

MIR DAMAD'S CONCEPT OF TIME

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Mir Bahar al-Din Muhammad Baqir Damad al-Hussayni Astarabadi (d. 1631 AC), was known as Ishraq,¹ and who was also referred to as “*Al-Mu`allim al-Thani*” and *Sayyid al-Afadil*.² He was the founder of the School of Isfahan and one of the most celebrated philosophers of the Safavid era. Mir Damad, who received much of his education in Mashhad, studying the *Al-Shifa'* and *Isharat* of Ibn Sina, continued his studies in Qazwin and Kashan. It was Isfahan, however, where he spent most of his prolific life producing numerous works and training such students as Sayyid Ahmad Alavi and Mulla Sadra.³ Like many other Muslim philosophers of the School of Isfahan, Mir Damad, who died in Najaf, made an attempt to bring about a rapprochement between the Peripatetic (*mashsha'is*) notion of the createdness and eternity of the world and that of the theologians (Mutakallimun).

Mir Damad's masterpiece is a work known as *Al-Qabâsât: t Al-Haqq al-Yaqin fi Huduth al-'Alam* (Sparks of Fire: The Truth of Certainty Regarding the Createdness of the World).⁴ Mir Damad chooses the word *qabâsât* based on the Qur'anic

¹ Ishraq was the pseudonym used by Mir Damad in his collection of poetry. See Sayyid Ahmed (ed), “Diwan-i ash`ar,” MS.347 of 4771(Mashhad, Imam Rida Library).

² Sayyid al-Afadil (The Master of the Learned) was the title bestowed on Hajj Mulla Hadi Sabziwari See *Gharr al-fra'id* known also as *Sharh-i manzumah*, (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1348), p.112.

³ His title as “Damad” meaning in persian “groom” is due to the fact that his father married the daughter of `Ali ibn `Abd al-`Ali also known as Muhaqiq-i Kirki and therefore Mir Damad is the grand son of this notable figure. For more information on his life and thought see the following works: Musavi M. Behbahani, *Hakim-i Isterabad* (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1377) ; Introduction to the *Qabâsât*, ed. M. Muhaqiq (Tehran: Tehran University Press ,1367); S.A. Mousavi Behbahani, “Mir Damad, falasifa wa sarh-i hal wa naqd-i athar-i uo”, *Majillay-I-Maqalat wa Barrasihay-i Nashriyyah Daneshkadeh Ilahiyat wa Ma`arif Islami*, V.3-4, 1349.

⁴ Mir Damad, *Al-Qabâsât*, ed. M. Muhaqiq (Tehran: Tehran Univ. Press, 1367), p.1.

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verses 27:7 and 20:9,10 to mean particles of fire. It is in this work, one of the most difficult pieces of Islamic philosophical genre, that Mir Damad discusses the question of time and its relationship to the eternity and createdness of the world. *Al-Qabâsât* is divided into ten chapters, each called a *qabas*, and each *qabas* consists of smaller sections called *wamid* (lightning). The choice of the title of this work as well as the chapters and sections clearly indicate Mir Damad's interest in Suhrawardi and his school of *ishraq*. In fact, the connection between Mir Damad and Suhrawardi is made even more clear not only by the title of his numerous works such as *Jazawat* (Ecstasies), *Al-Ufuq al-Mubin* ("The Clear Horizon") and *Mashariq al-Anwar* ("The Orient of Light") but also by the fact that he is one of the few philosophers who accepted al-Sahrawardi's principle of essence (*asalat al-mahiyyah*)⁵.

Before discussing the nature of time according to Mir Damad, it is imperative that something about the structure of the *Qabâsât* be said. In the first chapter, different types of createdness and the division of existence are discussed. The second chapter deals with three types of intrinsic priority, and posterity, and the third is a discussion of two types of distinctive posterity (*aqadum al-infikaki*). The fourth and fifth chapters are less important as far as the concept of time is concerned. However, in the sixth chapter, the relationship between time and motion is discussed. This chapter, which is unparalleled in depth and complexity of language, analyzes the concept of finitude and *ad infinitum* as it relates to existent beings as opposed to integers. The remaining chapters treat a variety of issues that are not particularly relevant to our discussion here. Therefore, in a general sense it can be said that our discussion of the concept of time is primarily based on Chapters one, two and nine, though reference will be made to other chapters.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 483. It is note worthy that the connection between Mir Damad and al-Sahrawardi is exemplified by the fact that Mr. Damad ends *Al-Qabâsât* by the prayer of light.

