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The Immateriality of Perception
In Mulla Sadra and Berkeley

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Abstract

Various views about the materiality or immateriality of the mind led to believe in the materiality or immateriality of perceptions. This paper is an attempt to compare the ideas of two great philosophers of the East (Iran) and the West (Ireland): Iranian Muslim philosopher, Mulla Sadra (1571/2-1640) and Irish empiricist philosopher, George Berkeley (1685-1753). Both philosophers believe in the immateriality of mind and the immateriality of perception, for perceiving is considered to be an act of mind. Moreover, they explain the formation of perception by referring to a spiritual process in which the organs of human body have no interference. But their opinions about how the perceptions come into being are different. According to the former, there are four kinds of perceptions or ideas: sensual, imaginal, illusionary and intellectual and all of them are immaterial but enjoy different degrees; that is, the degree of immateriality and abstraction from the sensual perceptions to the intellectual perceptions increases and so the intellectual perceptions are pure abstracted ideas, while the sensual perceptions are ideas that because of having some characteristics of material things are not perfectly immaterial. He is of the view that when the effect of external things is fund on the sensual organs, the soul tries to create in itself a spiritual image similar
to that effect. And consequently, other perceptions are created by the soul as well. According to Berkeley there is no material substance and all that exist are minds and ideas and they are of two kinds: God or the infinite mind and His Archetypes in one side and in the other finite minds and their ideas which are regarded as ectypes of real things in the mind of God like any existent in the material world which is regarded as an ectype of its Archetype in the knowledge of God. The similarity between the ideas of two philosophers is that both of them believe in immateriality of ideas and the difference is that Mulla Sadra has proposed several arguments to prove his view and by it he tries to prove the immateriality of mind while Berkeley offers no argument to prove his claim and his arguments just concern the existence of imaginal beings of things. To carry out a comparative study of these two thinkers’ views, this article intends to discuss the similarities and differences of their ideas.

**Keywords:** Mulla Sadra, Berkeley, ideas, materiality, immateriality, abstraction

### I. Introduction

To carry out a comparative study in the field of Western and Eastern philosophies, we should take certain measures among which an important one is that in comparing common ideas of philosophers it is necessary to reduce those ideas to the foundations upon which they are founded. As far as the Western philosophy and Islamic philosophy are concerned the foundations are different and as a result, the formal resemblances cannot be reduced to the foundations. And as it is well known in philosophical analysis, philosophers’ problems are more important than the answers they propose to those problems.

When I was doing research work for my PhD thesis which was a comparative study of Berkeley's idealism and Muslim philosophers views, I found out that there is a resemblance between the two philosophers of 17th century, namely, George Berkeley, the Irish
philosopher from the West, and Mulla Sadra\textsuperscript{1}, the Iranian philosopher from the East in certain respects. Though their approaches to the problem of knowledge were different, they held in common that all kinds of perceptions are immaterial. In my view it seems that Mulla Sadra’s approach is an ontological and metaphysical approach while, Berkeley’s approach is an epistemological approach. The problem of knowledge and its validity was not a real problem for Sadra and the Muslim philosophers before him. What were attractive for Muslim philosophers were the metaphysical problems like principality of existence or quiddity, and causality but for the Western philosophers of 17\textsuperscript{th} century especially after methodical doubt of Descartes the main problem was the problem of knowledge. Muslim philosophers after Sadra to the 20\textsuperscript{th} century were not familiar with the epistemological turn of the Western philosophy of 17\textsuperscript{th} century and what happened in the centuries after that. The epistemological realism that we see in the foundation of Islamic philosophy is in fact based on common sense. On the other side, Berkeley was living in an era in which the problem of knowledge was the main problem for philosophers. By his idealism and denying materialism, Berkeley was trying to reject the materialistic explanation of nature which was presented by scientists like Galileo and Newton. As a bishop\textsuperscript{2} Berkeley aimed to destroy the foundations of that materialism in order to prepare the ground for immaterialism as a foundation for religious belief in immaterial beings like God and spirit. Instead of proving the existence of immaterial beings, Berkeley attacks the basis of materialistic ideas by showing that there is no argument on the existence of matter. In this paper I will try first to discuss the ideas of each philosopher about the subject and then proceed to have a comparative view of their ideas.

