



Sheikh Mufid's Epistemological Views on Sensory Perception

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Abstract

Original Research



Sensory perception is a fundamental component of Islamic epistemology, playing a crucial role in human understanding of the external world. Sheikh Mufid, a prominent Twelver theologian, adopts a reason-centered approach to this subject, arguing that the senses alone are insufficient to produce certain knowledge; rather, valid knowledge emerges only through their interaction with reason. By distinguishing between simple and composite sensory perception, he clarifies the role of reason in analyzing and affirming sensory data, emphasizing the necessity of filtering illusions and imaginations through rational scrutiny. Moreover, while he upholds direct realism in perception—affirming a direct connection between the perceiver and the perceived—he also acknowledges its limitations. The findings of this study indicate that Sheikh Mufid presents a systematic framework for understanding the interaction between the senses, reason, and revelation, maintaining a firm stance against epistemic relativism. His rationalist approach has not only shaped Shiite theological epistemology but also offers valuable insights for contemporary epistemological analysis.

Keywords

Sheikh Mufid, epistemology, sensory perception, reason, revelation, certain knowledge.

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Problem Statement and Background

Sensory perception is a key topic in epistemology, playing a vital role in shaping human understanding of the world and fundamental concepts. From an epistemological perspective, sensory perception represents the initial stage of knowledge acquisition, wherein information is received from the senses and transferred to the intellect for analytical processing, ultimately leading to meaningful understanding.

Islamic theologians have traditionally discussed epistemological issues under the section known as *Laṭīf al-Kalām* within the discipline of theology (*Kalām*). This section covers subjects such as substance and accident, motion and rest, the soul, and perception. These discussions predate the expansion of Peripatetic philosophy and later became recognized as part of the philosophical domain of *Umur ʿĀmma* (general metaphysics). The term *Laṭīf al-Kalām* encompasses areas such as epistemology, ontology, and cosmology, laying the rational groundwork necessary for grasping the core theological discussions categorized under *Jalīl al-Kalām*. These latter discussions include fundamental theological principles such as divine unity (*Tawḥīd*), divine attributes, divine justice (*ʿAdl*), and prophethood (*Nubuwwah*), which form the doctrinal foundations of Islamic beliefs (Subhani, 2012, p. 17).

In epistemology, fundamental questions include the nature of knowledge, sources of cognition, the role of reason and the senses, and the criteria for truth. Sensory perception, as one of the primary sources of knowledge, holds significant importance in this discourse. Sheikh Mufid considers sensory perception, when integrated with reason, as a valid tool for understanding theological matters. He employs the term *Laṭīf al-Kalām* to refer to intricate philosophical discussions and, based on his theological principles, analyzes the role of sensory perception in his epistemological system. He believes that sensory perception, when accompanied by rational analysis, can provide a correct understanding of metaphysical concepts such as the afterlife and the soul (Subhani, 2012, p. 17).

As a distinguished Twelver theologian, Sheikh Mufid presents a unique perspective on the interaction between the senses and reason. He asserts that sensory perception alone is insufficient for acquiring certain knowledge and that only through the mediation of reason can truth be attained. While sensory faculties play a crucial role in cognition, their susceptibility to error necessitates rational oversight. This view sets Sheikh Mufid apart from some of his contemporaries.

Furthermore, he underscores the role of imagination (*wahm* and *khayal*) in cognition, arguing that many epistemic errors stem from the improper

functioning of these faculties. He highlights the potential distortion of sensory data by imaginative and illusory faculties, thereby stressing the need for verifying sensory inputs through rational evaluation. This critical approach to sensory perception is a distinctive feature of Sheikh Mufid's epistemology, differentiating him from many other theologians of his time.

Despite numerous studies on Islamic epistemology, a comprehensive analysis of Sheikh Mufid's views on sensory perception remains scarce. Most prior research has either broadly examined *Laṭīf al-Kalām* or focused on other aspects of his thought. Therefore, an independent study dedicated to the epistemological status of sensory perception in Sheikh Mufid's philosophy is warranted. This article aims to systematically analyze his views on sensory perception using a descriptive-analytical approach, clarifying its place within his epistemological framework. Examining these perspectives contributes to a better understanding of epistemological foundations in Twelver theology and their impact on subsequent intellectual traditions.

