

An Analysis of Mulla Sadra's Thoughts on the Soul in the Context of Modern Mental Health

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Abstract: This research explores Mulla Sadra's philosophical conception of the soul within his framework of Transcendent Theosophy (Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah) and examines its relevance to modern understandings of mental health. Through a philosophical analysis employing textual, hermeneutical, and comparative methods, this study interprets Sadra's key metaphysical concepts such as substantial motion (al-harakah al-jawhariyyah), the unity of existence (wahdat al-wujud), and the soul's intellective perfection in dialogue with contemporary psychological frameworks, including the biopsychosocial model, humanistic psychology, and existential psychotherapy. The findings reveal that Sadra's vision of the soul as a dynamic, evolving reality that ascends from corporeal origins toward spiritual perfection parallels modern ideas of personal growth, self-actualization, and holistic mental well-being. This research argues that mental illness can be philosophically understood as a stagnation or imbalance in the soul's ontological movement toward higher existence, echoing psychological notions of arrested development or loss of meaning. The study further identifies integration points between Sadra's metaphysical psychology and modern therapeutic paradigms, suggesting that his thought provides a conceptual foundation for incorporating spirituality into mental health practices. In conclusion, Mulla Sadra's philosophy offers a profound bridge between metaphysical inquiry and psychological science, emphasizing inner transformation, self-awareness, and the unity of being as essential to mental and spiritual health. This synthesis contributes to ongoing efforts in cross-cultural psychology and spiritual therapy to develop more holistic models of human well-being that harmonize reason, emotion, and transcendence.

Research Highlights:

- Provides a comprehensive philosophical analysis of Mulla Sadra's concept of the soul within the framework of Transcendent Theosophy (Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah).
- Demonstrates how Sadra's idea of substantial motion and the soul's journey toward spiritual perfection parallels modern psychological concepts of growth, self-actualization, and healing.
- Interprets mental illness as a form of imbalance or stagnation in the soul's ontological movement, offering a metaphysical perspective on psychological dysfunction.
- Establishes conceptual bridges between Islamic metaphysical philosophy and modern mental health frameworks such as the biopsychosocial model, humanistic psychology, and existential psychotherapy.
- Suggests practical implications for integrating spiritual and philosophical dimensions into counseling, psychotherapy, and holistic approaches to mental health.

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INTRODUCTION

Mulla Sadra, whose full name is Sadr al-Din Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Shirazi (1571–1640), was a 17th-century Persian philosopher, theologian, and mystic widely regarded as one of the most important figures in Islamic intellectual history. Living during the Safavid dynasty in Iran, he is often considered the greatest Islamic philosopher after Avicenna, and the leading thinker who successfully synthesized rational philosophy (*falsafah*), illuminationist wisdom (*ishraq*), and Islamic mysticism (*'irfan*) (Esmaeili, 2019). His philosophical system, known as *Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah* or the Transcendent Theosophy, represents the culmination of centuries of Islamic philosophical thought, uniting the insights of earlier traditions into a comprehensive metaphysical worldview.

Mulla Sadra's intellectual formation was influenced by prominent scholars such as Mir Damad and Shaykh Baha'i, from whom he inherited a deep understanding of peripatetic philosophy, illuminationism, and theological discourse. However, his thought marked a radical departure from the static ontology of his predecessors. Through his doctrine of substantial motion (*al-harakah al-jawhariyyah*), he proposed that existence itself is dynamic and that all beings are in a constant state of transformation (Yusuf, 2015). This principle became the cornerstone of his philosophy, explaining not only the natural world but also the spiritual journey of the human soul. For Sadra, the soul is not a fixed entity but a reality that evolves from material potentiality to spiritual actuality, attaining higher levels of existence through knowledge, moral refinement, and divine proximity.

Mulla Sadra's philosophy also introduced the revolutionary idea of the primacy of existence (*asalat al-wujud*), asserting that existence, not essence, is the fundamental reality. In this view, existence is graded in intensity and perfection, and all beings participate in the same ontological continuum that culminates in the Necessary Being God. This concept enabled Sadra to reconcile reason and revelation, philosophy and mysticism, by presenting a unified vision of reality in which intellect and faith coexist harmoniously (S. Rizvi, 2009). His major work, *al-Asfar al-Arba'ah* ("The Four Journeys"), encapsulates his mature thought and serves as one of the most comprehensive philosophical treatises in the Islamic tradition.

Beyond his metaphysical innovations, Mulla Sadra's ideas have profound anthropological and psychological implications (S. H. Rizvi, 2013). His conception of the soul as a living, evolving substance offers a rich foundation for understanding human identity, consciousness, and spiritual growth. In this sense, Mulla Sadra transcends the boundaries of traditional metaphysics, presenting a philosophy that speaks directly to the existential concerns of humanity. His thought continues to influence modern Islamic philosophy, theology, and even discussions on psychology and spirituality, making him a pivotal figure for contemporary interdisciplinary research that seeks to bridge classical wisdom and modern intellectual challenges.

Mulla Sadra's metaphysical system and its implications for psychology have been mapped out in authoritative surveys of his thought. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1966; expanded writings 1978) and Syed Sajjad Rizvi (2009) provide comprehensive expositions of Sadra's ontology, the primacy of existence (*asalat al-wujud*), and the doctrine of substantial motion (*al-harakah al-jawhariyyah*). These works explain how Sadra's graded view of existence makes the soul a dynamic reality that evolves from material potentiality to intellectual and spiritual actuality an ontological foundation that later commentators treat as the conceptual bridge linking metaphysics to psychological explanations of development and selfhood.

