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The Gradation and Unity of Existence and its Impact on Human Worldview from the Perspective of Revelational and Rational Arguments

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT			
Article History: Received: 03 December 2023 Revised: 11 February 2024 Accepted: 26 February 2024		SUBJECT & OBJECTIVES: There are two main theories about the reality of existence discussed in Islamic philosophy and mysticism, namely the Gradation of Existence and the Unity of Existence. This dispute has very important implications for the human worldview. This study is aimed to answer the following basic questions: Which of these theories is correct? Is there textual evidence from verses and narrations to support one of them? What are the implications of these theories? METHOD & FINDING: The study is based on the descriptive analytical method of analyzing available data in the library. This article compares two important schools of thought about a specific issue. CONCLUSION: The Gradation and Unity of Existence are two theories that interpret the reality of multiplicity in this universe. Both have their own rational and revelational evidence to prove themselves. Most philosophers, especially the followers of the Transcendent Wisdom of <i>Mulla Sadra</i> , believe that the unity of existence is the perfect version that can interpret many issues in a better way. Two theories have differences in interpretation of the monotheism of God at different levels, reality of contingent beings, creation of God as emanation or manifestation, gradation of existence or manifestation, etc.			
Key Words: <i>Unity of Existence</i> <i>Gradation of Existence</i> <i>Human Worldview</i> <i>Revelational Arguments</i> <i>Rational Arguments</i>					
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Introduction

Multiplicity in the world is based on differentiation. According to the fundamentality of existence, as *Mulla Sadra*, the prominent Muslim philosopher and founder of Transcendent Wisdom, proved, there is nothing except existence and it is the fundamental reality. (*Mulla Sadra, 1981, Vol. 1: 38; Ibid, 1984: 9*)

Then how does one existence differ from another? This is the main question. To reply, there are two perceptions, namely The Gradation of Existence and the Unity of Existence.

The first belongs to philosophy, and the second is mostly attributed to mysticism, although many prominent philosophers also believe in that, especially those who came after the Transcendent Wisdom of *Mulla Sadra*, which was a true effort to collect philosophy, mysticism, and revelation in one space. So, the question is: How does

each of these two perceptions affect the human worldview?

Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

Before discussing the impacts of these two theories on the human worldview, it is necessary to talk about the theoretical foundations of the research.

In the time of *Avicenna* and his school of thought (Peripatetic Philosophy), the question of originality and fundamentality of existence or quiddity was not raised in this way at all and the issue was not clear so much. So, his words are equivocal in this aspect.

The philosophers before *Sohrawardi* believed in three types of distinctions among things:

- With the totality of their essential parts.
- by one of their essential parts.
- by something extraneous to their essence, in accidental parts. (*Tabataba'i, 2011: 83*)

However, *Suhrawardi* added a fourth kind of distinction, which is gradation, as he accepted gradation in quiddity, which means that there is one fact and every essence may have a range of intensity in attributing to this fact. (*Suhrawardi, 1996, Vol. 1: 334*)

Mulla Sadra and his school of thought i.e., Transcendent Wisdom, proved that existence is fundamental, so the gradation should be attributed to existence, not to quiddity nor to concepts. Some researchers view *Suhrawardi* as the source of *Mulla Sadra's* idea of the variable intensity of being. (Ref: *Legenhausen, 2023*)

Although the Gradation of Existence is counted as the second pillar of the Transcendent Wisdom of *Mulla Sadra* after Fundamental of Existence, he did not discuss this issue in any separate chapter in his books and talked about it among other discussions, leaving his fans in regret for

being a separate talk about this important topic and issue. (*Alavi, 2004: 124*)

According to the theory of the Gradation of Existence, all beings, from floor to divine throne, from prime matter to eternal existence, are common in their existence; But they are distinct from each other in their level of enjoyment of this fact.

So, what differentiates the existence of different things is nothing but existence itself in its different degrees of strength and weakness. Therefore, existential instances are different from one another in terms of priority and posteriority, perfection and imperfection, and strength and weakness.

