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CLEMENT PALIGARU

Hello, I'm Clement Paligaru and welcome to *Ear to Asia* where we talk with researchers who focus on the region with its diverse peoples, societies and histories. *Ear to Asia* is a podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at The University of Melbourne. In this episode, we talk about the writings and ideas of one of the great Muslim philosophers, Mulla Sadra.

For most Western listeners, the likes of Aristotle and Plato probably first come to mind when the conversation turns to philosophy or ontology. High up on the list of other greats would be René Descartes and possibly David Hume. But it's probably less known in the West that between the 8th and 13th centuries, a period of about 500 years, Islamic philosophers were among the greatest contributors to the human canon of knowledge and history of ideas. In fact, the medieval West came to know basic Greek philosophy through

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the works of these Muslim philosophers. Some of the leading lights of this period were Avicenna, also known as Ibn Sina, as well as Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi.

On *Ear to Asia* today, we speak with Dr Muhammad Kamal from Asia Institute about how the pre-eminent Muslim philosopher of the 16th century, Mulla Sadra, grappled with the concepts of change and constancy. Questions like is everything changing continuously? If so, why do we continue to recognise people and objects as if there were unchanging identities attached to them? Muhammad Kamal is a specialist in comparative existentialism, metaphysics, ontology and Muslim philosophy. He's written three books on the work of Mulla Sadra, the most recent of which is *Transubstantial Change: Consequences and Implications*, from ICAS Press, London.

Kamal, welcome to *Ear to Asia*.

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Thank you very much.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Now firstly, the work of 16th century Muslim philosopher Mulla Sadra is the subject of your 2017 book. In it, you examine his theory of transubstantiation, which incidentally is not related to the concept of transubstantiation, which some Christian sects hold sacred. But before we dive into Mulla Sadra's theories of existence, give us an insight into the man. Who was Mulla Sadra?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Mulla Sadra was a Persian Muslim philosopher during the time of the Safavid dynasty in the 16th century. He was taught and brought up in Isfahan, which was the capital of the Safavid dynasty in Iran and then he developed his own philosophy or, you can say, ontology, which was very different from the doctrines of Suhrawardi and Avicenna or Ibn Sina.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

It is said that Mulla Sadra was the second most important Muslim thinker after Avicenna. Avicenna was also Persian and preceded Mulla Sadra by about 500 years. Who was Avicenna and why is Mulla Sadra held in similar esteem?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Well we usually say Muslim philosophy began with Al-Kindi, then developed with Farabi and reached its culmination with Avicenna. So Avicenna is very important. He is an Aristotelian Neoplatonist philosopher and he developed a full system of philosophy, unlike other philosophers before him in the Islamic world. And Mulla Sadra is important after him because he developed a new school in Muslim philosophy which we call Islamic existentialism today and he changed the whole tradition of thinking from the principality of essence to principality of existence.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

You talk about the principality of essence versus the principality of existence, can you tell us more about this?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

In Greek philosophy, the major problem was the principality of matter or form. What is coming first? Matter is coming before form or form is coming before matter. But in Muslim philosophy, we don't have this problem anymore. Muslim philosophers began with a discussion on the principality of essence or existence, whether essence is coming before existence or existence is coming before essence. So there was a major school in Isfahan during the time of Mulla Sadra where he was studying there and that was called the school of Suhrawardi. And Suhrawardi believed that essence is primary and existence is secondary.

For example, if you want to know something, you have to define it and in definition you always reveal the essence of that entity you are trying to define. And for that reason, essence is primary. Then Mulla Sadra, after studying there, he was one of the followers of Suhrawardi, he came to the conclusion that existence is primary, not essence, because if there is no existence, there would be no essence. If you want to know the essence of something, that something should exist, then you can define it, you can reveal the essence of that something. And that's the whole idea. So the reality for Mulla Sadra is defined as existence.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

So when he flipped it, what was the early reaction, do you know?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