Early specialised studies treating Sadra explicitly as a philosopher of the soul appear in the mid 20th century and have remained important reference points (Daftari, 2010). For example, M. A. Haq (1970) produced one of the earlier focused treatments often cited in later literature discussing Sadra's unified account of the faculties, the functions of the soul, and how a single psychic reality can manifest as various mental capacities. Haq's work is frequently used as a starting point by scholars who want to trace how Sadra reconceived the classical "faculty psychology" into a more unified, existentially graded

More recent journal articles and theses have treated Sadra's psychology in dialogue with contemporary philosophy of mind. Sumeyye Parildar (2016) investigates Sadra's notion of the "mental" as a monist account of mental existence, arguing that Sadra's framework offers a coherent alternative to strict Cartesian dualism and to reductive physicalism; Parildar reads Sadra as offering a form of mental ontological dependence that can be usefully compared to modern positions such as emergentism or non-reductive physicalism. Similarly, Mahdi Homazadeh (2019) explicitly compares Sadra's account with contemporary emergentism, showing both conceptual affinities and important divergences particularly regarding teleology and the metaphysical role of gradations of existence. These comparative studies have

opened the philosophical door to considering whether Sadra's categories might inform theoretical models employed in mental-health disciplines.

A growing strand of interdisciplinary literature moves beyond pure history or metaphysics and connects Sadra's views to modern concerns about mental health, spirituality, and holistic care. Articles and reviews in recent years (e.g., thematic reviews and papers in journals of religion-and-health or philosophy-and-psychiatry) have used Sadra to argue for a broader conception of mental well-being one that explicitly includes spiritual transformation, self-purification, and teleological growth as therapeutic aims. For instance, scholarship on "Islamic psychology" and the concept of the soul in clinical contexts references Sadra as a classical source that legitimizes integrating spiritual practices and existential meaning-making into therapeutic models (see thematic reviews and case analyses). Nevertheless, much of this work remains programmatic or theoretical rather than empirical, pointing to a clear gap in applied research.

Finally, several doctoral theses and recent papers examine the practical limits and possibilities of applying Sadra's thought to contemporary mental-health practice. Theses such as A. Daftari's (Durham doctoral work) map Sadra's threefold account of the soul (material, imaginal/ideal, and intellectual) and discuss implications for mind-body integration and eschatology; other contemporary essays (including comparative studies with Western thinkers like Heidegger and Corbin) explore the hermeneutical resources Sadra offers to clinicians who want a phenomenologically rich account of subjectivity.

In contrast, modern mental health frameworks, while sophisticated in their clinical and neuroscientific dimensions, often emphasize the material and behavioral aspects of human life. Psychological disorders are typically approached through pharmacological or cognitive-behavioral methods, which, though effective, may neglect the inner metaphysical and spiritual aspects of suffering (Buju, 2019). Increasingly, scholars and practitioners have called for a more integrative approach that includes the spiritual dimension as a vital component of mental health. In this context, revisiting Mulla Sadra's philosophical psychology can provide a valuable lens for reinterpreting the human condition in a way that unites body, mind, and soul.

By analyzing Mulla Sadra's thoughts on the soul in the context of modern mental health, this research seeks to uncover philosophical insights that may enrich contemporary psychological discourse. His vision of the soul's evolution, self-awareness, and ultimate perfection can offer a deeper understanding of human resilience, healing, and existential meaning dimensions that remain underexplored in current mental health paradigms. Thus, this study aims to build a bridge between Islamic metaphysical thought and modern psychological theory, contributing to the development of a more comprehensive, spiritually informed perspective on mental well-being.

METHOD

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study rests on the integration of Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Theosophy (Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah) with selected modern frameworks of mental health, particularly the biopsychosocial model, humanistic psychology, and spiritual or existential psychotherapy. This integration aims to uncover conceptual bridges between metaphysical understandings of the soul and contemporary approaches to mental well-being, particularly concerning consciousness, self-awareness, and spiritual growth (Cloninger, 2006).

Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Theosophy represents a synthesis of philosophical reasoning, mystical insight, and Qur'anic revelation. At its core lies a rich ontological, epistemological, and psychological system that provides a unified vision of reality. Ontologically, Mulla Sadra introduced the principle of the primacy of existence (*asalat al-wujud*), asserting that existence (*wujud*), not essence (*mahiyyah*), is the fundamental reality of all beings (Akhwanudin, 2016). Existence is a single, dynamic continuum that admits varying degrees of intensity and perfection. Within this graded ontology, the human soul occupies a unique position—it begins as a material entity but undergoes substantial motion (*al-harakah al-jawhariyyah*), gradually ascending toward immateriality through intellectual and spiritual perfection. This view situates human development not merely as psychological or behavioral change, but as ontological transformation a continuous journey toward unity with the divine source of being.

From an epistemological perspective, Mulla Sadra emphasizes the unity of the knower and the known (*ittihad al-'aql wa al-ma'qul*), where knowledge is not a passive reception of external forms but an active realization of being. In other words, to know something is to participate in its mode of existence.