II. The immateriality of Perception in Mulla Sadra

In Sadr al-Din Mohammad Shirazi (known usually as Mulla Sadra) the perceptions of human being consists of four kinds: sensual perceptions, imaginal perceptions, fantastical perceptions and
intellectual perceptions. In spite of the views of Muslim philosophers before him who held that among these perceptions only the fourth kind is perfectly immaterial, Sadra shows that all kinds of perceptions are immaterial. In the process through which the sensual perceptions are created, there is an impression from a sensible thing on an organ of our body and this impression which is completely material and paves the way for the mind to make an immaterial perception so, the sensual perception is created by the soul and because of its immateriality, the sensual perception is immaterial as well. In the sensual perception, perception is subject to three conditions: the presence of sensible thing in front of sensual organ, the conjunction of sensible thing with modes and accidents appropriated to it, and the individuality and particularity. The imaginal perception is subject only to the two later conditions and there is no condition in the intellectual perception.

Mulla Sadra thinks that the fantastic perceptions and the intellectual perceptions are in fact the same and they differ from each other only accidentally. The fantastic perception is the essence or truth which is perceived in the domain of intellect universally and in the domain of fantasy determinately and particularly. Accordingly, in fact in Mulla Sadra’s view all kinds of perceptions are restricted to three kinds; sensual, imaginal, and intellectual and they are respectively correspondent to the three worlds: sensible, imaginal and intellectual worlds.

Mulla Sadra argues that the immateriality of the intellectual perceptions requires immateriality of the soul. In Islamic philosophy there is a rule according which all intelligents are immaterial. To prove this rule, Mulla Sadra first refers to two different views about intellectual perceptions and then concludes that according to both of them the intelligents should be immaterial. The first view advocated by most philosophers according to which in the act of intellection the intellectual forms are obtained by intelligent, while the second view is his own view, which says that intellection is a result of the union between intellectual form and the
substance of intelligent. Each of these views was accepted it can be concluded that intellectual forms are immaterial and due to their immateriality the soul which is bearer of them is immaterial as well. Sadra's argument on the immateriality of intellectual forms is as follows: if the intellectual forms are imprinted in a corporeal thing, following its features they would be quantitatively dividable and they would have certain positions whether essentially or accidentally. But since intellectual forms are simple and undividable and have no positions they are immaterial and soul as their bearer, is immaterial as well (Al-Shirazi, 1990, 3/470-1)

To prove the immateriality of sensual perceptions and imaginal perceptions, Mulla Sadra criticizes the arguments which had been presented on their materiality. He presents his arguments on the materiality of sensual perceptions and tries to show their defects.

Argument 1 (A1). As all intelligents know evidently, each sense is appropriated to one sensual organ, for example vision is appropriated to eye and hearing to ear. If sensual perceptions were act of the soul, then these appropriations should be evidently wrong as well. If someone objects that though the soul is not present in these sensory organs but they are instruments by which the soul perceives. So the eye can see and the ear can hear just when the soul pays attention to them, the answer will be that if the soul pays attention to the tongue does it perceive the taste and if it pays attention to the skin does it feel pain? If it is the case so our idea has been proved and if it is not the case so it would be possible for each organ to perceive any perception for example skin could taste and tongue could touch.

Sadra's criticism against A1. Most of people attain their universal perceptions through their hearts and brains. Does it mean that these universal perceptions are located in heart and brain? If the answer is no then their argument will be false. Moreover, by their intellectual intuition, the intelligents know that the viewer is not the eye and the hearer is not the ear and in fact the viewer and the hearer are the soul himself. Some of them at first believed that the agent is the
totality of these organs to which these acts are attributed. But then they saw that the acts cannot be attributed to the organs individually and because of this they fell in doubt and the clever people among them found out the soul as the agent to which these acts can be attributed (Al-Shirazi, 1990, 8/230-1).

Argument 2 (A2). We see that the ability of each sense is decreasing when the organ by which that sense acts is getting sick or physical weakness is coming to it. This is evident about the external senses and the medical experiences shows that in the realm of internal senses we have similar situation. The destruction of any part of brain decreases its ability in thinking, imagining and remembering.

Sadra's criticism against A2. The sensory organs are like instruments by which the agent acts his deeds. And it is like using glasses by people who have weak eyes, and it is wrong if we say that the viewer is the glasses (ibid, 231-2).

