Binary Oppositions and Binary Pairs:

From Derrida to the Islamic Philosophy

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Abstract. For more than half a century, postmodern philosophy has tried to show that all kinds of texts deconstruct themselves from within. One of the main notions to present this revolution has been the concept of the "binary pair". Derrida, who himself based his theories on Saussure's philosophy of language, made objection to his idea of the "binary opposition". In this way, the interpretations and the hermeneutics based on binary oppositions were called into question, since there was, as Derrida believed, no true opposition between a pair of conceptions.
In this research, the endeavor is made to show the problems that walk with the notion of the binary pair and to suggest some alternatives. Of course, the author does not mean that the binary pair itself is rejected; however, putting emphasis on this idea in a way that the other routes are blocked is going to be questioned. In fact, some complementary notions for the binary pair and the binary opposition will be posed. In the present paper, ten kinds of relationship that have been extracted from the Quran are defined, explained and exemplified by one or some verses from the holy book. All these will be investigated in the light of the Islamic philosophy, especially Mulla Sadra's theosophy, which was highly predicated on the Quran. The findings confirm that the binary opposition and the binary pair alone cannot lead us to comprehensive understanding of texts. After this research, the author hopes some samples of the binary pair and the binary opposition, such as the metaphysics of absence versus or along with presence and the priority of writing over speech or vice versa, chance and causality, process and fixity are delved from the Islamic perspective. This change could vary the direction of hermeneutics, literary criticism, and exegesis.

Keywords: Islamic philosophy, Mulla Sadra, Derrida, binary oppositions, binary pairs

1. Introduction

For more than half a century, postmodern philosophy has tried to show that all kinds of texts deconstruct themselves from within. One of the main notions to present this revolution is the concept of the "binary pair". Derrida, who himself based his theories on Saussure's philosophy of language, made objection to his idea of the "binary opposition". In this way, the interpretations and the hermeneutics based on binary oppositions were called into question, since there was, as Derrida believed, no true opposition between a pair of conceptions (*Writing* XVI).

In the present essay, the endeavor is made to show the problems of emphasis on binary pairs and to suggest some alternatives which can walk along with this notion. In other words, the author does not mean to reject the binary pair; however, putting emphasis on this idea in a way that the other routes are blocked is going to be questioned. In fact, some complementary concepts from the Islamic philosophy for the binary pair and the binary opposition will be posed and defined. At the same time, we count the characteristics of these complementary relations and quote some verses from the Holy Quran that contain the alternative. In addition, the main philosopher to whom we refer is Mulla Sadra who himself extracted his philosophy from the Quran as one of the main sources (Nasr 14). Mention should be made that these alternatives are just a

part of the researcher's studies' results that as a matter of fact due to lack of time and space the inclusion of all was impossible.

2. Argument

To begin with, a significant question could be why binary pairs should be revised from the Islamic point of view. Binary pairs have two general defects that did not matter to Derrida, and in effect he used them as proof for his ideas; however, they are not acceptable in the Islamic philosophy. The first reason is contradiction; contradiction is there when we find Derrida rejecting binary oppositions but at the same time making new ones. Just as two examples, when the binary opposition was refuted, a new one was made between binary oppositions and binary pairs. Derrida also privileged writing over speech (Bressler 78); although Spivak in her preface to *Of Grammatology* has another opinion and believes that this is "a very hasty view" (lxx), because neither writing nor speech is privileged for Derrida, she neglects that Derrida himself in *Writing and Difference* says that there is "writing in speech" (247). This contradiction shows that we need to have binary oppositions along with binary pairs.