This idea has profound psychological implications, as it positions self-knowledge and consciousness as transformative acts that elevate the soul's ontological status. Consequently, ignorance, confusion, or mental disturbance can be interpreted as disconnections from the higher realities of existence forms of existential alienation that hinder the soul's perfection (Loy, 2018).

In terms of the psychology of the soul, Mulla Sadra conceives of the soul as a single, evolving substance that traverses several levels of existence: the corporeal (linked to sensory perception), the imaginal (*khayal*), and the intellectual (*'aql*). The perfection of the soul involves harmonizing these faculties and transcending lower appetites toward higher intellectual and spiritual awareness (Remiswal et al., 2021). This developmental vision closely parallels modern concepts of psychological growth, self-actualization, and inner integration, offering a metaphysical depth to what psychology describes as mental and emotional maturation.

Modern mental health frameworks also offer valuable perspectives for understanding human well-being, albeit from different epistemic standpoints. The biopsychosocial model, formulated by George Engel in 1977, posits that mental health arises from the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. It rejects reductionist, purely biomedical views of mental illness and emphasizes the holistic nature of human experience. Similarly, humanistic psychology, inspired by figures such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, centers on self-actualization, authenticity, and personal growth. It views the individual as an integrated whole, capable of self-direction and meaning-making. Spiritual and existential psychotherapies, influenced by Viktor Frankl and Rollo May, further explore the importance of purpose, freedom, and transcendence, focusing on how individuals find meaning in suffering and cultivate inner harmony.

Conceptually, there are striking points of convergence between Mulla Sadra's philosophy and these modern frameworks. Both emphasize the unity and multidimensionality of the human being, viewing mental health as more than the absence of illness it is the realization of one's potential and harmony with the greater order of existence (Madzhuga et al., 2018). Mulla Sadra's substantial motion can be likened to the process of psychological development and self-transcendence described in humanistic and existential theories. His notion of intellectual and spiritual perfection parallels Maslow's hierarchy of needs, particularly the stage of self-actualization and the later concept of self-transcendence. Furthermore, the epistemological principle of unity between knower and known resonates with the therapeutic emphasis on awareness and presence found in mindfulness-based and existential therapies.

Methodology

This research employs a philosophical analysis approach, integrating textual, hermeneutical, and comparative methods to explore Mulla Sadra's conception of the soul and its relevance to modern mental health frameworks. Since the study concerns abstract metaphysical and psychological concepts rather than empirical data, a qualitative and interpretive methodology is most appropriate. The aim is not to test hypotheses through observation but to interpret philosophical meanings, uncover conceptual relationships, and construct a bridge between classical Islamic thought and contemporary psychological theory.

The textual analysis component focuses on an in-depth reading of Mulla Sadra's primary philosophical works, most notably *al-Asfar al-Arba'ah* ("The Four Journeys"), which represents the culmination of his metaphysical and psychological thought. Other Sadrian texts, such as *al-Shawahid al-Rububiyah* and *al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'ad*, are also referenced to provide a comprehensive understanding of his views on the origin, evolution, and perfection of the soul (Wainwright & Brümmer, n.d.). Through close textual examination, the study identifies and analyzes key philosophical principles such as *asalat al-wujud* (the primacy of existence), *al-harakah al-jawhariyyah* (substantial motion), and *ittihad al-'aql wa al-ma'qul* (the unity of the knower and the known) that shape Mulla Sadra's psychology of the soul. Each of these concepts is examined not only for its metaphysical significance but also for its implications in understanding human consciousness, personal development, and psychological well-being.

The hermeneutical approach is employed to interpret Mulla Sadra's philosophical ideas within their historical, cultural, and theological contexts while also engaging them with contemporary intellectual paradigms. This method recognizes that philosophical texts carry layered meanings that must be interpreted through dialogue with both their original context and modern concerns. By applying philosophical hermeneutics, the research aims to reveal how Sadra's metaphysical insights rooted in Islamic cosmology and spirituality can be recontextualized to address current questions about the nature of the mind, consciousness, and mental health. This involves interpreting the symbolic, ethical, and existential dimensions of Sadra's writings, as well as understanding the soul's journey as both a metaphysical and psychological process.

In addition, a comparative analysis is conducted to identify conceptual parallels and differences between Mulla Sadra's philosophical psychology and modern mental health theories. This comparative dimension draws upon established psychological frameworks such as the biopsychosocial model, humanistic psychology, and spiritual or existential psychotherapy (Gilbert, 2019). The analysis investigates how concepts such as substantial motion may correspond to psychological development or self-actualization, how unity of existence can relate to holistic and integrative understandings of the self, and how intellectual perfection parallels modern notions of self-awareness, mindfulness, and spiritual growth. By examining these intersections, the study seeks to highlight the ways in which Mulla Sadra's metaphysical system can contribute to a more comprehensive and spiritually grounded understanding of mental well-being.

The sources used in this research include both primary and secondary materials (Prada-Ramallal et al., 2018). The primary sources consist of Mulla Sadra's original Arabic and Persian works, with reference to English translations where available. Secondary sources include scholarly interpretations and analyses by key Sadrian scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1978), Henry Corbin (1993), and Sajjad H. Rizvi (2009), whose works provide critical insights into Sadra's metaphysical psychology. Additionally, literature from modern psychology and psychotherapy including the writings of George Engel, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Viktor Frankl is utilized to frame the mental health theories with which Sadra's philosophy is compared. These modern sources enable a conceptual dialogue between metaphysical and scientific approaches to understanding the human psyche.