There was a big reaction. And that's why he escaped, because he couldn't defend himself and it was a big change. He is describing this change as a mystic experience, like Parmenides, for example, in Greek philosophy, who had a mystic or religious experience to reveal his philosophy, so Mulla Sadra is saying, well I got this idea in a religious experience and I believe that existence is primary, not essence.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Now some of the greatest Muslim thinkers, such as Avicenna, we've just spoken about, Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, were Persian. What made Persia such a powerhouse of thought considering the Arabian Peninsula was the birthplace of Islam?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Well that's true. Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, but then Arabs didn't have philosophy, didn't have civilisation before the rise of Islam. But Persians had a great civilisation and cultural developments in the area, even before the rise of Islam. For example, in Jondi Shapour, one of the cities in Iran, they had a great school for teaching philosophy and sciences and they were familiar with Greek sciences and Greek philosophy. So that's why many Muslim philosophers like you mentioned, Avicenna, Suhrawardi, then we can talk about Razi and others, they were all Persians because they came from that cultural background which was very different from the Arab cultural background.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And you mentioned there Greek philosophy. Now many of us, when we mention the term philosophy, we do think of Greek philosophers whom Avicenna and Mulla Sadra read, how did they have access to these much earlier Greek works and what languages did they read them in?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Yeah, as I mentioned, Persians were familiar with Greek works because as you know, Persian empires were in conflict with the Greek empires before the rise of Islam. But in the eighth century, when the Abbasid Dynasty was established in Baghdad and Baghdad became the capital of that dynasty, there was an enlightened caliph, his name was Ma'mun. He patronised philosophical thinking and scientific investigations in Baghdad, so he encouraged people to study philosophy and science and because Arabs didn't know Greek language, they didn't know about philosophy and science. So he commissioned

Christian thinkers in Iraq to translate Greek works of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus into Arabic language. Then he established an institution, it was called Bayt al-Hikma in Arabic, which is the house of wisdom, for that purpose.

So the first rector of that institution was a Christian Nestorian thinker by the name of Ibn Masawaiyh, who translated a number of books. Then after him, the second rector of the institution was his student, Hunayn and he was also a Christian Nestorian thinker. In fact the caliph commissioned him to go to Rome and look for manuscripts and bring them back to Baghdad and translate them. So Hunayn translated a large number of works done by Greek philosophers into Arabic language. So that was the contribution of these non-Muslim thinkers or Christian thinkers for developing philosophical thinking in the Arab Islamic world.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Let's go back to Mulla Sadra, who was a Shia Muslim who had sympathies with Sufism. Can you unpack that for us? How did that combination of Shia and Sufism inform his view of the world and his work?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Well Sufism has a great impact on either Sunni Islam and Shia Islam. Shia Muslims were also inspired by Sufism and before Mulla Sadra, we have Suhrawardi who was a mystic himself and he tried to combine philosophy and Sufism. That's why we call his philosophy theosophy rather than philosophy, or *al-hikmat* in Arabic or Persian language. And Mulla Sadra was inspired by Suhrawardi, so Mulla Sadra was a mystic as well as a philosopher.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Kamal, to what extent were Mulla Sadra's views and work rooted in his culture and times, versus that which could be seen as timelessly Islamic and therefore independent of 16th century Persia?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

It is a very interesting question because my understanding of Mulla Sadra is very different, for example, from Shia theologians' understanding of Mulla Sadra. Because in Iran, government and theologians tried to force him, as an Islamic scholar, Shia Islamic scholar, but in fact he was a philosopher. For this reason, during his time, as you know, he came into conflict with the theologians and he couldn't defend himself and he escaped from

Isfahan and hiding for 10, 12 years because his ideas were different, radical and progressive and the theologians couldn't understand him. And even today, the theologians have not been able to understand his philosophy very well, particularly his theory of transubstantial change.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

and we'll come to that in a minute. You're listening to *Ear to Asia*, brought to you by Asia Institute of The University of Melbourne. Our guest on this episode of *Ear to Asia* is Dr Muhammad Kamal, a specialist in comparative existentialism and Muslim philosophy.