Argument 3 (A3). Since like human beings, animals have particular perceptions, they should have immaterial rational soul but it is improbable for them to have such soul. So having immaterial soul is improbable for human beings as well.

Sadra's criticism against A3. If, as I think, the animals have had immaterial souls separated from physical world but not from the world of measurable forms, which impossibility it would require? These souls cannot ascend to the world of immaterial ineligibles.

It is not our word, Sadra says, that to perceive particulars is done by an immaterial faculty. What I want to say is that the particulars are perceived by our souls themselves and when it is proved that it is the soul that perceives the universals and since the perceiver of universals should be immaterial so it can be concluded that there is one faculty in us which perceives particulars and universals and it is immaterial. But animals have not the faculty of perceiving
universals, so we cannot use this argument for them and we are in doubt about them (ibid, 232).

Argument 4 (A4). When we perceive a globe, its image should be imprinted in us. But it is impossible for an image of a globe which has corporeal specifications, to be imprinted in something which has not any position or place and cannot be pointed by finger.

Sadra's criticism against A4. This objection can be showed against people how believe in the theory of impression according which in vision the image or from of the perceived thing is imprinted in the nature of perceiver, but we do not believe in this theory. In my opinion perceiving is by the subsistancy of the idea of the perceiver and this requires just standing out and not penetration.

Sadra adds that if you say perceiving the universal concept of globe by the soul entails the impression of something which has specifications like position and place in something like soul which has not these specifications, my answer will be that the universal concept of globe is just an abstracted concept and has not corporeal specifications like shape or position (ibid, 232-233).

After rejecting four arguments on materiality of perceptions, Sadra refers to an argument which has been presented on the materiality of sensual perceptions which is as follows:

Argument 5 (A5). If perceiving sensible things was the act of the soul then it was necessary that our sensation does not requires its presence and also it was necessary that its perceiving things near or far, present or absent was the same since it is an immaterial thing and it is meaningless for it to be near or far from a material thing.

If you say that the soul perceives material things by the help of organs then it is right to say that they are near or far from material things, we will say that if the eyes have no faculty of vision, then the nearness and farness will be in relation to the other things and not to the viewer. And it will be like the
presence of the observed thing in front of someone which does not make the vision passible for the other man who is absent.

Sadra's criticism against A5. Though the soul is the perceiver of sensible things but its act of perceiving is provided with some conditions: the health of sensory organ, the presence of sensible thing in front of the perceiver. And because of the second condition the vision is influenced by the nearness or farness and the presence or absence of the visible thing. To sum up his view, Sadra says:

The soul has three grades of being: intellectual, imaginal, and sensual being and it is united with the intellect, imagination and the sense, so when it perceives the sensible things it becomes identical with the senses and the sense is an instrument which has a position and it is influenced in a position. Thus in sensation there are two things: the sense being impressed and the soul act of perceiving. And in it the need to the positional presence is because of the sensual impression which is passivity and not because of the soul act of perceiving which is receiving the images (ibid, 234).

After discussing the immateriality of sensual perceptions and refuting the arguments presented on its materiality, Sadra goes on to refer to the arguments presented on materiality of imagination which are as follows:

Argument 6 (A6). If we imagine a square accompanied with two equal squares at its left and right and each of them has a certain direction, in our imagination the squares will be distinct and their distinction is not due to something in their essences or something requisite for their essences or non-requisite for them, so it is pursuant to their bearer i.e. mind and because of this we can say that in its imagining, mind is material.

Sadra's criticism against A6. Sadra offers two responses to A6, one by giving a counter example and the other by trying to solve the problem. The first one is as follows:
When we imagine the huge things, if that part of imaginal form which is equal to imaginal soul was impressed on it, the question will be about the excess part which is more than imaginal soul, whether it is impressed on imaginal soul or not. If it was not impressed, then their view that the imagining is by this impression, will be refuted. And if it was impressed on it then two parts of imaginal form will be impressed on the imaginal soul and it requires that the place of two parts be the same and nevertheless we could distinct the equal part from the excess part. Accordingly, it indicates that we can recognize between two parts though they have been obtained by one thing. And if it is the case then the presence of the forms of two squares in the soul does not requires disability of separating them in the soul. And in brief, in his trip around the world, human being has visited too many lands, and if the image of each land was located on one part of his brain in which no other image imprinted, then mind's limited capacity could not be enough to contain all these images.