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For Mir Damad, time can be divided into three ontological domains or divisions, *sarmad* (transcendental), *dahr* (eternal), and *zaman* (temporal). His views on eternal createdness (*al-huduthi al-dahri*), according to some, is a rendition of Ibn Sina's view on the problem of createdness and eternity of the world. According to others, however, it is a clarification of and response to the inherent problems of Ibn Sina's views on the subject matter. Mir Damad is particularly drawn to Ibn Sina, who divides time and its relationship to eternity and createdness into three categories:

1. The relationship between immutable and immutable (*al-sarmad*).⁶
2. The relationship between immutable and changeable (*al-dahr*).⁷
3. The relationship between changeable and changeable (*zaman*).

Ibn Sina seems to have conflicting views on this since he identifies *al-dahr* as that which is with time but not of time, a kind of frozen time, which dominates *zaman*.⁸ Mir Damad begins by opposing the traditional view of the philosophers in general and Ibn Sina in particular, who has argued that the problem of eternity at both ends is insoluble and can be equally proven and refuted *jadalat al-tarafayin*.⁹ Ibn Sina's concept of essential createdness, Mir Damad argues, is eventually reduced to a mere linguistic difference between God and the incorporeal substances, since the latter's existence is not created in the real sense of the word. In order to preserve the transcendental nature of God, Mir Damad

⁶ See the Qur'an (28: 71,72) for mention of *sarmad*

⁷ Mir Damad, *Qabasat*, pp.8-9, 18-19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁹ Ibn Sina, *Al-Shifa, Al-Mantiq, wa Al-Jadal*, ed. Ahmad F. Al-Ahwani (Cairo: 1385), p.76.

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maintains, a real *huduth* is required (he calls this *huduth fi matn al-ayan*).¹⁰

An accurate interpretation of Mir Damad's view on time and the question of *huduth* and *qidam* require a thorough understanding of such figures as Abu al-Barakat al-Baghdadi, Ibn Sina, and al-Suhrawardi. However, that is a discussion, which is beyond the scope of this work. What we do surmise from the *Qabâsât* is that for Mir Damad, time can be divided into three ontological domains or divisions, *al-sarmad* (transcendental), *al-dahr* (eternal), and *zaman* (temporal). *Al-sarmad* can be viewed as the domain that belongs exclusively to the Necessary Existence and therefore no existent, be it corporeal or incorporeal, may enter this domain. Compared with this ontological domain, all that lies below it, be it corporeal or incorporeal, is therefore nonexistent since its existence is contingent and not necessary. That which is contingent has a shadow existence and while it has its own ontological level of reality, it nevertheless is nonexistent when it is compared with *al-sarmad* and therefore can be called *al-'adam al-sarmadi*. This non-existence, which is intertwined with the ontological fabric of all other domains, makes them existent from one aspect, and nonexistent from another one. *Al-sarmad*, therefore, is a timeless entity that transcends time. As Rûmî, the Persian mystical poet, said:

In the timelessness, where there is Divine Light
Where is the past, present or the future?

Next is the ontological domain of *dahr*, where all incorporeal beings reside. These incorporeal intelligible beings, which have been referred to by different names such as Plato's forms or archetypes, Ibn al-'Arabi's *Al-A`yan al-Thabitah*, Suhrawardi's *Arbab al-Anwa`* or *Rab al-Naw`*, act as an

¹⁰ Henry Corbin suggests the term *événement éternel*, which is close to the Greek term used by Proclus and conveys its real meaning. For more information on this see Mir Damad's *Al-Qabasat*, p.12.

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intermediary between *al-sarmad* and the ontological realm below it.

Dahr is not extant and is therefore indivisible. It is non-existent from the aspect of *al-sarmad* but existent from the perspective of the inferior ontological domain called *zaman*. *Zaman* for Mir Damad is the ontological domain where all existent beings reside and includes of those corporeal entities which undergo change and are subject to degeneration and corruption. Mir Damad distinguishes between *zaman* and *al-dahr* by telling us that existent beings are within time (*fi al-zaman*) whereas they are concomitant with *al-dahr* (*ma`a al-zaman*).¹¹

Tushiko Izutsu argues that there is another interpretation of *al-sarmad*, *al-dahr* and *zaman*, which Mir Damad himself may have recognized and alluded to in *Al-Qabâsât*.¹² Contrary to the previous interpretation, this view offers a more dynamic relationship between the three ontological realities as well as in and of themselves. Accordingly, the Absolute or *al-sarmad*, despite its simple existence, contains certain individual particularities (*ta`ayyun*), which can be actualized. Izutsu describes this as divine essence - which is particularized from its attributes, and thus there is a dynamic relationship between the essence of the Absolute and its attributes, which are its inherent particularization. It is precisely the mutual relationship between the essence of the Absolute and its attributes, which, according to Izutsu, is what Mir Damad calls *al-sarmad*. *Al-sarmad* here is not an absolute ontological reality but a relationship between two unchangeable phenomena, which, from the aspect of *zaman*, it appears contradictory but from above remains valid. From the same perspective, *al-dahr* is the relationship between the archetypes, which are unchangeable, and *zaman*, which is subject

¹¹ Mir Damad elaborates on this Ibn Sinian's notion in the *Ta`liqat*.