As a result, it shapes a longitudinal system from the weakest to the most severe to the rank where there is nothing above it. This system is called the Gradation System. (*Tabataba'i, 2011: 18; Ibid, 2012, Vol. 1: 35; Misbah Yazdi, 2015, Vol. 1: 362*)

So, he proved that Gradation is applied not to essence but primarily to existence because existence is the only original reality. Existence, although one simple reality, has different longitudinal levels in which the aspects of multiplicity refer to the aspects of unity, they are the same facts, and the difference is only in gradation.

It seems that some verses of the Qur'an also talk about the gradation of existence. For example, Almighty Allah said:

"It is Allah who has created seven heavens and of the earth [a number] similar to them. The command gradually descends through them". (The Qur'an, 65: 12)

So, the descending of command among them refers to levels of existence for these things, and there is a special system among them.

Also, the holy verse

"There is not a thing but that its sources are with Us, and We do not send it down except in a known measure", (The Qur'an, 15: 21)

Implies that there is another existence and another level for everything in God's sources and that this notable position of things is the lowest level of them. Other verses imply the same meaning.

The result of Gradation is that multiplicity and unity of things both exist in reality, and there is no contradiction among them; But unity returns to multiplicity, and multiplicity returns to unity.

On the other hand, the Unity of Existence means that existence and being are confined to one individual, i.e., God. God's existence is so absolute and infinite that He filled the reality Himself, and there is no space for any

other. The multiplicity we witness is nothing except His manifestations, and they do not have any type of existence. *(Amininijad, 2015: 137)*

This theory was proposed by mystics before philosophers based on their intuitions, and they tried to prove it based on rational arguments as well. The Transcendent Wisdom of *Mulla Sadra* claims that there is no contradiction between mysticism, philosophy, and revelation; But each of them conforms to the others.

In this context, *Mulla Sadra* stated:

The Sharia (Devine Laws) and the intellect are compatible in all their rules. The true, divinely blessed Shari'a may not have rules conflicting with the necessary certainty of knowledge. It's a shame for a philosophy to have laws not following the Book (Qur'an) and the Sunnah. (Mulla Sadra, 1981, Vol. 8: 303)

The individual Unity of Existence is the latest theory of *Mulla Sadra*, as he knows the theory of Gradation is a stage of education and learning for beginners and chooses the individual Unity of Existence as his last selected theory after making all necessary arrangements and proving it with different intellectual arguments to enhance his philosophy and bring it closer to mysticism. *(Ref: Monazah & Kavandi, 2017: 169-186)*

Mulla Sadra pointed out this on different occasions. For example, He said:

As Almighty Allah granted me through His grace and mercy to know that contingent quiddities are eternally invalid and doom, He also guided me with an empyrean obvious argument to the straight path that existence and being are confined in single unit reality and have no partner in real existence.

There is no second for it in actuality. All things that appear in the world of existence, except the Necessary Being (deity), are nothing except manifestations of Devine and appearances of his attributes. (Mulla Sadra, 1981, Vol. 2: 292)

Furthermore, he explicitly wrote that the first theory was for education:

It's very necessary to know that we proved different grades for existence and accepted what was accustomed on the stages of education and research that existence has multiplicity in it; that is not contradicting what we are proving now that existence and being are confined to a single self and reality, as it is the doctrine of saints and mystics. (Mulla Sadra, 1981, Vol. 1: 71)

Famous Muslim philosopher Allamah Tabataba'i said:

Actually, the theory of mystics (Unity of Existence) is an accurate and deep view of this issue, so it dominates the theory of philosophers (Gradation of Existence). (Hosseini Tehrani, 2005: 213-214)

Islamic mystics and philosophers proved this theory with many rational and textual arguments, (Ref: Mulla Sadra, 1981, Vol. 2: 301; Amininijad, 2015: 205-209) some of which are mentioned below:

The existence of God is infinite, not as potentially infinite numbers. The actual infinite existence refuses every other being to exist because it would change God's existence to be limited and finite, which would contradict our original supposition and be impossible.

As the Transcendent Wisdom proved, existence is the only fundamental and absolute reality. A thing's absoluteness does not yield to duplication or repetition.