Kamal, this is your third book on Mulla Sadra's work and this time you focus on his ideas about change, transubstantiation in particular. Can you briefly summarise Mulla Sadra's concept of transubstantiation?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

First, I'd like to talk about my first book, in 2006. It was on Mulla Sadra's philosophy or ontology and the second book in 2010, it was a comparative analysis between Mulla Sadra's ontology and that of Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher. This one, the third one, is on the concept of change in Mulla Sadra's philosophy, which is called transubstantial change.

The theory of transubstantial change of Mulla Sadra should be viewed as challenging two fundamental principles. The first is the Aristotelian interpretation of change and the second is the reduction of everything into fixed or unchangeable substance. So Mulla Sadra does not believe that there is something unchangeable in the universe or in the world.

Everything is going through change substantially. For example, Aristotle says, well substance is fixed, immutable and change occurs only in four categories of substance, like change in quality, quantity, position and then locomotion, but substance itself is unchangeable. And that's how it becomes a principle for identity in every entity.

And Mulla Sadra believed that a fixed ground like substance will not be able to produce any change. For that reason, substance itself should change and everything is changing. Why? Because there is also nothing in the universe perfect, every entity is there or every existent has some kind of privation and struggling to perfect itself in its own way. And for that reason, it should change substantially and constantly at the same time.

CLEMENT PALIGARU



Now the physical world is constantly changing, as are people and all within this world, yet in the face of change we, as humans, are geared to recognise what we refer to as the identities of people and things, implying there is an essence of constancy. How did Mulla Sadra accommodate the human experience of identity and constancy in his concept of transubstantiation?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Mulla Sadra clearly says identity, particularly personal identity, is a fiction, it's not real. We cannot talk about one single identity for a particular individual because there are identities in plural. He is describing this process in Arabic as *al labs ba'da labs*, means dressing after dressing. You wear something and then you put on something else on your dress or there are different layers of identities, there's no single identity. It's not possible to say there is a single identity for an individual or for a particular existence.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Is it like new skin or new layers of skin coming off?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Yes, exactly new layers of skin, yeah.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Now your writing suggests Mulla Sadra held the view that there was some sort of progression in his theory of transubstantiation. Can you tell us about that and why did he feel it was necessary to impose the idea of progression?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

The idea of progression is coming from the idea of privation, nothing is perfect in the world. Every entity is born with certain privation, so I am born, I am imperfect and I want to reach my own perfection. So if there no progress in change, I will not be able to reach perfection in my own way, so that's why every kind of change in the world is a kind of progress towards perfection.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

We're going to flip the usual order of things now and discuss death before creation. How does Mulla Sadra explain death?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

For him, there is no death, there is a change and that's also a transubstantial change. We are changing substantially, we move from one mode of existence to another mode of existence. Because for him, there's no nothingness after life and when we die, we start new mode of existence in a different form and a different way of existing in another universe or in intermediary universe, he is calling it *bazakh* in Arabic or Persian because for him, we must go through this process of progress in order to reach perfection. And perfection is achieved only when we become one with God. He goes back to Sufism in this regard.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

So Kamal, is that a reference to what many of us understand as the soul?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Of course, he believes in the human soul because he is a believer and he is a Muslim, he believes in the human soul, but then his interpretation of life and death is very different from theological interpretation because in theology, human soul is fixed, like substance in Aristotelian theory and it's not changing. But for Mulla Sadra, everything is changing, the human soul is substantially changing.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

So then if death is part of progression of this soul, why do most people fear it, according to Mulla Sadra?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Because people don't understand the meaning of death. I remember a definition of a philosopher by Socrates, I think it is in one of the dialogues of Plato, *Phaedo*, he's saying a philosopher is in love with death because death here is not annihilation, it is a transformation, it is a transubstantial change, we are changing from one mode of existence to another. But when people don't understand that and they think death is annihilation, then they will be afraid of death, they don't want to face that kind of annihilation.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

In explaining the origin of things, Mulla Sadra and other Islamic philosophers reject Aristotle's theory of the origin of the world. Briefly, what was Aristotle's view and why did the Islamic philosophers differ?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

For Aristotle, there is a principle. In Latin, it is known as *ex nihilo nihil fit*, from nothing, nothing is produced, or nothing cannot produce anything, simply. When you go back to the Abrahamic religions, whether that is Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the religious people believe that god created the whole worlds out of nothing, there was nothing, then god brought this world into existence and this is not possible for Aristotle. So what happened, according to Aristotle, there was raw material, the prime matter and god gave form to that prime matter. So prime matter coexisted eternally with god and this is not possible in Judaism, Christianity and Islam because it will destroy the foundation of monotheism.

