

MULLA SADRA AND THE LATER DEVELOPMENT OF KALĀM

by Scott Michael Alexander

My account of Chapter 1:73 of the *Guide of the Perplexed* sought whether Maimonides' view of the Kalām theology of Islam was accurate, and whether his portrayal remained historically valid thereafter, down to our own time.

I responded guardedly, in three ways. First, by taking issue with Michael Schwarz' attack on Maimonides' accuracy; second, by referring to other modern commentators, such as Sarah Stroumsa and Harry A. Wolfson, who defended, within limits, Maimonides' conception; third, by noting where Maimonides himself identified variations from his twelve summary theses of Kalām doctrine. Those theses portrayed the Kalām synthesis between its warring Mutazilite and Asharite trends, in its mostly Asharite final formulation. But I said little about the future life of this theology.

I've just read the fascinating work called *The Wisdom of the Throne*, by the later Muslim philosopher Mulla Sadra, in its recension, translation, and extensive commentary by James Winston Morris (Princeton, 1981).

I scanned two brief sections of *The Wisdom* that throw light on the later development of the Kalām (see "Files" section of Yahoo Maimonides group, <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/maimonides/files>).

Sadra (c. 1572–1640) was, perhaps, the greatest name in the later history of Islamic philosophy. He was from the line of Avicenna, but also of Suhrawardi, the philosophic martyr and Maimonidean contemporary who founded Illuminationism. Sadra represents the synthesis of Avicennan, and Sufic and Kalāmī trends.

The passages that I scanned display the remarkable way that Kalām physics, as accurately depicted by Maimonides, remained rooted in this train of thought. At the same time, it shows how Sadra transformed and spiritualized that physics in Sufic, neo-Platonic and even pre-Platonic directions.

The first passage shows how Kalām atomism, with its doctrine of constant change in the atoms and their accidents, remained central 400 years after Maimonides described it. Sadra retains this doctrine of constant change in the substances of existence, without mentioning the atoms themselves.

This is especially evident in the context of Sadra's most famous doctrine, the constant transformation of essences. He departed from the Platonic/Aristotelian heritage, which took essences to be the only real eternal unchangeable things, that, in some way, preceded or defined the things they instantiated.

Sadra, to the contrary, like most later Islamic philosophers, was an existentialist, not in whatever way we take that term now, but in the sense that existence always must precede essence. The existence, being, *wujūd*, of the particular tangible thing is not only more real than its ideal essence, but the notion of its ideal form only comes to us after we realize the fact of its existent sensible substance.

Sadra then argues that the true reality of this existent being is in constant "motion" or change, not merely accidental change, as in the classic Hellenic philosophy, but truly substantial change. Sadra recasts the *meaning* of Kalām atomism as "substantial change." Allah directly recreates the *substance* of all things at every moment, which was the very outcome of Kalām atomic physics. Recall that in the language of that

day the term for “atom” was usually rendered by “essence,” as in the way medieval Hebrew uses *etzem* for atom.

The second, shorter, scanned text maps Sadra’s doctrine of substantial change over the *Qur’an* precept of total destruction on Judgment Day (which I briefly discussed in my essay on *Guide* 1:73). Morris provides an excellent explanation of Sadra’s conceptual leap. Sadra, writing in a vaguely esoteric way, but clearly to the eyes of those “who unveil the inner reality and transcendent unity of being” (that is, by *kashf*, direct intuitive “unveiling”), that the *Qur’an*’s account of Judgment Day, while seemingly in the future tense, should be understood as present imperfect, or, as Morris terms it, “present continuous,” so that the judgment day is always happening. By this means, Sadra defangs judgment day of its particularity, making it an ongoing process. The passage displays his interpretive freedom, still more or less within the context of orthodoxy.

On the other hand, bearing in mind that Sadra was already a 17th Century figure, it remains troubling that he never freed himself from the shackles of Aristotelian/Galenic science, on those few occasions when he descends from his lofty noetic perch to mention such things. This seems to underscore the weakness of his school’s engagement with scientific developments taking place not so far from his Persian abode.

So, while later Islamic philosophy went its own way, it did not stray far from the fundamental twelve Kalām theses of Maimonides. The point of interest is how thinkers like Sadra performed their arabesques.

I noticed Sadra’s apparent divorce of Islam from politics. Given his wide influence, one might want to cheer. Nonetheless, leading mullahs opposed Sadra’s legacy down to the present day.

I recommend Sadra’s “Wisdom of the Throne” for its creative development of the Neoplatonic logic lurking behind Maimonides’ twelve Kalām themes, without departing from them.

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