And if each image has no special place in the mind and it is possible for the mind to have several images in one place and each one distinct from the other, so the impression of all images on mind does not require that the images be indistinct.

Sadra's second response to A5 is as follows:

In relation to the forms of squares, the soul is active not passive and the entity of each square is derived from the act of the soul. The entity of imaginal square is not like an external square so that requires its having corporeal matter capable of getting any form due to external causes. Its entity is a simple fact which has not any matter and the source of the individuality of its entity is the agent who images it. In brief, whatever is perceived by imagination and fantasy and is appeared in the mind is created and innovated by the mind (ibid, 235-8).

Argumant 7 (A7): In spite of their equality in species, imaginal forms are different in quantity as some of them are smaller and some larger. This difference is due to either the object from which
the form has been received or the subject how received the form. It cannot be due to the object because we sometimes imagine something not existent in the external world. So it is due to the subject i.e. the imaginal form which is imprinted sometimes on a large part and sometimes on a small part.

Sadra's criticism against A7. The difference between imaginal forms is not due to the object and not due to the subject for being capable of receiving the forms. Its origin is rooted in the act of subject who has created them.

Argument 8 (A8). It is impossible for us to imagine whiteness and blackness in a single imaginal specter but it is possible to imagine them in two parts and if those parts were indifferent then there was no difference between the impossible and the possible cases. So it can be concluded that the two parts which contain the imaginal forms are distinct in position.

Sadra's criticism against A8. We do not deny the differences between the specters and the multiplicity of their quantities and their differences in imaginal pointing but from this it cannot be concluded that the soul is a material substance or conclude that it cannot perceive the particulars and imaginal forms (ibid, 238).

At the end of his arguments on the materiality of perceptions, Sadra proposes and criticizes the argument which had been presented on the materiality of the faculty of fantasy. The argument is as follows:

Argument 9 (A9). Since it has been proved that Imagination is a corporeal fact, so the fantasy which only perceives what belongs to material forms, is material as well. For example when truthfulness is perceived by the faculty of fantasy, it is either pure truthfulness or truthfulness of a person. The former is false because it is a universal fact which is perceived by the intellect and our discussion is about particular perceptions. So the perceiver of truthfulness perceives the truthfulness of a person and because of this he should be perceiver of that person. Because to perceive a compound or to verify something for
something, is possible only by perceiving two sides. Accordingly, the fantasy is perceiver of the form of a person and since the perceiver of a particular form should be a corporeal faculty, so the faculty of fantasy should be corporeal.

Sadra's criticism against A9. Since it had been proved that the perceiver of particular and imaginal forms should be immaterial, so in being immaterial, the faculty of fantasy is prior to the faculty of imagination. Because the existence of fantasy like its objects is not independent in its essence and entity. And the relation between it and its perceptions is like the relation between the common nature of a species in its particular and universal. The pure hostility is perceived by pure intellect and the hostility which is attributed to the personal form is perceived by that intellect which belongs to the imagination and the hostility which is annexed to the personal form is perceived by the intellect which is mixed with the imagination. So the pure intellect in its nature and act is abstracted from two worlds and fantasy in its nature and belongingness is abstracted from this material world and in its nature and not belongingness is abstracted from the imaginal form and the imagination in its nature and not belongingness is abstracted from this material world (ibid., 340).

As it was revealed, Sadra rejected all arguments of the materiality of perception. But this is the first step of his reasoning and the second step he should have is to propose some other arguments on immateriality of perceptions. To do this he presented several arguments most of them are borrowed from the philosophers before him.

III. The immateriality of Perception in Berkeley

In regard to the perception, Berkeley uses two concepts which we should to distinguish them. The first concept is "idea" by which he means any immediate object of sense or understanding. And the second concept is "notion" which is perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind. Ideas are always sensory; they
are either the content of states of sensory knowledge or the copies of these in memory and imagination. Notions are concepts of spirit - of self, mind, and God – and have a more complex origin. The notion of self-knowledge is derived from immediate intuition, and the notion of other minds is derived from interpretation, and the notion of God is derived from reflection and reasoning (Grayling, 2005, 176-7). To illustrate why we cannot have an idea of mind Berkeley says:

A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being: as it perceives ideas, it is called the understanding, and as it produces of otherwise operates about them, it is called the will. Hence there can be no idea formed of a soul or spirit: for all ideas whatever, being passive and inert… they cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts (Berkeley, 1996, 27).