The analytic process proceeds through three stages. First, the study conducts a conceptual exposition, elucidating the essential elements of Mulla Sadra's philosophy of the soul and situating them within his broader metaphysical framework. Second, it performs a comparative interpretation, juxtaposing these philosophical ideas with modern mental health concepts to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Finally, the research undertakes a synthetic reflection, integrating insights from both traditions to propose a holistic model of mental health that encompasses the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of human existence. Through this multi-layered analytical process, the study seeks to demonstrate that Mulla Sadra's vision of the soul offers valuable theoretical foundations for rethinking the nature of mental health, emphasizing self-awareness, existential meaning, and spiritual transformation as core components of human well-being.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of this research reveal that Mulla Sadra's philosophical conception of the soul provides a profound and integrative framework that complements, and in some aspects extends beyond, modern theories of mental health. Through textual and comparative analysis, it becomes evident that Sadra's metaphysics offers a holistic understanding of the human being one that unites body, mind, and spirit within a dynamic continuum of existence. His concept of substantial motion (*al-harakah al-jawhariyyah*) emerges as the central principle linking ontological transformation to psychological development, while his doctrines of the primacy of existence (*asalat al-wujud*) and the unity of the knower and the known (*ittihad al-'aql wa al-ma'qul*) provide metaphysical foundations for consciousness, self-awareness, and spiritual growth.

The first major finding is that Mulla Sadra's ontology reframes mental health as a process of existential perfection rather than a mere state of psychological balance. According to Sadra, the soul is not static but undergoes continuous transformation from materiality to immateriality through knowledge and virtue. In this sense, psychological well-being corresponds to the degree of existential harmony between the soul and its higher realities (Tymieniecka, 2003). This insight resonates with modern humanistic and existential approaches, such as those proposed by Maslow and Frankl, which define mental health as the realization of one's potential and the attainment of meaning in life. However, Mulla Sadra extends this idea beyond the psychological realm, grounding it in a metaphysical journey toward unity with the Divine. Thus, mental health, from Sadra's perspective, is inseparable from spiritual development and ontological ascent.

The second result concerns the epistemological and psychological dimensions of self-awareness. Sadra's principle of the unity between knower and known suggests that genuine knowledge is transformative it changes the very being of the knower. When applied to modern psychology, this means

that self-knowledge is not merely cognitive insight but an existential act that restructures one's consciousness. The process of gaining awareness, therefore, becomes an act of becoming (Marton & Booth, 2013). This finding parallels the emphasis in contemporary therapies, such as existential and mindfulness-based psychotherapy, on awareness and presence as paths to healing. Both frameworks view self-awareness as central to psychological integration and liberation from suffering. Yet, Sadra's perspective deepens this understanding by presenting awareness as participation in higher levels of existence, implying that healing is not only mental but ontological a movement toward a more perfect mode of being.

A third significant result is the discovery of a conceptual bridge between Sadra's metaphysical psychology and the biopsychosocial model of mental health. While the biopsychosocial model accounts for the complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors, it often omits the spiritual dimension. Sadra's theory introduces a fourth, transcendent component that integrates the spiritual and existential aspects of human life into the model. This expanded framework acknowledges that disturbances in mental health may not only stem from environmental or cognitive causes but also from spiritual disconnection and loss of meaning. By emphasizing the soul's inherent drive toward perfection, Sadra's thought complements the biopsychosocial perspective with a "spiritual-ontological" layer, proposing that true well-being involves alignment with the higher purpose of existence.

Furthermore, the research shows that Sadra's view of the soul's journey provides a philosophical explanation for resilience and transformation. The soul, in its movement from material imperfection to intellectual and spiritual completion, encounters trials and forms of suffering that are integral to its perfection (Ahnert, 2014). This mirrors modern therapeutic concepts that regard psychological suffering as an opportunity for growth and self-realization. In both frameworks, struggle and adversity are not merely pathological but potentially transformative, serving as catalysts for deeper self-understanding and inner strength. Thus, Sadra's metaphysical vision offers a powerful philosophical foundation for positive psychology's focus on post-traumatic growth and the human capacity to derive meaning from hardship.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that Mulla Sadra's metaphysical anthropology contributes to redefining the purpose of mental health interventions. In a Sadrian framework, the goal of therapy would not merely be to restore emotional stability but to guide individuals toward intellectual illumination and spiritual maturity. His philosophy implies that the ultimate cure for existential anxiety, despair, or alienation lies not only in behavioral adjustment but in the rediscovery of the soul's divine origin and destiny. This aligns with the growing interest in spiritually integrated psychotherapy, which recognizes the importance of meaning, purpose, and transcendence in human healing. Therefore, Sadra's thought provides both a theoretical and ethical basis for re-envisioning mental health as a multidimensional process that involves the restoration of harmony between the self, the cosmos, and the Divine.

Overall, the results of this study affirm that Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Theosophy can serve as a profound philosophical resource for enriching modern understandings of mental health. His integration of metaphysics, psychology, and spirituality offers a comprehensive model that situates mental well-being within the broader context of existential evolution. By reinterpreting Sadra's doctrines through contemporary psychological lenses, this research reveals enduring insights into the nature of consciousness, the purpose of suffering, and the transformative potential of the human soul.