Existence itself contradicts non-existence, so existence is always necessary. It proves that everything except God does not exist because they are not necessary to their existence; otherwise, they should always exist.

Effects are nothing except copulative existence in comparison with their first cause (God), as proved in Transcendent Wisdom, so their existence inheres in God and depends on Him. They have no independent existence of their own as beings. They are relations to God in their existence, not existence itself. So, the cause is real, and the effects are related to it.

The Unity of Existence does not mean that everything except God is delusional or a mirage; Because this theory says that they do not exist themselves as beings while admitting them as manifestations of that One being (Necessary Existence).

This theory also does not lead to Pantheism, as it differentiates between existence and manifestations of it and proves that manifestations are not on the stage of God.

Proponents of this theory have argued in many verses and narrations; some of which come in the following;

Almighty Allah said:

*“He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden, and He has knowledge of all things”.
(The Qur’an, 57: 3)*

This verse indicates the existential ontological surroundings of God, which means that He has filled existence from first to last, from outward to innermost, and that there is no space for anything else. This ontological surrounding leads to an epistemic surrounding as well.

The Qur’an also said:

“He is Allah, the One, the All-Paramount”. (The Qur’an, 39: 4)

The verse proves that He is the one, and His arrogance and superiority conquer all others. So, his unity and loneliness are so powerful that it does not allow us to suppose that the second is similar to Him. Thus, others cannot exist by His side and share some of His attributes.

Imam Ali has stated that the night before the Battle of Badr, He saw *Khidr* in His dream. He said to *Khidr*:

“Teach me something by which I can be victorious over the enemies. He said, Say: O who exists, and there is no existence except Him. When I woke up, I told the whole story to the Holy Prophet (PBUH). He said, You have taught the great name of God (Esm-e-A’azam). So, this sentence was continuously on my tongue on the day of Badr”. (Saduq, 1977: 89)

According to this narration, the real existence belongs to

God alone, and other things are only manifestations of this Ultimate Being. Hence, it is said that *“There is no God but Allah”* is the monotheism of common people; But *“No Existence but Allah”* is the monotheism of elite and special people.

Quoted from Imam Baqir, *Jabir* said:

“There was God and nothing else... It’s like that today and will be forever”. (Ibid: 141)

The Hadith is so clear that it denies thingness except for God, and thingness is identical to existence, as proved in Islamic philosophy. So, the Hadith denies existence except for God. It means that existence is confined to God, which is the theory of the Unity of Existence.

Another important keyword is human worldview. The Oxford Reference defines worldview as:

A largely unconscious but generally coherent set of presuppositions and beliefs that every person has that shape how we make sense of the world and everything in it. This in turn influences such things as how we see ourselves as individuals, how we interpret our role in society, how we deal with social issues, and what we regard as truth. (Ref: Oxford Reference)

In this regard, Martyr Motahhari said:

The type of perception and way of thinking that a school of thought offers about the world and existence is considered the intellectual support of that school. This intellectual infrastructure and base is called worldview. (Motahhari, 2005: 77)

Hence, the worldview of a person defines his ideas about God, the universe, human beings,

and their mutual relations. It is like lenses or eyeglasses through which a human looks at the world and its realities. It guides and affects everything in human life, even if he does not notice it. A worldview sifts, sorts, accepts, and rejects, and gives context to human life in all dimensions of it.

In terms of research background, the theory of the Unity of Existence has a long history. The Upanishads from the East have believed in this theory since ancient times. (Urquhart, 2016: 49)

Muslim mystics reached this theory as a result of their mystical intuitions and then tried to justify it with different rational and textual evidence; While the Gradation of Existence is considered one of the four pillars of the Transcendent Wisdom of Mulla Sadra, so this theory was not proposed in this format before, although Suhrawadri

talked about the gradation in quiddity.