While he denies having an idea of spirit, he confirms having notion of it and its modes:

… the words will, soul, spirit, do not stand for different ideas, or in truth, for any idea at all, but for something which is very different from ideas, and which being an agent cannot be like unto, or represented by, any idea whatsoever. Though it must be owned at the same time, that we have some notion of soul, spirit, and the operations of the mind, such as willing, loving, hating, in as much as we know or understand the meaning of those words (ibid).

By perception Berkeley means any way of having ideas and notions before the mind, in sensing, conceiving, imagining, remembering, reasoning, and the rest. So it is not restricted to sensory perception alone.

Perceiving involves a causal relation: Minds perceive either by causing ideas which they imagine or dream or by being causally affected by the ideas given by God (Grayling, 2005, 177).
The difference between the ideas of sense and the ideas of imagine is that the former are more strong, lively, and distinct than the latter and they have likewise a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random while the ideas of imagine are not such. Berkeley says: “The ideas of sense are more strong, lively and distinct than those of the imagination” (Berkeley, 1996, 30).

Although everything that exists is mind-dependent, Berkeley thinks, and it is not dependent on particular or finite minds, but has an objective source and structure, namely, the eternal, omnipresent and law-like perceiving of an infinite mind. Grayling concludes that in this sense Berkeley is a realist. Because according to him the world exists independent of the thought and experience of finite minds. (Grayling, 2005, 178)

In spite of this interpretation of Berkeley I think that by no way Berkeley can be regarded as a realist. Regarding the difference between opinions of philosophers and his views, he says that “though they acknowledge all corporeal beings to be perceived by God, yet they attribute to them an absolute subsistence distinct from their being perceived by any mind whatever, which I do not” (Berkeley, 1996, 152). As this expression shows he did not believe in the external existence of material things and so regarding him as a realist is a controversial view.

To prove the immateriality of ideas, and relying on the proposition "sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit" Berkeley concludes:

> Not that they have no real existence, but that seeing they depend not on my thought and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, there must be some other mind wherein they exist (ibid).

T. M. Bettcher has formulated Berkeley’s argument on Immaterialism in four theses:
1. The Substantiality Thesis: Ideas depend upon spirits for their existence,
2. The Ideality Thesis: Sensible things (such as colors, sounds, etc.) are ideas,
3. The Collections Thesis: Everyday items are nothing but collections of sensible things we immediately sense perceive,
4. Basic Idealism: So everyday items depend upon spirits for their existence (Bettcher, 2008, 76).

Of these four theses the first and second theses are acceptable but the third and fourth ones are controversial. In Berkeley’s philosophy there is no argument on the collection thesis and by accepting the representative theory, one can say that the sense perception represents an external thing from which mind is affected and the sensual ideas are result of this affection. Berkeley has no argument on non-existence of matter and because of this he cannot conclude that “everyday items are nothing but collections of sensible things we immediately sense perceive”. The only Berkeley’s defense of the collection thesis, as Bettcher says, is his corresponding reduction of philosophical materialism to skeptical absurdity (ibid). But the skeptical absurdity only leads us to an agnostic view rather than a refutative view about existence of matter. To actualize the second target i.e. to deny the existence of matter one need arguments, upon which the non-existence can be proved. Since the third thesis is false then the fourth one which is based on it is false as well. It can be said that more than imaginal existences in mind, the everyday items or external things have existences in external world.

Berkeley’s arguments for immaterialism and idealism have been named sometimes as the ‘Master Argument’, the ‘Argument from Conceptual Inseparability’ and the ‘Identity Argument’. Of course Berkeley himself did not use these names and indeed different Berkeley scholars sometimes use different names for one and the
same argument (Jones, 2009, p. 116). But let’s have a glance on these three arguments:

1. The Master Argument: We cannot even think of an everyday object that no one is thinking of, because in trying to do so we are thinking of it ourselves. So everyday objects cannot exist ‘unthought of’ - that is, they cannot exist beyond the mind (ibid, p.129).