The Soul's Journey from Corporeal Origin to Spiritual Perfection in Mulla Sadra's Philosophy

Mulla Sadra's conception of the soul is one of the most profound elements of his philosophical system, *Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah* (Transcendent Theosophy). In contrast to earlier philosophical traditions that viewed the soul as a pre-existing, static entity, Sadra redefined the human soul as a being in constant motion evolving, transforming, and perfecting itself throughout its ontological journey. This dynamic understanding of the soul is grounded in his principle of substantial motion (*al-harakah al-jawhariyyah*), which asserts that all existence, including the soul, is in a perpetual state of becoming. The soul, therefore, is not created in its final form but begins as a material entity that gradually ascends toward immateriality and divine perfection.

According to Sadra, the human soul originates in the corporeal realm it is initially tied to the body and depends on it for its existence and awareness (Daftari, 2010). At birth, the soul's faculties are largely potential, reflecting its initial material attachment. Through sensory perception and interaction with the physical world, the soul begins its first phase of development. However, as it grows in knowledge and self-awareness, it becomes increasingly independent of the body. This process marks the soul's transition from the corporeal to the psychic stage, characterized by rational thought and intellectual activity. Sadra thus rejects both the Aristotelian notion that the soul is a fixed form of the body and the Platonic idea that

the soul pre-exists the body; rather, he proposes a middle path in which the soul originates with the body but transcends it through existential motion.

The journey continues as the soul engages in intellectual and spiritual purification. Through the exercise of reason, ethical discipline, and contemplation of higher realities, the soul undergoes transformation toward immaterial existence. Sadra describes this process as the soul's gradual detachment from material constraints and its ascent toward the realm of intellect ('alam al-'aql). The highest stage of this ascent is what he calls intellectual perfection (al-kamal al-'aqli), where the soul attains unity with the divine intellect and experiences the reality of being as a single, continuous truth. This union is not the annihilation of individuality, but rather the fulfillment of the soul's inherent potential to reflect divine attributes such as wisdom, justice, and compassion.

At the metaphysical level, this journey reveals Sadra's understanding of the unity of existence (wahdat al-wujud), a concept influenced by Ibn 'Arabi yet reinterpreted through his own ontological system. For Sadra, existence itself is a graded reality (tashkik al-wujud), meaning that all beings share in existence but differ in intensity and perfection. The soul's evolution, therefore, is an intensification of existence moving from a lower, corporeal level to a higher, spiritual degree. This continuous ascent reflects the soul's intrinsic yearning for perfection, mirroring the divine creative act that sustains and elevates all beings.

In the context of modern mental health, Sadra's view of the soul's journey offers a profound philosophical foundation for understanding psychological growth and well-being. His concept of transformation aligns with contemporary ideas of self-actualization in humanistic psychology and the emphasis on meaning-making in existential psychotherapy (Evans, 2008). The notion that the soul evolves through stages of awareness parallels modern theories of consciousness development, while the emphasis on ethical and spiritual purification resonates with therapeutic practices that integrate mindfulness and spirituality. In essence, Sadra's model presents mental health not merely as the absence of illness, but as the realization of one's highest ontological and spiritual potential.

Thus, Mulla Sadra's doctrine of the soul's journey from corporeal origin to spiritual perfection embodies a deeply integrative vision of human existence. It unites metaphysics, psychology, and spirituality into a coherent framework that transcends the dichotomy between body and soul, faith and reason, material and spiritual. His thought invites both philosophers and psychologists to reconsider the human being as a dynamic, evolving reality one whose ultimate well-being lies in the harmonious ascent toward divine perfection.

Mental Illness as an Imbalance or Stagnation in the Soul's Movement

Within Mulla Sadra's metaphysical framework, the human soul is not a static essence but a dynamic, evolving reality that progresses through different levels of existence. Central to his philosophy is the principle of substantial motion (al-harakah al-jawhariyyah), which posits that every being including the soul undergoes continuous transformation toward higher states of perfection (Yusuf, 2015). The health of the soul, therefore, depends on the harmony and continuity of this existential motion. When the soul's movement toward perfection becomes obstructed, distorted, or stagnant, the individual experiences a form of existential imbalance that, in contemporary terms, may manifest as mental illness.

In Sadra's view, the soul's journey is characterized by a constant interplay between its material, psychic, and intellectual dimensions. At the material level, the soul interacts with bodily and sensory experiences, which are necessary for its initial development. At the psychic level, it engages in emotional and rational processes that shape identity, self-awareness, and moral disposition. Finally, at the intellectual or spiritual level, the soul seeks transcendence through knowledge, reflection, and closeness to the Divine. When these dimensions function in balance, the soul advances harmoniously, achieving both psychological stability and spiritual fulfillment. However, when the lower faculties dominate or the higher faculties fail to develop, the soul's motion becomes impeded, leading to disintegration and disorder within the self.

Mental illness, from this perspective, can be interpreted as a disruption in the soul's natural progression toward perfection. For instance, excessive attachment to material desires, sensory pleasures, or ego-centered emotions may anchor the soul to its corporeal phase, preventing it from ascending to higher intellectual or spiritual levels. Sadra would regard such stagnation as a form of existential imprisonment, in which the individual's consciousness becomes confined to the lowest strata of being. Feelings of anxiety, despair, or alienation can thus be understood as signs of the soul's inner disharmony a consequence of failing to actualize its higher potentials. Similarly, irrational thoughts, moral confusion, or loss of purpose reflect distortions in the rational and spiritual faculties that guide the soul's ascent.