The Concept and Status of Sensory Perception in Epistemology and Islamic Philosophy

Sensory perception is a foundational issue in epistemology, requiring the fulfillment of several essential conditions. First, a sensory organ (such as the eye or ear) must be present to receive sensory data. Second, a perceptible object must exist to be perceived. Third, a sensory encounter between the perceiver and the perceptible object is necessary for perception to occur. Fourth, a belief regarding the perceived object must be formed. In other words, without a sensory connection between the perceiver and the perceived, no belief in the object's existence can arise. Thus, sensory perception necessitates the simultaneous fulfillment of these conditions, and in the absence of any one of them, sensory knowledge cannot be established (Nosratian Ahoor, 2016, p. 253).

Sensory Perception in Islamic Epistemology

Sensory perception is regarded as a primary source of knowledge in Islamic epistemology, serving as the initial stage of human interaction with the external world. This type of perception arises from the activity of the five senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—enabling direct recognition of external realities (Shams, 2008, pp. 143–144). However, the nature and validity of sensory perception have been debated among Islamic philosophers and theologians.

Ibn Sina defines perception as “the presence of the essence of an entity before the perceiver” and classifies it into two types: sensory and intellectual. He describes sensory perception as the formation of an image of a perceptible object in the mind, serving as a precursor to intellectual cognition. In contrast, intellectual perception reflects the essence of an entity without mediation (Ibn Sina, 1984, p. 308). Nasir al-Din al-Tusi categorizes perception into four stages: sensory, imaginative, estimative, and intellectual. He argues that sensory perception, which involves direct reception of environmental data, is shared between humans and animals, whereas intellectual perception is exclusive to humans and plays a decisive role in cognition (Mohammadi, 1999, p. 119). These perspectives indicate that Peripatetic philosophers emphasize the necessity of reason in completing sensory knowledge.

Among theologians, Qadi Abd al-Jabbar, a prominent Mu‘tazilite thinker, considers sensory perception an intermediary between the senses and reason. He maintains that the reliability of sensory perception is contingent upon rational verification and acknowledges the possibility of sensory error under specific conditions (Abd al-Jabbar, n.d., vol. 12, pp. 16 & 27). Conversely, the Ash‘arites regard sensory perception merely as an effect of environmental influences on the senses, arguing that it does not independently lead to true knowledge. They stress the dependency of perception on divine will, diminishing the role of reason in evaluating sensory data.

Philosophical Analysis of Sensory Perception

Sensory perception has been regarded as one of the fundamental issues in Islamic philosophy. Thinkers such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Suhrawardi, Mulla Sadra, and Allama Tabataba’ii have each offered distinct analyses of this concept based on their respective philosophical foundations.

Avicenna, while emphasizing the importance of sensory perception, considers it capable only of grasping the accidents and external appearances of objects. In his view, understanding the substance and essence of things is possible solely through the intellect. Thus, he regards sensory perception as a necessary precursor to intellectual cognition but insufficient on its own (Ahmadi, 2011, pp. 122–123). Suhrawardi, with his theory of presential knowledge (*‘ilm huḍūrī*) and illumination, presents a different perspective on sensory perception. He maintains that although sensory perception is the starting point of cognition, the human soul, due to its inherent immateriality, can directly apprehend the truth of things without mediation. This view transforms the experience of sensory perception into a kind of direct and intuitive interaction with the external world (Yazdanpanah, 2010, vol. 1, p. 280).

Mulla Sadra, in his *Transcendent Philosophy (al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah)*, offers an innovative perspective, considering the nature of sensory perception as transcending the material world. He argues that sensory perception is not material; rather, sensory forms emerge at a level above the material realm, manifesting as aspects of the imaginal world (*'ālam al-mithāl*). In this process, the human soul plays an active role, reconstructing and imparting meaning to the world (Mulla Sadra, 1981, p. 329). This perspective presents sensory perception as part of humanity's ascent to higher levels of existence.

Allama Tabataba'ii, inspired by Sadrian philosophy, analyzes the nature of sensory perception as a complex mental process. He emphasizes its particularity and asserts that direct contact between sensory organs and external matter is necessary for its realization. However, he also stresses the immateriality of the soul, considering sensory perception as a reflection of an imaginal truth. In his view, all acquired knowledge (*'ilm ḥuṣūlī*) ultimately reverts to presential knowledge (*'ilm ḥudūrī*) (Yazdanpanah, 2010, vol. 1, p. 179).

These analyses demonstrate that in Islamic philosophy, sensory perception is not merely a rudimentary process but is connected to higher levels of human existence and serves as a platform for elevating cognition. Examining these perspectives provides a deeper understanding of the place of sensory perception in the path of knowledge and its relationship with other cognitive levels.