So when Muslim philosophers read Aristotle, they were not comfortable with this theory of creation. That's why they believe that this theory of creation by Aristotle is applicable only to creating material entities in the world, not for the creation of the universe by god. They were in a kind of dilemma. They didn't know what to choose between Aristotle and the theological theory of creation *ex nihilo* until one of the Christian thinkers, by the name of al-Hemsi, translated *The Enneads* of Plotinus into Arabic. So when the Arab thinkers read Plotinus and Plotinus is saying, well the world is not created out of nothing or the world is not created out of the prime matter, but it is the self-manifestation of god, it is the emanation, then they were fascinated by that new idea. That's why they brought Aristotle and Plotinus and they created this new Aristotelian Neoplatonist school.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

So it sounds like a compromise.

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

It's a middle position between religion and Aristotle. And for this reason, you find a large number of Muslim philosophers belong to this tradition of Neoplatonism from Avicenna, even Suhrawardi or Mulla Sadra.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

And Mulla Sadra and present days where I want to move to now. Kamal, what do Mulla Sadra's theories tell us about the latitude available for independent reasoning in Islam, which is known as *ijtihad* in Arabic?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Well not only Mulla Sadra, all Shia thinkers believe in *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning in Islam. But when you're going to understand the theory of change in Mulla Sadra's philosophy, when he is saying everything is changing in the universe, including substance and there is no room for fixed ideas, for fixed truth, for universal truth, universal knowledge, there should be room for constant *ijtihad*. We cannot think of Islamic law, for example, as fixed ideas and fixed principles to rule forever. You have to change your rules and regulations, you have to change your interpretations of truth, reality, knowledge and even Islamic law.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Where else might we feel Mulla Sadra's influence today?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

I think he's very influential in Iran and his influence in the West is coming now because of some literature available in the English language and then there were some great thinkers like Henry Corbin and others, worked on his ideas and they have written on his ideas in the West and people now read him and they like to do research on his ideas.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

But of course how far this goes also depends on translation of his works.

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Exactly.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Now you've written three books examining Mulla Sadra's theories and ideas. Why are you drawn to his works?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Well I have been inspired by Western existentialism, particularly the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. I have read Heidegger for a long time and when I read, for the first time, the

text of Mulla Sadra, I found some kind of resemblance between his ideas and that of Martin Heidegger. I found a resemblance between the ontological enterprises of Mulla Sadra and Martin Heidegger. And I was, again, fascinated by all these ideas of the primacy of existence and the principality of existence and transubstantial change. So I decided to work on Mulla Sadra and compare his ideas, or his ontological enterprise with that of Martin Heidegger.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Was it also because from your own background there was some issues, some things that weren't addressed by Heidegger that when you read Mulla Sadra, you know, they seemed to fill in the gaps?

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Well I'm still more fascinated by Martin Heidegger rather than Mulla Sadra. But so there are similarities. It is fascinating to bring two thinkers from two different times and cultures and you see their ideas in many ways resemble each other. It's a great area for research and investigation.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

Kamal, I really appreciate you coming in today and joining us on *Ear to Asia*. Many thanks for your time.

MUHAMMAD KAMAL

Thank you very much for having me.

CLEMENT PALIGARU

We've been speaking with philosopher, Dr Muhammad Kamal, from Asia Institute at The University of Melbourne. Dr Kamal specialises in comparative existentialism, metaphysics, ontology and Muslim philosophy.

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I'm Clement Paligaru, thanks for your company. Bye for now.



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