This interpretation resonates with modern psychological insights, though articulated through a metaphysical lens. In contemporary terms, one might say that mental illness arises when there is a lack of integration between the biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of human life a concept closely aligned with the biopsychosocial model. From a Sadrian viewpoint, however, such imbalance is not merely functional but ontological: it signifies a weakening of the soul's existential intensity and a deviation from its essential path toward perfection. Healing, therefore, cannot be achieved solely through medication or behavioral modification but must involve a restoration of harmony within the soul's movement. This includes cultivating wisdom (hikmah), moral virtue, and self-awareness, as well as reconnecting with transcendent realities that give life meaning and direction.

In practical terms, this Sadrian understanding encourages a holistic view of mental health that integrates body, mind, and spirit. Mental illness, rather than being a mere pathological condition, becomes an opportunity for transformation a call for the soul to realign with its true nature and resume its upward journey. Therapies that foster reflection, ethical discipline, and spiritual growth can therefore be seen as ways of reactivating the soul's motion toward balance and perfection. Just as Sadra envisions existence as a continuous unfolding of divine reality, mental health can be conceived as the soul's ongoing participation in that unfolding a dynamic equilibrium between the temporal and the eternal, the finite and the infinite.

Comparison with Modern Psychological Perspectives on Growth, Self-Actualization, and Mental Disorders

In modern psychology, particularly within the humanistic tradition pioneered by Abraham Maslow (1943, 1968) and Carl Rogers (1951), self-actualization represents the process of realizing one's full potential and achieving psychological integration. Maslow's hierarchy of needs culminates in self-actualization a state of inner harmony, creativity, and authenticity. Rogers similarly emphasizes the actualizing tendency as the inherent drive of every human being toward growth, fulfillment, and congruence between the "real self" and the "ideal self." Both thinkers view psychological well-being as the outcome of realizing one's capacities in a supportive environment, where the self develops freely toward greater complexity and integration. In this sense, their view echoes Sadra's idea that the soul naturally strives for perfection and higher levels of being, suggesting a shared belief in the inherent teleology of human existence that is, the movement toward an ultimate good or fulfillment.

However, Mulla Sadra's conception of growth differs from humanistic psychology in its ontological depth. For Sadra, the soul's development is not only psychological but existential an ascent through the very hierarchy of being. Growth involves transcending material and sensory limitations to attain immaterial intellectual perfection (al-kamal al-'aqli). This transformation is not merely about self-fulfillment in worldly terms but about union with the source of existence itself. While Maslow's self-actualized individual achieves autonomy and creativity, Sadra's perfected soul achieves transcendence and unity with divine reality. The ultimate end is not self-expression but self-transcendence, where the individual's identity is harmonized with the universal order of being. Interestingly, Maslow's later notion of self-transcendence where the individual moves beyond ego and personal desires to serve higher values comes close to Sadra's metaphysical vision, though without the explicitly theological dimension.

When it comes to understanding mental disorders, both frameworks recognize imbalance or stagnation as the root of suffering, but they interpret it differently. In modern psychology, mental illness is often understood through the biopsychosocial model, which integrates biological predispositions, psychological patterns, and social contexts (Kinderman, 2005). Disorders arise when one or more of these components become dysregulated for example, chemical imbalances in the brain, maladaptive cognitive patterns, or social isolation. From a humanistic or existential standpoint, figures such as Rollo May (1958) and Viktor Frankl (1963) argue that psychological distress emerges from a loss of meaning, alienation, or failure to actualize one's potential conditions that mirror Sadra's idea of the soul's stagnation in its existential journey.

Sadra's view, however, frames such imbalance in metaphysical terms: mental illness occurs when the soul's movement toward perfection is obstructed, often due to excessive attachment to material existence or neglect of intellectual and spiritual cultivation. Whereas psychology may diagnose depression as a neurochemical or cognitive issue, Sadra would interpret it as the soul's estrangement from its true purpose a state of ontological weakness or disharmony. Healing, therefore, requires not only therapeutic intervention but also spiritual realignment, in which the individual restores harmony between the body, mind, and spirit. This resonates with modern integrative and transpersonal psychologies, such as those

developed by Ken Wilber (1993) and Stanislav Grof (1988), which emphasize the spiritual dimension as essential to full psychological health.

Both Sadra and modern psychology ultimately converge on a vision of human flourishing as a process of becoming an unfolding of potentiality into actuality (S. H. Rizvi, 2013). Yet, their points of departure remain distinct: psychology focuses on the empirical, observable dimensions of personality and behavior, while Sadra's philosophy penetrates to the metaphysical essence of being itself. In Sadra's framework, psychological healing is inseparable from spiritual purification; in modern psychology, it is primarily about restoring functional balance and promoting personal growth. The synthesis of these perspectives suggests that a truly holistic model of mental health must integrate both dimensions addressing the material and cognitive aspects of disorder while also nurturing the soul's innate movement toward meaning, transcendence, and divine perfection.