Sheikh Mufid's Epistemological Approach to Sensory Perception

Sheikh Mufid, one of the most prominent Shiite theologians, assigns a significant role to sensory perception in his epistemological thought. However, he considers it merely an initial stage in the process of human cognition. According to him, the senses function as primary tools of knowledge, but they alone cannot produce certain knowledge. This perspective seeks to explain the relationship between the body and the soul, demonstrating that, from his viewpoint, sensory knowledge only leads to valid cognition when guided by reason and intellect (Sheikh Mufid, 1993b, p. 127). In this section, we will analyze Sheikh Mufid's views by selecting key issues related to sensory perception.

The Distinction Between Substance and Accident

One of the central aspects of Sheikh Mufid's view on sensory perception is the distinction between substance and accident in sensory cognition. He argues that the senses can only perceive the accidents of objects, while the essence of things, as their fundamental reality, remains beyond the reach of the senses

(Sheikh Mufid, 1993b, pp. 95–98). This distinction clearly highlights the inherent limitations of sensory perception and serves as a foundation for contemporary epistemological inquiries.

Sheikh Mufid explains that every accident inheres in a substance, and the substance serves as the carrier and foundation for its existence. He explicitly states that no substance exists without an accident or another accident replacing it. This view aligns with the perspectives of theologians such as Abul Qasim Balkhi and Abu Ali Jubba'i. In contrast, Abd al-Salam ibn Muhammad Jubba'i opposed this view, asserting that substances can exist devoid of colors, tastes, smells, and other accidents (McDermott, 1993, p. 265).

This perspective bears some resemblance to the views of Hisham ibn al-Hakam, who emphasized the role of intermediaries, such as light, in sensory perception. He believed that these intermediaries could alter the conditions of knowledge acquisition (Van Ess, 1982, vol. 1, pp. 240–243). The significance of this view lies in its emphasis on the limitations of the senses and its insistence that complete knowledge is only possible through the integration of sensory and rational cognition. In this regard, Sheikh Mufid, while acknowledging the role of the senses, underscores the role of reason in uncovering the ultimate truth. This aspect distinguishes his view from certain empiricist theories and can be considered a precursor to contemporary epistemological theories that emphasize the mind's role in analyzing and organizing sensory data.

The Multi-Layered Epistemic Structure in Sheikh Mufid's Thought

In his epistemological theories, Sheikh Mufid portrays cognition as a dynamic and multi-layered structure. This process begins with sensory reception and, through rational analysis, culminates in genuine and reliable knowledge. From his perspective, sensory perceptions such as color, motion, or tactile sensations represent only a preliminary layer of knowledge and, without the intervention of reason, cannot yield complete and reliable cognition (Sheikh Mufid, 1993b, p. 128).

The similarity between Sheikh Mufid's view and that of Hisham ibn al-Hakam is also evident here. Hisham believed that the senses provide scattered data from the environment, which must be organized by reason to present a coherent and complete picture of reality (Van Ess, 1982, vol. 1, pp. 244–246). This perspective, which emphasizes the interaction between the senses and reason, is also reflected in Sheikh Mufid's thought, demonstrating the attention both theologians paid to the role of reason in refining sensory data.

In his epistemological analysis, Sheikh Mufid introduces reason as an

essential tool in religious cognition, asserting that sensory perceptions can only lead to certain knowledge when subjected to rational analysis. Unlike Sheikh Saduq, who adopted a transmission-based approach and regarded reason merely as a tool for validating transmitted reports, Sheikh Mufid viewed reason as an independent and fundamental factor, not only in theoretical cognition but also in analyzing religious propositions. Opposing both the Ash'arites, who confined sensory perception to mere external experience, and the Mu'tazilites, who placed absolute emphasis on reason, he adopted a middle path, recognizing the roles of both reason and sense perception in the cognitive process, albeit with distinct functions (Mahmoudi & Niazi, 2011, pp. 78–80).

The Role of the Intellect and Soul in Perception

In Sheikh Mufid's thought, the soul (*nafs*) functions as an independent and immaterial substance that plays a fundamental role in the perceptual process. He maintains that through the intellect (*'aql*), the soul can analyze sensory data and transform it into deeper, more complete knowledge. According to his view, the immaterial nature of perception and the soul's metaphysical characteristics (such as non-spatiality) demonstrate that valid cognition is only possible through the interaction of soul, intellect, and senses (Sheikh Mufid, 1993b, p. 130).