Incomprehensiveness is the second reason which itself is a tripartite defect. First, Derrida opposed the binary opposition, for example of speech over writing in the Western philosophy, but he did not consider the Islamic philosophy. In Mulla Sadra's idea, there is no difference between speech and writing (Khamenei 48-9); in the Quranic exegesis, also, neither is privileged over the other: while the revelation of the Quran is by speech, the Quran itself is a written text, and both have their own values in hermeneutics. In other words, without any of the two exegesis is impossible. Interpreting a verse, sometimes the critic needs to know "the condition of revelation" (s*ha'n-i nozool*) as well as the syntactic and other formal features of Arabic language. Here, as we see, speech is hidden in writing; to reverse Derrida's words, there is "speech in writing". Moreover, speech has temporal priority, as the holy book was first revealed and then written. Nonetheless, when we understand that the Quran had once been written in another Book, "preserved tablet" (*lawh mahfooz* (85: 21-2)[2] that contains everything in this world before its creation (Tabätabäï 7: 182) and then was sent to Prophet Muhammad, the equation alters. Besides, priority in time does not bring forth any privilege; if it were so, the last chapters (*suras*) of the Quran would be less important than the first ones. However, the last sura but two, Chapter of Purity (S*ura Ikhläs*), is valued as one third of the whole (Mahdavī 180; Sadooq 2: 392; Tabätabäï and Fiqhī 268).

Then, Derrida objected to binary oppositions, for one pair in them was privileged. However, there are other relations between two things rather than opposition alone that will be excavated below. Finally, in the Quran the example goes that we understand the meaning of one thing by its relation --- whatever it is; difference, opposition, or what we are going to speak of later --- to the other entity; for instance, the good is perceived when we have also the evil: "The example of the two parties is as the blind and the deaf, and the seeing and the hearing; will you not then *mind*?" (emphasis added; 11: 24). The verse highlights that the two groups are opposites and the opposition comes out of the comparison; then, by an exhortatory question asks why people do not consider the opposition to distinguish the two. Postmodernists had a similar example for différance (Bertens 101), but we should note that difference sometimes leads to opposition, sometimes not, as it will be illuminated below.

Now, it comes to the features of binaries in the Islamic philosophy; before Derrida, the Western philosophy necessitated one pair in a binary to be privileged, their relation to be fixed and just in opposition. Derrida did not help that much to the problem, since he again fixed them on parity and their single relation did not fade. Nonetheless, binaries in the Islamic philosophy or theosophy, especially of Mulla Sadra, in which religion is tightly linked with philosophy, are mostly epistemological, not ontological, *except some exceptions*. By epistemological the writer means that binaries do not obey the same rule. Indeed, an Islamic scholar can differentiate between two binaries with the same qualities; in other words, two binaries with the same features do not belong necessarily to one category. Distinction needs theological knowledge that is part and parcel of the Islamic philosophy. This is one of the jurisprudential fundamentals that analogy is not accepted to express an opinion in Islam (Makärim, *Tafsīr* 6: 101). On the other hand, they are not created in

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2.All translations are from the following source with a little change; otherwise, it will be mentioned:
  M. S. Shäkir, *The Glorious Quran*, *Noor al-Anwär 2*, on CD, 27 vols. (Qum: C.R.C.I.S., 1998).

the assumed condition; some of them are made by human mind and some later became opposites; hence, they are not ontological. For both of these statements the example of God and Satan could be brought forth: Satan was not created as an enemy to God; he was a jinni of high rank. Even after his fall, he did not become an opposite of God, but human mind has taken him in this way. This matter will be discussed more in one of the binaries below.

By this point and the example of Satan, we understand that binaries are not fixed and they can change to another one. Having these characteristics in mind, the essayist poses just ten relations between words, or signs, in the Quran, although they are more than twenty.

3. Classification of Relations

The first kind of relation between two entities is the Binary Pair. By a binary pair, we mean that two opposites gather in one, but do not become one. Multitude and oneness are opposites, but according to Mulla Sadra, existence is at once both One and Many in God. The verse in the Quran reads, "He, Allah, is One" (112: 1). Islamic scholars interpret the Arabic word for "One" (*Ahad*) as One and Many; that is, the Many are One; They are not superadded to or separate from One (Tabätabäī 20: 670-71). This does not mean that He has some parts, or He is divisible and has any counterpart. Although God is One, He exists in everything and everywhere; He is pervasive (*basīt*). As an example, we refer to this verse: "I [God] breathed of My spirit into him [human]" (15: 29). That is, He exists in human.