Integration of Sadra's Philosophy with Holistic and Spiritual Dimensions of Therapy

One major integration point lies in Sadra's principle of substantial motion (*al-harakah al-jawhariyyah*), which frames the human being as perpetually evolving rather than fixed. In therapy, this idea can enrich the understanding of psychological change as a continuous existential movement rather than a mere adjustment of symptoms or behaviors. Just as Sadra viewed the soul as progressing through stages of awareness and being, modern therapists can view healing as a process of transformation, where clients move toward higher levels of self-understanding, meaning, and coherence. This approach resonates with humanistic and existential psychotherapy, which regard personal growth as an ongoing journey of becoming rather than a final state of equilibrium.

Another key point of integration is Sadra's emphasis on the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) and the interconnectedness of all levels of being (Akhwanudin, 2016). In therapeutic contexts, this concept supports the growing recognition that mental health is inseparable from one's relational, environmental, and spiritual contexts. Practices such as mindfulness, compassion-based therapy, and spiritually oriented counseling can be seen as modern reflections of Sadra's vision, which encourages awareness of the self's participation in a larger, divine reality. By fostering this awareness, therapy can help clients move beyond self-centered perspectives toward a sense of wholeness and connectedness an essential step in overcoming alienation and existential despair.

Sadra's doctrine of intellective perfection (*al-kamal al-'aqli*) also parallels modern therapeutic goals of self-actualization and self-transcendence. For Sadra, intellective perfection represents the culmination of the soul's journey, where it achieves harmony between reason, emotion, and spirituality, ultimately uniting with the divine source of existence. In psychological terms, this can be understood as the realization of an integrated and authentic self a state of balance where cognition, feeling, and purpose are aligned (Gardner et al., 2005). Therapies that integrate spiritual reflection, moral development, and contemplative practices can thus be viewed as facilitating this movement toward perfection. The inclusion of meditation, gratitude exercises, or existential dialogue in therapy echoes Sadra's view that mental and spiritual purification are interconnected processes.

Furthermore, Sadra's perspective supports the therapeutic value of suffering and struggle, which he interprets as stages in the soul's purification and ascent. In contrast to approaches that primarily aim to eliminate distress, Sadra's philosophy invites therapists to help clients reframe suffering as a transformative opportunity a necessary passage in the soul's journey toward higher consciousness. This aligns with existential psychotherapy and logotherapy, where pain and crisis are seen as potential sources of growth, meaning, and renewed purpose. Such an approach encourages resilience and self-awareness rather than avoidance or suppression of inner conflict.

In practice, integrating Sadra's insights could lead to the development of spiritually integrated psychotherapy models that balance empirical rigor with metaphysical understanding (Forman, 2012). Therapists influenced by this framework might help clients explore not only their emotions and cognitions but also their spiritual direction and existential purpose. Techniques such as guided reflection, narrative therapy, or spiritual dialogue can be employed to awaken the client's awareness of their inner motion and potential for transcendence. In community or culturally sensitive settings, particularly within Islamic contexts, Sadra's philosophy could provide a culturally resonant basis for integrating religious and philosophical teachings into mental health care without compromising scientific integrity.

Implications

The exploration of Mulla Sadra's philosophy of the soul in relation to modern mental health yields significant implications across philosophical, psychological, and practical domains. Philosophically, Mulla

Sadra's conception of the soul provides a profound lens through which to deepen the understanding of consciousness and existence. His doctrine of substantial motion (*al-harakah al-jawhariyyah*) challenges static notions of the self by asserting that existence is dynamic, fluid, and constantly evolving. This offers a metaphysical foundation for viewing consciousness as a process of unfolding rather than a fixed state an idea that resonates with current debates in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. Sadra's principle of the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) further enriches this discourse by framing consciousness as intrinsically connected to all levels of being, suggesting that awareness is not merely an individual phenomenon but a reflection of universal existence. This perspective invites a holistic understanding of human identity, one that transcends dualistic separations between body and soul, matter and spirit, or self and other. In this way, Sadra's thought revitalizes philosophical inquiries into the nature of being and offers an ontological depth often absent from modern materialist paradigms.

From a psychological standpoint, Sadra's philosophy provides a strong argument for integrating spirituality into mental health frameworks. His view of the soul's journey as a continuous ascent toward perfection implies that psychological well-being is inseparable from spiritual development. This challenges conventional models that focus primarily on symptom management or behavioral correction and instead promotes a view of healing as existential transformation. Modern therapeutic approaches such as humanistic, existential, and transpersonal psychology find resonance with Sadra's belief that meaning, moral virtue, and self-awareness are central to human flourishing. Integrating these ideas into mental health practice can help address the growing recognition that many psychological struggles are rooted not merely in biological dysfunction but in spiritual disconnection or loss of purpose. Consequently, Sadra's thought encourages the creation of holistic therapeutic models that honor the full spectrum of human experience physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.

Practically, the insights derived from Mulla Sadra's philosophy have the potential to inform counseling, spiritual therapy, and cross-cultural psychology. In counseling contexts, therapists can draw on Sadra's notion of the soul's motion to help clients reframe mental distress as part of a larger process of growth and transformation. This approach can foster resilience and meaning-making, particularly among clients who draw from religious or philosophical traditions. In spiritual therapy, Sadra's teachings can serve as a foundation for integrating Islamic metaphysical concepts with contemporary psychological methods, offering culturally sensitive frameworks for mental health interventions in Muslim communities. Moreover, in cross-cultural psychology, Sadra's holistic anthropology can bridge Western and Eastern paradigms of the self, promoting mutual understanding between scientific and spiritual worldviews. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of the physical and metaphysical dimensions of human life, practitioners can cultivate more inclusive and empathetic approaches to care that respect the diversity of human experience.