Different philosophers and thinkers researched the worldview but their research angles were different from the perspective of this paper. Some of them are mentioned below:

- *Gulfam* and *Rezapoor* discussed the Law of Causality i.e., cause and effect, and its role in explaining the acts of God. The act of God, in their opinion, is nothing but a manifestation of him. Then they discussed the impacts of this theory on human worldview on different levels, which is close to the topic of this paper. (*Golfam & Rezapoor, 2023*)

- *Abbod* discussed the divine worldview from the perspective of motivations and approaches. This perspective is a discussion about methods of research about worldview. (*Abbod, 2012*)

- An introduction to the Islamic worldview by renowned Muslim philosopher, Martyr *Motahhari* contains five parts, namely Man and Faith, Monotheistic Worldview, Revelation and Prophethood, Human in the Qur'an, Society and History, and Eternal Life. The perspective is general, not the impacts of any specific philosophical theory on the worldview. (*Motahhari, 2005*)

- Worldview from Materialism to Mysticism by *Shadi Faqih* discusses types of worldviews, mentions the points that distinguish one from another, and discusses the true Mystic worldview. (*Faqih, 2002*)

- The History of a Concept by *Naugle* conceives Christianity as a worldview and discusses the history and contemporary use of it as an approach to faith and

life. He examined the role this concept has played in the natural and social sciences and explored the uses of this concept in different Christian traditions and faiths. (*Naugle, 2002*)

Impacts on Worldview

The Gradation and Unity of Existence are philosophical and mystical theories; But they have great impacts on the whole worldview and ideology of a human and also on his acts and actions because they are derived from his ideology. They have very important ethical aspects as well, some of which are discussed below:

1. Difference in Monotheism

According to the theory of Gradation, there are different levels of existence, God is the highest level, and other levels exist by His side. So, this theory puts God on a level among other beings, although it asserts that it is the highest

and most intense level and distinguishes it from all other levels.

But some others, who support Unity of Existence, consider that this is enough to make God limited, as if God is a level of existence like others, which is a limitation for Him. It seems like to consider some of existence necessary as God and consider others contingent like all other things, which ends up limiting the existence of both of them. (*Hosseini Tehrani, 1998: 197*)

The theory of Unity of Existence claims that existence is exclusive to God, which proves monotheism more purely since the others have no share in existence. They are nothing but manifestations of that one existence. The Holy Qur'an considered all other things to be shadows of God and said,

"Have you noticed how your creator and nurturer

extended the shadow?”.
(The Qur'an, 25: 45)

According to this theory, there is no chance for gradation in existence since existence has only one referent, and gradation needs different referents.

2. Devine Unity in Attributes

According to the theory of Graduation of Existence, all contingents enjoy different attributes like existence, knowledge, power, life, etc. The difference between them and God is in their level of enjoyment. However, according to the Unity of Existence, their attributes are also nothing except manifestations of God's attributes. Hence, all attributes of perfection belong to God and He is the one who deserves all praise, as the Qur'an states,

- *“All Praise belongs to Allah”.* *(The Qur'an, 1: 2)*

- Also, *“He is the living One, the All-sustainer”.*
(The Qur'an, 2: 255)

3. Devine Unity in Creation

The two theories differ in their interpretation and explanation of creation as an act of God. The Theory of Gradation interprets it as Emanation; But according to the theory of Unity of Existence, the creation of God is nothing but a manifestation, because the others do not exist in fact, so it is impossible to attribute creation to them, and there is no system of cause and effect according to this theory. So, there is an act of manifestation from God as a demand for His attributes.
(Mulla Sadra, 1984: 53-54; Imam Khomeini, 2010: 300)

On the Day of Judgment, the multiplicity will disappear as a result of God's appearance, as the Holy Qur'an states,

“To whom does the sovereignty belong today?”

To Allah, the One, the All-Paramount". (The Qur'an, 40: 16)

So, in this theory, the creation and destruction of things are nothing except their appearance or disappearance.

Mulla Sadra in his great book "Asfaar" wrote:

The creation of God is the disappearance of himself in things and the manifestation of them. Destruction of things (on the day of Judgment) also means the appearance of himself alone and paramountcy of him above all things, where he removes specifications and features of all things and makes them vanish, as the Qur'an said, "Everything is to perish except His face. (The Qur'an, 28: 88)". (Mulla Sadra, 1981, Vol. 1: 261)

Thus, the Day of Judgment is the day of the dominance of unity over multiplicity.