Sheikh Mufid emphasizes the intellect's crucial role in guiding the senses, citing Imam al-Sadiq's (A.S.) response to Abu Shakir al-Daysani as a paradigmatic example. The Imam's position illustrates that senses alone cannot perceive truth unless the intellect functions as a guiding and illuminating instrument. This approach is clearly demonstrated in the Imam's dialogue with Abu Shakir, where the Imam (A.S.) compares the use of intellect to a lamp that illuminates the dark path of sensory perception (Sheikh Mufid, 1969, p. 485). Furthermore, Sheikh Mufid stresses the role of material causes in the perceptual process. He argues that God does not directly intervene in human sensory perception; rather, it occurs through natural intermediaries and material causes. He explicitly states that a blind person cannot perceive color while remaining blind, as they lack the necessary sensory apparatus (Sheikh Mufid, 1993b, pp. 92-94).

This perspective reflects his rationalist approach to explaining sensory perception mechanisms and the role of natural factors. Sheikh Mufid's epistemological position stands in contrast to Ash'arite thought, which diminishes reason's role in perception and attributes knowledge solely to divine intervention. While aligning with rationalist theological traditions like the Mu'tazilites, he uniquely maintains an inseparable connection between reason and revelation, arguing that intellect alone is insufficient without divine guidance. This view converges with Nasir al-Din al-Tusi's theory that sensory

perceptions remain merely conceptual until intellectual verification establishes their validity (Tusi, 1985, p. 12; Hosseinzadeh, 2011, pp. 85-88). What distinguishes Sheikh Mufid's theory is his tripartite cognitive framework interlinking the intellect, senses, and soul, where the intellect purifies sensory data and guides the soul toward certain knowledge.

The Role of Will in the Process of Perception

One of the contemporary epistemological challenges concerns the issue of will and freedom in the cognitive process. Unlike the Ash'arites who consider perception as a direct result of divine action, Sheikh Mufid regards human will as an inseparable component of the cognitive process. He maintains that through free will, humans can utilize their senses and intellect, with this will directing the course of knowledge (Sheikh Mufid, 1993b, p. 95).

Sheikh Mufid's perspective contrasts with deterministic views like those of the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites, where perception is transmitted to humans as God's act. In his theory, human freedom in choosing cognitive paths and employing cognitive tools (senses and intellect) directly impacts truth perception. He argues that the human will ensures the cognitive process isn't limited to passive sensory reception, but rather enables the perceiver to enhance understanding and correct potential errors through will and rational reflection.

This view is significant for several reasons. First, Sheikh Mufid advocates an active epistemology where humans aren't passive recipients of sensory data but actively shape knowledge through the will, guiding it toward perfection. This positions him against deterministic theories that consider knowledge as divinely imposed without active human participation. Second, his emphasis on the will's cognitive role shows remarkable parallels with modern epistemological theories like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's, who argues that true knowledge only forms through conscious human will (Nasr Hamid, 1998, p. 50).

Thus, while rooted in Islamic tradition, Sheikh Mufid's perspective on the will's cognitive role holds significant potential for engaging with contemporary epistemological discussions, offering an interdisciplinary model for understanding human cognitive processes.

Confronting Epistemological Relativism

In addressing the challenge of epistemological relativism, Sheikh Mufid explicitly emphasizes absolute truth, maintaining that through reason and

revelation, humans can attain a unified truth. He asserts that truth is accessible to humanity and should not be considered dependent on temporal or spatial conditions (Sheikh Mufid, 1993b, p. 102).

This perspective serves as a response to epistemological relativism, which views truth as relative and contingent upon cultural, historical, and individual circumstances. Epistemological relativists argue that truth depends on the particular perceptions and experiences of individuals and societies, and cannot be regarded as singular and fixed. In contrast, by emphasizing reason and revelation as complementary and mutually reinforcing sources, Sheikh Mufid presents a conception of truth that transcends individual and cultural contexts. He particularly stresses that human reason, when properly employed in accordance with revelatory teachings, can apprehend a stable, singular truth unaffected by temporal or spatial changes (Sheikh Mufid, 1993b, p. 103).

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd similarly critiques epistemological relativism while attempting to balance human understanding with revelatory truth. He acknowledges that although revelatory truth remains constant, human comprehension of it inevitably reflects historical and cultural contexts (Abu Zayd, 1995, p. 76). While recognizing the limitations of human knowledge, Abu Zayd implicitly affirms the existence of a fixed truth that can be approached through interpretive processes.