In summary, the integration of Mulla Sadra's metaphysics with modern mental health thought provides a multidimensional framework for understanding human consciousness, healing, and growth. Philosophically, it redefines being as a process of continuous spiritual ascent; psychologically, it underscores the essential role of meaning and transcendence in mental well-being; and practically, it inspires new models of therapy that unite scientific knowledge with spiritual wisdom. Together, these implications affirm the enduring relevance of classical philosophical insights in shaping a more holistic and humane vision of mental health in the modern world.

Limitations

One of the primary challenges lies in the difficulty of directly applying metaphysical theories to empirical psychology. Mulla Sadra's philosophy is grounded in ontological and theological assumptions about existence, the soul, and divine reality concepts that transcend empirical observation and measurement (Kohandel, 2016). Modern psychology, by contrast, operates within a scientific framework that prioritizes observable phenomena, quantifiable data, and experimental validation. As a result, Sadra's ideas, while rich in philosophical depth, may not easily translate into testable hypotheses or measurable constructs within psychological research. For example, notions such as substantial motion or unity of existence are metaphysical categories rather than empirical variables, making their operationalization within clinical or experimental contexts inherently challenging. This gap limits the extent to which Sadra's philosophy can be directly implemented in contemporary therapeutic practice without reinterpretation or adaptation.

Additionally, there are interpretive limits due to cultural and theological differences between the classical Islamic context of Sadra's work and the secular orientation of modern psychology. Sadra's

framework is deeply embedded within a theocentric worldview, where human development is inseparable from the soul's relationship with God and the metaphysical hierarchy of being. Modern psychology, however, tends to focus on the human subject in isolation from transcendental realities, often adopting secular or naturalistic assumptions about consciousness and behavior. This fundamental divergence can create conceptual tensions when attempting to synthesize the two traditions. Moreover, Sadra's thought presupposes familiarity with Islamic philosophy, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and Sufi metaphysics disciplines that may not align neatly with the epistemological foundations of Western psychology. Consequently, any comparative analysis must be conducted with careful attention to context, avoiding anachronistic or reductionist interpretations that could distort the original meaning of Sadra's philosophy.

Methodologically, the research is constrained by the differences in interpretive frameworks and disciplinary languages used in philosophy and psychology (Willis et al., 2007). While hermeneutical and comparative analysis can reveal conceptual parallels, it cannot substitute for empirical verification or clinical validation. The study's conclusions, therefore, remain primarily theoretical and interpretive rather than experimental. Furthermore, since much of Sadra's work has been transmitted through classical Arabic and Persian texts, nuances of meaning may be lost or altered in translation, potentially affecting the accuracy of interpretation. These linguistic and contextual factors necessitate cautious engagement with primary sources and acknowledgment of possible interpretive bias.

In summary, although this study demonstrates the potential for fruitful dialogue between Mulla Sadra's metaphysics and modern psychology, it remains limited by epistemological, cultural, and methodological boundaries. Future research would benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration between philosophers, theologians, and psychologists to explore how Sadra's ideas might be adapted into empirical or therapeutic frameworks without compromising their metaphysical essence. By acknowledging these limitations, this research remains grounded, critical, and open to continued development recognizing that the integration of ancient wisdom with modern science is an ongoing, evolving endeavor.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research highlight that Mulla Sadra's concept of the soul presents a profound philosophical bridge between spirituality and modern psychology. His doctrine, which views the soul as a dynamic and evolving reality that moves from corporeal existence toward spiritual perfection, offers a metaphysical framework for understanding human mental and emotional development. By positioning self-awareness and intellectual-spiritual growth as essential aspects of human flourishing, Sadra's philosophy resonates with modern psychological theories that emphasize personal growth, self-actualization, and holistic well-being. In the context of mental health, Sadra's notion of substantial motion where the soul continuously transforms toward higher levels of being can be interpreted as a metaphor for psychological healing and development. Mental illness, from this view, reflects a form of stagnation or imbalance in the soul's movement toward perfection, suggesting that true recovery involves restoring harmony between one's material, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. This aligns with contemporary holistic and humanistic approaches to therapy, which value meaning-making, inner transformation, and integration of the self. Ultimately, Mulla Sadra's insights encourage a re-evaluation of how mental well-being is conceptualized moving beyond purely biomedical or behavioral paradigms toward a more integrated understanding of the human condition. By recognizing the unity of body, mind, and spirit, his philosophy provides a timeless foundation for modern approaches that seek to incorporate spirituality into mental health care. In doing so, Sadra's metaphysical vision not only deepens the theoretical discourse on consciousness and existence but also offers practical inspiration for developing therapies that honor both the psychological and transcendent aspects of human life.

AUTHORS' DECLARATION

Authors' Contributions and Responsibilities

The author made a full and independent contribution to the conception, design, and execution of this research.

Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests that could have influenced the research process or its outcomes. This study was conducted purely for academic and intellectual purposes, without any financial, institutional, or personal interests.

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