4. Devine Unity in Acts

Mu'tazilites considered that intelligent beings have full authority in their acts, so they have entire free will and liberty in all their activities; But according to Gradation of Existence, all contingents are copulative existences and God is the nearest agent of all things.

According to the theory of Unity of Existence, this perception proves more clearly that God is the real and effective agent in this universe, and all others are nothing except manifestations of that one agent. They only bring things closer to the real agent by moving them, not creating them, and all effects belong to that agent. So, humans stand in constant need of God, as the Holy Qur'an states:

"O mankind! You are the ones who stand in need of Allah, and Allah He is the All-Sufficient, the All-laudable". (The Qur'an, 35: 15)

So, we belong to Allah not only at the creation stage but also in all of our actions. Accordingly, the Holy Qur'an related all human acts to God and said,

- *"Have you considered the sperm you emit? Is it you who created it, or are We the creator?"*. (*The Qur'an*, 56: 58-59)

- *"Have you considered what you saw? Is it you who makes it grow, or are We the grower?"*. (*The Qur'an*, 56: 62-63)

That's why Prophet Ibrahim attributes His healing from illness to God, not to doctors and medicines; Because they are only means and intermediaries. (*Ref: The Qur'an*, 26: 78-81)

5. Contingents; Copulative Existences or Manifestations

According to Gradation of Existence, God has a necessary existence, and all other things are contingents,

and they are nothing except copulative existences because they have no independence in their existence. They are connected to God in their existence, all attributes and actions. (*Tabataba'i*, 2006: 21; *Golfam & Rezapoor*, 2023: 36)

However, according to Unity of Existence, the contingents have no existence, even as copulative beings. They are only manifestations of one necessary existence, which is God. In this theory, manifestations do not exist but they are not non-existent in fact, they have a mirror role. (*Amininijad*, 2015: 137)

That is what Imam Reza pointed out in a debate with *Imran Sabi* when he asked Him, *"Is God in creation, or is creation in God?"* He answered: *"He is not in creation, nor is creation in him; God is almighty"*. Then He compared the relationship between God and creation with the relationship between a picture in a mirror and the

owner of that picture. So, the mirror of the universe transmits you to God, and they have nothing by themselves. What is shown in the mirror is not a mirage but reflects a fact. (*Sadug, 2014*)

It is quoted by Imam Baqir that He said:

“And then He (God) sent them in shadows. I said, “What are shadows? He said, did you see when something appeared in the light of the sun that was something and nothing at the same time?”. (Kulayni, 1986, Vol. 1: 436)

The contingents are the same fact and have the same role in the theory of Unity of Existence.

6. Gradation in a New Way

According to the first theory, there is gradation in existence; But it will appear in a new way according to Unity of Existence, which is gradation in manifestations

because they are not at one level. Some of them are powerful, stronger, and closest to God; While others have different levels. So, there is not a single level of relationship among these manifestations.

The important point is that God is a part of gradation according to the first theory; But He is out of the system of gradation according to Unity of Existence, as He is not among the chain of manifestation. (*Hosseini Tehrani, 1998: 171-172*)

7. Cause and Effect

This is one of the most important laws in philosophy. According to this law, the whole system of existence, from God to the lowest level (Prime Matter), takes its actions within the circle of this law. (*Misbah Yazdi, 2015, Vol. 2: 57-59*)

This law will get new meanings in the theory of Unity of Existence because it

needs at least two existences; But there is only one existence according to this theory and it is impossible to have cause and effect between one existence and itself. Hence, the theory of causality will return to manifestation and theophany.

In this respect, *Mulla Sadra* said:

The sun of fact is raised, and the matter is disclosed that everything that was named existence is nothing but a manifestation of one Being, which is the sustainer of all. They are a glimmer of the powerful light (God).

So, what we thought first- that there is cause and effect in existence- finally scientifically led us to conclude that the cause is the original and fundamental, and the effect is nothing except a manifestation of that.

