered the beneficial and the harmful a means for reaching good and evil. He believes that these two vary in relation to different things. However, good is existential while evil in non-existential. Good is essentially what is desired by all (Mulla Sadra, 2003, vol. 1: pp. 75-76). Then virtues are always good and the vices are evil. As we mentioned in first section, justice represents the noblest of all virtues and contains them all inside and is their balance. In other words, modesty is the balance of carnal instinct, courage is the balance of anger while wisdom is the balance of thinking faculty. Here justice represents the balance of all virtues together (Asfar, 2004, vol. 9: p. 117).

## **HAPPINESS AND ITS RELATION WITH VIRTUE**

As we mentioned in our discussion of the definition of ethics according to Mulla Sadra, happiness is the ultimate telos of ethics. In fact, happiness is the consequence of ethics and lies outside it. The concrete actualization of justice as a human virtue is the virtue of other virtues and balances human soul and puts it in the path of happiness.

Happiness of one thing, according to Sadra, is the ultimate perfection of the thing that is consistent with its nature and essence (Al-Shawahid al-Rububiyah, 2006, p. 365). Then, as long



as the soul is associated with the body it cannot reach its true happiness though it can act in a way that may not lose true happiness (Asfar, 2004, vol. 9, p. 174). “If the soul is occupied with invocation of God one can say that when it is separated from the body it will surely reach happiness specifically if it has become well versed in divine teachings (Asfar, 2004, vol. 9, p. 174)

But as long as man lives in this natural world he is not needless of action because due to the darkness of nature what is achieved through sciences will be lost. Then to preserve what has been achieved one needs to keep doing good and divine invocation (Mulla Sadra, 2006, vol. 1: p. 293).

The reason that we cannot reach true happiness in this world is on the one hand, the fact that the specific perfection of rational soul consists of its union with Universal Intellect or Active Intellect that allows it to have epistemic domination over the rational and physical worlds through which all epistemic truths and essence become actualized in it. On the other hand, in this material world due to our dependence on body and physical sense we have no interest in the primordial eternal perfection (Al-Shawahid al-Rububiyah, 2006, p. 366). According to the aforementioned issue, happiness is considered to be the result and end of ethics and virtues in general and justice in particular are deemed to be the prerequisite of happiness. Although true happiness of man is hinged upon his departure of natural world, Mulla Sadra divides happiness according to gradational system into worldly and otherworldly. Worldly happiness is achieved along with such affairs as health, beauty, courage and welfare. Otherworldly happiness is also acquired based on belief and righteous action (Mulla Sadra, 2006: p. 293).



### **STUDY OF THE MEANING OF VIRTUE-ORIENTED-NESS IN SADRAEN MORAL PHILOSOPHY**

As we mentioned in the first section of the current essay on virtuism, a virtue-oriented theory insists on the role of moral agent. On the contrary, utilitarianism and consequentialism as two alternatives of virtuism insist instead on for example the courageous or righteous nature of the action as the standard of its moral content. Moreover, it was mentioned that due to the close relationships between the moral science of Sadra and metaphysics and epistemology as well as some fundamental debates in ethics we can interpret moral science in classic sense as moral philosophy and likewise Sadraen moral science as Sadraen moral philosophy. Given these two premises we have the right to ask whether Sadraen ethics is virtue-oriented or not? Because on the one hand in Sadraen moral science, virtue is explained as an existential perfection of the agent of moral action. And on the other hand, Sadra’s ethics is considered to be a branch of his overall philosophical system.

According to what has been argued by Sadra as regards virtue, it is the chief subject-matter of ethics. Then, Sadraen ethics is virtue-oriented in terms of subject-matter. On the other hand, man can reach happiness when justice turns to the end of ethics and prevails human existence. For justice is the mother of all human virtues. But our main concern is the demonstration of the point that whether Sadraen ethics according to the modern definition of moral philosophy is virtue-oriented or not?

The answer is that in view of the main lines of Sadraen ethics and concerns of virtuists, Sadra is a virtue-oriented philosopher of course with a metaphysical outlook. To state the matter differently, in virtue-oriented theory the emphasis is laid on the agent of moral action not the moral action itself. Likewise, Sadra used to consider each one of the virtues an existential

perfection for the moral agent. For example, courage is a virtue not due to the fact that “being ready for defense” is good rather “being ready for defense” is a perfection for the individual. This intensifies his existence and basically human existence based on the primacy and analogical gradation of existence is subject to intensification. In other words, it is subject to ascension and descension. Moreover, the relation of the virtues with moral action is not a generic relation rather virtue is predicated to moral action in view of the essence of the action itself. In other words, moral actions are merely described as virtuous just in mind otherwise the external existence of these actions have their origin in the very state that is considered to be an existential perfection for the agent of action.

## CONCLUSION

According to our previous discussions, Mulla Sadra’s moral philosophy or practical philosophy is virtue-oriented from two perspectives, i.e. in view of its subject and end. Although we were allowed to describe Sadraen moral philosophy as virtue-oriented in view of the subject the end of ethics in Sadraen theosophy is of a specific place that cannot be neglected.

On the other hand, these virtues are rooted in human existence and are resulted from mental states and in their turn play a role in human existential intensification; thus virtue-oriented-ness (virtuism) in Sadra’s practical philosophy is of metaphysical nature and indeed has a deep philosophico-metaphysical justification.

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