Methodology of Mulla Sadra

Mulla Sadra's philosophical methodology can be inferred from what we have so far stated concerning his school of thought. In al-Asfar, his treatment of almost every problem, starts with a Peripatetic sketch. He then propounds the problem within the framework of the principles that conform to it in the Peripatetic school. Then he restates the different old and new ideas which are related to that problem. Following this, he rejects, modifies, confirms, or completes it, or presents a series of new and more comprehensive arguments.[1]

Moreover, when necessary, he provides evidence from sophism, particularly from Muhyaddin Ibn-Arabi, and Plotinus (like Muslim philosophers who preceded him, Mulla Sadra sometimes mistakes him for Aristotle, because, even until recently, Plotinus's book of Tasu'at (Ennead) was considered to have been written by Aristotle).

Mulla Sadra has his eyes on the Qur'an in dealing with all major philosophical problems, and benefits from its Divine Graces so much so that some assume that he employs Qur'anic verses in his philosophical reasonings. This is totally absurd. However, as mentioned before, the Qur'an was always a source of inspiration for him. Accordingly, he managed to discover certain realities that were not accessible to others.

Mulla Sadra's most important characteristic, one which can rarely be seen (if at all) even in Ishraqi philosophers, is his reliance on intuition, unveiling, and perception of the realities of the world, and solving intricate philosophical problems through ascetic practice, worship, and connecting to the world beyond the matter and sense, which he believes means the real sense. However, he neither limits himself to this, nor gives a decree in this regard to others. Rather, he addresses the realities that have been unveiled to him through intuition, and that have been hidden under the cover of logical reasoning in the guise of a kind of reasoning which employs the common terminology used in Peripatetic philosophy. He, himself, has referred to this unique method in the Introduction to al-Asfar.

As discussed above, he cast even those theories and ideas of previous philosophers (whether before or after Socrates) which also enjoyed an intuitive aspect, and which had not assumed an inferential nature into the mould of common (or Peripatetic) philosophical problems, and presented a series of philosophical arguments and reasonings for them. Mulla Sadra prefers to call his school of thought one of wisdom rather than philosophy. As readers are well aware, he chose the name of Transcendent Wisdom[2] for his school. This is because, firstly, wisdom has an outstandingly long historical record, and is assumed to be the same as what was called 'Sophia' in the past. Secondly, long ago, wisdom consisted of a vast field of knowledge

embracing all natural and mathematical sciences, and possessed a worldview which was wider than that of modern scholars. Thirdly, wisdom has been frequently praised in the Qur'an and hadith, while there is no word of philosophy in it.

The subtle point here is that we can employ wisdom as a bridge to fill the gap between philosophy and gnosis, which are two totally different fields of knowledge. Wisdom was Mulla Sadra's secret key to access and master the philosophical and gnostic schools of his time, and making peace between them.

The Peripatetics agreed that wisdom or the philosophical journey is, in fact, a process of becoming which comes to an end through the development and growth of material intelligence (intellectus materialis) into intellectus in habitu and, then, into actual reason (intellectus in actu) and acquired reason (intellectus adeptus or acquisitus), and through connection to the origin of knowledge (perhaps the same Promete of Ancient Greece), which Aristotle called active intellect. The end result of this process is that a person becomes wise.

Gnostics and sophists, too, believed that gaining knowledge or becoming a wiseman means knowing the world, passing through the sense and material world (which they called traversing the heavens and Unity of Divine Acts), beginning the process of knowing the human self (or traversing the soul), and passing through the immaterial depth of the world: that is, the Ideal and rational world, or traversing the Unity of Acts and observing the pre-eternal beauty and eternal truth, which is usually referred to as the four-fold spiritual journey. The first stage of this is moving from existents and creatures towards absolute reality (the Truth); the second is moving towards the Truth, accompanied with and aided by the Truth; the third is traversing in the Truth and attaining all existential realities; the fourth is returning towards creatures and existents with a new outlook and fresh step.

Wisdom is consistent with both interpretations of knowledge and the real and beyond-matter knowledge of the world. Accordingly, Mulla Sadra innovated a method which was based on both philosophy and gnosis, and employed it to solve problems related to the knowledge of the world. It is from here that one can grasp the reason behind his philosophical school's name of 'Transcendent Wisdom' or superior philosophy. Therefore, it was not just by accident that he named his magnum opus 'Transcendent Wisdom in Four-Fold Journeys'. The superiority of his school lies in his intelligent methodology, through which he could make peace between two opposite schools of thought, namely, Peripatetic and Ishraqi philosophies (and sophism), and unity them and, in fact, bring them to transcendence – he showed this superiority by means of employing the word 'transcendence'.

Note:

[1]. He uses this method mainly to prevent students' becoming confused while solving problems.

[2]. This word had been previously used as an adjective in the mystic works of Ibn-Sina and Qaysari, the well-known commentator of Ibn-Arabi's Fusus. However, Mulla Sadra used it formally as the title of his great book.