The second category includes Couples, which are two different beings; here, difference matters, not opposition nor parity. Man and woman, or black and white (as race, not face color) are the best examples which are embodied in the following verse: "We [God] created you [human] from a man and a woman and made you different nations and tribes to know [not oppose] each other" (49: 13). From a man and woman who are different beings different tribes are created. These different tribes could be the white and the black, the white and the American Indian, etc., who have been taken for a very long time in the Western and Eastern thoughts, literature, and philosophy as opposites.

Binary Opposition, as the third kind, contains two absolute oppositions; that is to say, the existence of one means the non-existence of the other. It is noteworthy that here one is privileged. The Quran reads, "The example of the two parties [believers and unbelievers] is as the blind and the deaf, and the seeing and the hearing" (11: 24). In this verse, believers and unbelievers are taken as opposites and compared to the seeing and the hearing on the one side and the blind and the deaf on the other. In fact, one cannot be at the same time both a believer in God and an unbeliever. However, opposites can turn to each other: "He [God] is the One who gave you life, then will cause you to die, then will give you life" (22: 66). As death and life make a binary opposition, one cannot be both alive and dead. This verse asserts that man before the stage of being breathed of God's spirit was dead; after this stage he became alive and then at the end of his life again dies; nonetheless, in the hereafter he once more will be given life to live an eternal life.

Counterpoints are two complimentary entities; neither of the two is privileged, yet both are accepted and can exist the same time: "We made the night so that they [humans] may rest therein and the day to give light" (86: 86). Here, there is no negative connotation for the night; indeed, night and day are not presented as the traditional opposites. They are complimentary, for they make one 24-hour day, as in the following verse: "You [God] penetrate the night into the day and You penetrate the day into the night" (3: 27). Likewise, they could exist as the same time in the dawn and twilight.

Neither Pair contains two entities neither of which is privileged and both are condemned. According to the Islamic theology, one cannot be either a colonizer or a colonized: "*Permission* is given to those against whom war is made to fight, for they are *oppressed*" (emphasis added; 22: 39). In other words, "these people are not allowed to be oppressed."

Metaphorical Binaries are poetic or generally speaking literary concepts that through the literary history have been taken as opposites, though there is no true and actual opposition. These oppositions are most of the times shared between different nations in the world literature. As they are conventional, sometimes one is privileged, sometimes neither. Gold and silver or gold and copper as two metaphorical oppositions in which gold is privileged stand as examples for this genus. On the other hand, "The Tiger" and "The Lamb" by William Blake in English literature represent a metaphical binary neither of which is underestimated or

overestimated. Among the Quranic instances the subsequent verse could exemplify this relation: "Allah is Guardian of those who believe [in Him]; He brings them out of the darkness [heresy] into the light [faith]" (2: 257). As we observed before about the night (darkness) and the day (light), neither of them was privileged, but here darkness is undermined by the light.

Then, we have Hierarchy as the seventh group. Hierarchy is a binary in which one is privileged, but there is no opposition and parity between them. A controversial example could be the relation between God and Satan, which is a "superficial binary opposition". On the surface and in the Western culture, Satan and God are opposites; Satan is the source of the evil and God as the origin of the good. Nonetheless, in the Islamic tradition he is nothing before God and just one of His creatures: "[Satan] said, 'respite me until the day [people] are resurrected'" (7: 14). Here, after his fall he asks God to respite him; or, "Whoever turns himself away from remembrance of the Gracious, We [God] appoint Satan for him" (43: 36). In these two verses, Satan's request and God's respiting and appointing him show that Satan's power is under God's control.