2. The Argument from Conceptual Inseparability: The properties we experience everyday objects to have depend on the perceptual circumstances in which we find ourselves, and so these properties are essentially features of our own perceptual reactions to objects, rather than being genuine features of the objects as they are in and themselves out there independent of perceivers (ibid, p. 117).

3. The Identity Argument: Some of the properties we experience objects to have are in fact identical with sensations of pleasure and pain, and hence cannot possibly exist beyond the minds of those who are experiencing them (ibid).

Though Berkeley uses these arguments and some other arguments to prove that there can be no such thing as matter what is known as his immaterialism but I think that what these arguments can show is at most improvability of the existence of matter and to deny the existence of matter Berkeley needs to present some more arguments.

IV. Summary and conclusion

Though Mulla Sadra and Berkeley are from two different schools in philosophy and because of this their approaches to philosophy is deferent, but there is an idea they have in common, and it is the immateriality of perception. The other thing that they have in common is that each of them tries to prove his view by rejecting the
idea of opponents and refuting their arguments. Mulla Sadra refuted the arguments which were presented on the materiality of three kinds of perceptions: sensual, imaginal and fantastical perceptions. The second stage of Mulla Sadra’s discussion about the problem was to give his arguments on the immateriality of perception which most of them have been borrowed from the philosophers before him notably the peripatetic philosophers like Ibn Sina (Avicenna in Latin). Between his arguments I think the best argument is that which is based on the simplicity and immateriality of intellectual perceptions which requires immateriality of the soul as bearer of them.

At the beginning of his very important book, Principles of Human Knowledge Berkeley offers several arguments against the existence of matter. After rejecting the existence of matter, he concludes that sensual perceptions are given to us by God and they are immaterial. Berkeley’s argument for refuting the existence of matter consists of two stages from which one is acceptable and one unacceptable. The first stage of his argument is that all arguments on the existence of matter are false and they cannot prove its existence. Confirming his claim we can say that there is no argument on the existence of matter and as Kant says we can accept its existence just by belief (Kant, 1964, Bx1).

The second stage of argument is to deny the existence of matter and to say that perceptions are given to us by God. Relying on the fault of arguments on matter Berkeley concludes that there is no matter, but this conclusion is wrong and to take the second stage he needs to appeal to other arguments which prove the non-existence of matter; something that is absent in his philosophy. To prove or deny existence of something certainly it is necessary to give at least one argument and if all arguments on existence of something had been falsified it does not prove its non-existence. The middle position that we can have is to be agnostic. So the right conclusion of Berkeley’s argument is that the existence of being is doubtful and we are not sure whether matter is existent or not. In other words, we
have some perceptions which are not created by ourselves and their causes are unknown to us. There is no way for the intellect to show and recognize the causes of these perceptions. Hence, the cause of these perceptions whether God or matter can be held just by belief. And so there is no intellectual solution for the dispute between realism and idealism and consequently their claims about matter should be regarded as axiomatic ideas of them.

References


Endnotes

1. Mulla Sadra is the founder of the third great philosophical school in Islamic world which is named “Transcendent Theosophy and it has been said that it is a new version of the philosophia perennis. His philosophy is rich in that it encompasses nearly all the traditional sciences of Islam (Nasr, 1997, p. 69).
2. In 1710, Berkeley was ordained priest in the Anglican Church and in
1734 he was consecrated bishop at St. Paul’s Church, Dublin. In early summer of that year Berkeley and his family moved to Cloyne and remained in residence there until August 1752. Berkeley was an Anglican bishop in a country in which the majority of population was Roman Catholic and the ratio of Christians was approximately eight Catholics per Protestant (Flage, 2014, p. 12-13).

3. Rejecting Sadra's point, his commentator, Sabzewari says that A cannot be presented against the impression theory, relying on it we can say that the specifications like position and place are requirements of the existence of the idea of perceived globe and not its quiddity which requires these specifications in its receptacle. As the heat which is requirement of the existence of fire and not of its quiddity which we have an image of it in our mind (Al-Shirazi, 1990, 8/232).

4. Sadra's debate about this argument is so detailed that discussing it needs more meticulousness and this is out of bounds of our present target.