¹² Tushiko Izutsu, "Introduction" to Mir Damad, *Al-Qabâsât*," p.12. For more information on Mir Damad's intellectual thought see H. Corbin, "Confessions extatiques de Mir Damad" in *En islam iranien* (Paris: Gallinard Press, 1972, pp.9-53.

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to change and therefore this ontological relationship is one of relativity.

For the three categories of time, *al-sarmad*, *al-dahr*, and *zaman*, it is *al-dahr* which, for Mir Damad, is the philosophically significant issue, and one which he thinks is the key to the understanding of the problem of the creation and eternity of the world. The concept of *al-dahr*, according to Mir Damad, solves the following problem. There are those philosophers who believe in the eternity of the world by arguing that even though the world may have been created, since it has always been co-eternal with God, it is therefore eternal and its createdness has no beginning in time. To put it differently, since God is the eternal cause, which has always been there, the effect must have always been there. This co-eternality in time, however, does not mean ontological equality with God since God is ontologically prior to its effect. Many Peripatetic philosophers, in particular Ibn Sina, base their argument on this interpretation and state that since existents came from nonexistence and because their existence is contingent upon God, they should therefore be regarded as a nonexistence. This concept, to which I have alluded before, is traditionally referred to as *al-huduth al-dhati* (essential createdness). It is as an alternative to this concept that Mir Damad puts forward his theory of *al-huduth al-dahri*.

Mir Damad argues that the world of existent beings is created not because its existence is prior to this type of nonexistence, namely *al-'adam al-dhati*, for this is a conceptual understanding of causality. The type of createdness that Mir Damad advocates is of a different type, namely, a real one since it follows to a real nonexistence as opposed to an essential nonexistent (*al-'adam al-dhati*). The priority and posterity are not in the domain of time but in *al-dahr*, that is, it is a non-existence that is neither essential (*dhati*) nor temporal (*zamani*) but eternal (*dahri*).

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Eternal non-existence is therefore real nonexistence since *al-dahr* is not extant, linear, or in a state of flux. It is not clear why Mir Damad states that ontologically *al-dahr* is nonexisting in the sense that its existence is contradictory to an actualized existence. Therefore, he says that this is different than essential nonexistence (*al-`adam al-dhati*) of existent beings where existence is incompatible with but is not contradictory to an actualized existence. Since *al-dahr* transcends time and is nonexistent, Mir Damad tells us that the only way to recognize of it is through a mystical mode of knowledge (*kashf wa shuhud*) while a person is in deep meditation.

Mir Damad appears to be arguing that coming into being and perishing are not only an integral part of *zaman* but are also somehow related to the ontological domain of *al-dahr*. Mir Damad's perceptive observation of *zaman* sees *al-dahr* within it as well as by arguing that *zaman* is in a state of continuous change and flux and therefore cannot "be" (*wujûd*) in the authentic sense of the word. In a sense it is "not", rather than is and the simultaneous existence and nonexistence for Mir Damad are indicative of the *`adam* of *zaman* and the *wujûd* of *al-dahr*.

Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani, one of the most eminent contemporary Muslim philosophers, criticizes Mir Damad's view as being more rhetorical than substantial and argues that the concept of *al-huduth al-dahri* is a reformulation of the essential createdness (*al-huduth al-dhati*) of Ibn Sina.¹³ Furthermore, he maintains that whatever Mir Damad wanted to elaborate upon, using the concept of *al-huduth al-dahri*, can also be explicated by Ibn Sina's *al-huduth al-dhati* and goes so far as to say that Mir Damad's *al-huduth al-dahri* is really *al-huduth al-zamani*. As Ashtiyani states;

¹³ S.J. Ashtiyani, *Muntakhabat-i azathar-i hukamay-i Iran* (Tehran: De l'institute Franco-Iranien, 1350F, pp.8-9, 40-43.