Along with the case of God and Satan, another illustration could be of God and servant (man): "[Jesus] said, 'surely I am a servant of Allah; He has given me a book and made me a prophet'" (19: 30). Also, "He [God] is the One who sends clear verses to His servant [Prophet Muhammad] to bring you [people] out from the darkness into the light" (57: 9). In these two verses, God's highest creatures, that is Prophet Muhammad and Jesus Christ, are called His servants. The Arabic word for "servant" (*'Abd*) comes from the word for "worship", which shows the hierarchy. One may say that there is a difference between the two, as Derrida supposed between any two entities; although there is, the difference is not meaningful; it is that much large and obvious that everyone knows and understands it. It is not something new to discover that man is different from God, and we should apprehend their meanings and relation by the difference.

In Contranyms, we have one word with two opposite meanings. Here, in order to understand the significance, the difference between two signs does not matter. Contranyms are extant in all languages; for instance, in English the word "cleave" means both "to divide" and "to stick", or "quiddity" signifies "essence" and "trifling point" (Mish 230, 1021). The word "*ishtaraw*" in Arabic both means "bought" and "sold": "These are the people who *bought* the life of this world for hereafter" (emphasis added; Shäkir 2: 86); "These are the people who *sold* hereafter for the life of this world" (emphasis added; Makärim, *Quran* 2: 86).

All said apart, the relation between signs goes beyond binaries; sometimes we should consider a tripartite relation to understand the meaning of a sign. So, the nineth relation is called Triptych. The Quran tells us that the full meaning of "justice" is understood when we have three components in a tight relationship. The absence of one makes the meaning of justice shaky. The first part is "just rules": "Surely Allah commands you to judge with justice when you judge between people" (4: 58). The verb "commands" indicates the necessity of justice as a general rule for humans. The just ruler is the second one: "He [God] said, 'My covenant does not include the unjust [to become divine leaders]'" (2: 124). Justice-wanting people as the last component make the triangle: "Of those We created are a people who guide to the truth and thereby they do justice" (7: 181).

If we have a just ruler and just rules with no justice-wanting people, the government becomes of 'Ali, the first Imam in shiism and the fourth caliph in sunism, in nascent Islam; in other words, justice is not fulfilled completely. As 'Ali himself says, the difference between my government and others' is that in the latter "people woke up in fear from the governer's cruelty, and I woke up in fear from my subjects' [cruelty]" (Moosavī 284; sermon 96). To have the other binary fomulas --- to have a just ruler and justice-wanting people without just rules results in a chaotic society; justice-wanting people with just rules, but without a just ruler, have no executive person to do justice --- also leads to injustice.

Among other examples is Trinity; although Trinity is not accepted in the Islamic tradition (4: 171; 5: 73), the researcher's point here is about different relations between signs in different texts and cultures. As Christians belive that the three persons in Trinity are the same, so they should be regarded in a relation rather than two by two or separately in the Western or Christian literature. In addition, in literary texts, sometimes it is necessary to criticize the text in regard to three characters. For example, in phychoanalytical approach to *Hamlet* by Shakespeare we should see Hamlet, Claudius, and Gertrude in a triangle (Lacan, Miller, and Hulbert 11-52).

The last relation to explain here is among four signs, which the writer names Knitted Binaries. In this type, we have two binaries, any of the previous ones, from each one entity is not mentioned. As the connection is made between two of them crisscross, the relation among the four would be discovered: "This book [the Quran] surely warns one who is alive and proves true the promise [of punishment] against the unbelievers" (36: 70). According to this verse, human being is either alive or unbeliever; we can find out that the alive are believers and the unbelievers are the dead.

After this research, we believe that it would be the time to rethink some samples of the binary pair and the binary opposition; in other words, having these alternatives in mind, we should investigate the metaphysics of absence versus or along with presence and the priority of writing over speech or vice versa as two important matters tightly connected with the binary pair and the binary opposition. Chance and causality, process and fixity, as well as institutionalization and uninstitutionalization are also in this line. We hope this change can vary the direction of hermeneutics, literary criticism, and exegesis.

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