So, the causation and the effect are nothing except

the development of the cause in itself and its artistry with its arts, not the separation of something separated from it by identity. (Mulla Sadra, 1982: 50-51)

So, from this point of view, it is clear that the law of causality returns to manifestation according to the theory of the Unity of Existence. That's why Imam *Khomeini* asserts the use of the term manifestation instead of cause and effect. (*Imam Khomeini, 2010: 293-294*)

8. Ethical Aspect

The root of many sins in humans is considering themselves independent in their existence. The Holy Qur'an also referred to this point and said,

"Indeed, man becomes rebellious when he thinks himself independent". (The Qur'an, 96: 6)

As a result, he acts in his daily routines as he wants and

does not consider himself responsive or accountable to anyone. However, according to the Gradation of Existence, all contingents are destitute in their existence, and they are not independent in themselves even for a while.

There is a grade of existence above everything except God, as He is at the highest level. This ideology and way of thinking may change the whole life of a human and make him free from all kinds of sins. For example, he will not suffer from arrogance, as he considers himself dependent on God everywhere and every time. That's the Qur'anic perspective as stated,

“O mankind! You are the ones who need Allah, and Allah is the All-Sufficient, the All-laudable”. (*The Qur'an*, 35: 15)

This ideology and point of view appear more clearly in the theory of Unity of

Existence and divine unity in attributes, as the existence and all attributes belong to God alone, and human beings have no type of existence except as manifestations and shadows of that one necessary existence.

Hence, he is nothing except a glimpse of God, and they remain relative, finite, and delimited forever. This perspective will make them humble, submissive, and obedient before their God and also among themselves, and it will eradicate the roots of many evils and sins.

In the following table, the similarities and differences between the two theories of the Unity of Existence and the Gradation of Existence are clarified.

Table 1. Characteristics of Unity of Existence and the Gradation of Existence

Similarities	Differences	
	Gradation of Existence	Unity of Existence
Thinking Based on the Fundamentality of Existence	All things exist beside God; But there is no association with him at this level.	The Gradation leads to the limitation of God's existence; While existence is exclusive to God.
Accepting Multiplicity in the World with Different Interpretations	Contingents have attributes like God but differ in level.	The attributes of contingents are manifestations of God's attributes.
	Interpret the creation of God as Emanation.	Interpret the creation of God as Manifestation.
Accepting Gradation in Some Ways	There is no effective agent in this world except God.	Contingents are manifestations of God in all their acts, and we should see that single agent in all acts.
	Contingents are the copulative existences of God.	Contingents are manifestations of God's existence.
The Dependence of Humans on God in All Their Essence, Attributes, and Actions	Existence has different levels and God is the highest level.	Existence is only One and God is out of gradation.
	There is a law of causality emanation.	There is manifestation and theophany.

Conclusion

Gradation or Unity of Existence are two main theories in Islamic philosophy and mysticism to interpret the multiplicity of things in this world. The Gradation of Existence accepts the plurality of existence and puts them in different levels, from the lowest level to the highest level (God), as they differ from each other in the level of enjoyment from existence in terms of strength and weakness; While the Unity of Existence believes that existence is confined to God, as His existence is unlimited, and all others are manifestations of that one being.

These two theories have several impacts on the human worldview in different aspects, as the theory of Unity of Existence proves monotheism more purely, as God is the only existence and He is outside of the system of gradation.

He is the only real and effective agent in this universe, as all others require Him in their essence, attributes, and actions. According to this theory, the creation of God is nothing except manifestation, and there is gradation among them.

The theory of the Gradation of Existence explains creation as Emanation and considers all low levels of existence as copulative existences of the highest level (God).

Both theories have different ethical aspects, as the lowest level of existence is always in need of the highest level, and the manifestations have no type of independence compared to the only existence.

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The corresponding author, has the main role in all stages, from study conception and design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results to manuscript preparation. The second author, as a supervisor, has reviewed the manuscript critically and helped enrich the content of this article with his useful and fruitful advice. The third author also contributed to the conception and revision of the manuscript and played an important role in checking the philosophical terms in the English language.

Therefore, all authors have reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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