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If [Mir] wants to refute eternity of what is not God, refutation of the eternity of time is impossible. Therefore, we should abandon the effort to prove the createdness of time (*al-huduth al-zamani*) and accept a type of *huduth*... This is precisely *al-huduth al-dhati* or something of this kind, which may be called by another name.¹⁴

Ashtiyani's criticism is strictly Ibn Sinaian in that he identifies any *huduth* with the notion of time. *Huduth* of any existent being, Ibn Sina says, is posterior to its *`adam* and therefore *`Adam* is an indirect cause of existent beings. Also, *huduth* and *`adam* are contradictory and thus for *huduth* to occur, *`adam* should vanish.

Mir Damad accepts part of this argument but refutes the remainder. Although he admits the contradictory nature of *wujûd* and *`adam*, he states that it has no bearing on the question of time. *`Adam* and *wujûd* are not necessarily contradictory when it comes to existent beings since to be contradictory requires that they be at the same time. For example, A and $\sim A$ cannot be at the same time, although their occurrence at two different time is possible and not contradictory. In other words, *wujûd* and *`adam* can be contradictory in time but when and where this contradiction fades away is in *al-dahr* where posterity and priority are ontological. It is precisely the conceptual nature of *huduth* (*mantiqi*, *`aqli*, *i`tibari*, *dhihni*, *bi al-martabat al-`aqliyyah*) and not its reality, which is troubling to Mir Damad. A real *huduth* must be independent of God in the real sense of independence which Mir Damad identifies as when a cause creates an effect, and in this sense, God is the ultimate cause of creation.

There are primarily two problems with the theory of *al-huduth al-dahri*. First, despite the complex and sometimes verbose

¹⁴ Ibid., p.15.

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and repetitious nature of his argument, Mir Damad does not succeed in achieving his original objective, that is, to separate in a real sense the transcendental reality of *al-sarmad* and that of *al-dahr*. This lack of success is not due to the weakness of his argument but is deeply rooted in the ontological structure of Mir Damad's philosophy. As Mulla Sadra realized, reconciling the principle that states, "from One emanates only one" (*al-wahid la yusadder ila al-wahid*) with bestowing independence upon the reality of anything except the One, ultimately fails. Mir Damad has made a noble attempt to bring about a rapprochement between the notion of real *huduth*, which he thinks the realm of *al-dahr* makes possible, and Ibn Sina's notion of *huduth al-dhati*. In my opinion, this attempt fails, despite the sophistication of the arguments put forward.

The second objection is one that is equally valid for the arguments of Ibn Sina and Mir Damad, both of whom in my opinion have disregarded a subtlety when they claim that *`adam* precedes *wujûd*. Let us analyze this further. If *`adam* precedes *wujûd*, then in order for *wujûd* to become *mawjud*, *`adam* should become *ma`dum* so that *mawjud* can come into being. In order for *Adam* to become *ma`dum*, there must be something to enable it to become *ma`dum*, which is contradictory to the very definition of *`adam*. So the very notion of *`adam* is as problematic as *wujûd* and one that is not entirely clear in the arguments put forward by either Ibn Sina or Mir Damad.

The other alternative is that *`adam* does not precede *wujûd*. The first problem that arises is that if *`adam* did not precede *wujûd*, and then *wujûd* must have always been there. If we identify *wujûd* with God, then this problem is solved, but we have also sided with the eternity of the world as stipulated by *mashsha'is*. If we do not identify *wujûd* with God, then we have the problem of co-eternality of *wujûd* with God, which is even a bigger problem. In short, Mir Damad's perspective of *huduth* in general and *huduth al-dahri* in particular rests upon the notion of *`adam* preceding

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wujûd, and if this axiom itself is problematic, so is his conclusion. The irony of it is that to the extent which *Al-Qabâsât* is understandable, Mir Damad does not address the problematic nature of the above assertion of the truth. Rather, he offers a solution to the question of eternity and createdness of the world on its basis.

To summarize the above discussion, it can be said that Mir Damad wants to restore the created-ness of the world in the real sense of creation, not as philosophers have explicated. The philosophers' notion of creation is based on essential creation (*al-huduth al-dhati*), which implies priority and posterity in the essential sense of the word, such as the posterity of number three to two. This, Mir Damad says, is not real *huduth*. He argues that real *huduth* is possible and necessary only where and when the created and creator stand in a causal relationship. This is made possible according to him, within the ontological realm of *al-dahr*.

Mir Damad's view of time is a much-neglected area of scholarship because of the difficulty of his language and the complexity of his philosophical concepts. His contribution to Islamic philosophical tradition, however, is enormous, since his grand synthesis of various notions of time not only provides the reader with a compendium of Islamic philosophers' view of time, but also offers a middle ground between the peripatetic and that of Mutakallimun on the problem of eternity and created-ness of the world.