Sheikh Mufid's position differs from other theological schools like the Ash'arites, who prioritize revelation while limiting reason's interpretive role, and the Mu'tazilites, who emphasize reason's importance but sometimes fail to maintain proper balance with revelation. By integrating reason and revelation as complementary sources, Sheikh Mufid develops a more balanced and comprehensive approach to truth that resists relativism while acknowledging the possibility of objective, universal knowledge.

The Role of Reason in the Epistemology of Sensory Perception

An analysis of these perspectives reveals that Sheikh Mufid, in contrast to certain Ash'arite schools that downplay the role of reason in the process of perception, explicitly emphasizes the importance of reason's participation in completing sensory perception. He believes that the senses alone are not capable of providing reliable knowledge; rather, this process requires rational analysis and processing. This view not only aligns with rationalist foundations in Islamic theology but also serves as a constructive model for explaining modern epistemological issues. In epistemology, knowledge acquired through sensory encounter is considered "sensory knowledge" only when it corresponds to

reality and transcends mere “sensory perception” (Shams, 2008, pp. 143–145). Accordingly, Sheikh Mufid distinguishes between “sensory perception” and “sensory knowledge,” emphasizing that the process of perception requires the intervention of reason.

On the other hand, Sheikh Mufid’s emphasis on the mechanical aspect of sensory perception and the role of direct contact in sensory processes can offer a useful model for explaining contemporary theories on the transmission of sensory information. This perspective aligns with the theory of direct realism, which asserts that perception occurs without intermediaries and is based on the causal impact of the external object on the senses (Shams, 2008, pp. 148–151; Hosseinzadeh, 2011, p. 226).

Sheikh Mufid extends this theory in a way that considers direct contact between the knowing subject and the perceived object as essential. This analysis applies to different senses, including the transmission of sound, smell, and taste. He argues that these processes have rational evidence and can provide a foundation for formulating more precise views on the physical role of natural phenomena in sensory perception.

Nevertheless, Sheikh Mufid’s view on sensory perception requires supplementation from the perspective of modern epistemology. One of the criticisms of direct realism is its inability to explain sensory errors and perceptual illusions. For example, when a person initially perceives an object’s color as blue but, upon closer inspection, sees it as purple or indigo, the question arises: If sensory perception directly results from the causal influence of the external object, how can such discrepancies occur? (Shams, 2008, pp. 151–153; Hosseinzadeh, 2011, p. 226). On the other hand, the sense-data theory or representationalism, which holds that perception is mediated by mental representations, could complement Sheikh Mufid’s perspective (Shams, 2008, pp. 151–153; Hosseinzadeh, 2011, p. 226). In this theory, sense-data serve as intermediaries between the perceiver and the external object, thus accounting for perceptual errors.

It appears that Sheikh Mufid’s emphasis on direct contact in sensory perception, while precise in its explanation of sensory mechanisms, requires augmentation from the standpoint of modern cognitive sciences. Considering cognitive science theories regarding neural mechanisms in information transmission could provide a foundation for developing and refining his views. By integrating Sheikh Mufid’s reason-centered approach to sensory knowledge with contemporary findings, the role of reason in perception can be reinforced, offering a structured and robust response to relativistic epistemological approaches.

Conclusion

An examination of Sheikh Mufid's views on sensory perception reveals his rational and critical approach to this subject. Unlike some Ash'arite schools that minimize the role of reason in perception, Sheikh Mufid argues that the senses alone cannot yield certain knowledge; rather, they lead to valid knowledge only through interaction with reason. This perspective highlights his emphasis on rational analysis in refining sensory perceptions and filtering out errors caused by illusions and imaginations.

Sheikh Mufid also underscores the natural mechanisms and causality involved in sensory perception, considering direct contact essential in the process of sensory knowledge. His view aligns with the theory of direct realism in theological epistemology, yet he acknowledges the limitations of this theory, particularly concerning perceptual errors.

The findings of this study demonstrate that Sheikh Mufid, by distinguishing between simple and complex sensory perception, presents a systematic understanding of perception in which reason plays a corrective and complementary role. This approach, in addition to aligning with rational theological principles, can also contribute to theological epistemological analyses. Particularly, linking Sheikh Mufid's theories with philosophical findings on perception and cognition could provide a framework for further developing his views within Islamic epistemology.

Ultimately, Sheikh Mufid's thoughts in this field not only contribute to the refinement of Shiite theological epistemology but also offer a firm and coherent stance against relativistic epistemological approaches. His integration of reason, sense, and revelation presents a comprehensive model for explaining the interaction between different sources of knowledge, demonstrating significant potential for engagement with perspectives in Islamic epistemology.

▣ Conflict of Interests

▣ The authors declare no competing interests.



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