

## **The Relationship between the Continuous Imaginal World and the Discontinuous Imaginative Faculty in Ascending and Descending Arcs according to Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra**

**Saeed Rahimian**<sup>1</sup>

**Erfaneh Mohammad Zadeh**<sup>2</sup>

Received: 2015-10-10; Accepted: 2015-11-15

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One of the most important issues for Muslim philosophers is the continuous imaginal world and its relationship with the discontinuous imaginative faculty. The continuous imaginal world is a perceptive faculty of the soul known as the faculty of imagination. The discontinuous imaginative faculty is the order of the universe called the imaginal world, which Muslim philosophers have portrayed in ascending and descending arcs. Linking the discontinuous imaginative faculty in descending and ascending arcs occurs through the continuous imaginal; however, in order to link to the discontinuous imaginative faculty, which enjoys intermediate immateriality, this faculty should also enjoy intermediate immateriality. Suhrawardi explicitly introduced the discontinuous imaginative faculty, but he was not able to explain the relationship between the discontinuous and continuous imaginal world and the discontinuous imaginative faculty correctly, since he does not believe in the immateriality of the continuous imaginal world. Nonetheless, his intellectual efforts paved the way for Mulla Sadra. Proving the immateriality of discontinuous imagination, Mulla Sadra could truly explain its relationship with the discontinuous imaginative faculty by means of ascending and descending arcs. Thus, through the ideas of Mulla Sadra, the revelations of mystics and prophets are made sense of by descending arcs, and all the promises of divine religions are justified in ascending arcs.

**Keywords:** continuous imaginal world, discontinuous imaginative faculty, intermediate immateriality, descending and ascending arcs.

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1. Associate Professor, Department of Theology, Shiraz University, Iran, email: sd.rahimian@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)
2. PhD Degree in Philosophy of Religion and Modern Issues of Theology, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, I.R.I., email: em1517@yahoo.com

## **Introduction**

The term *imagination* is a common term whose notion has been identified with the qualifications *continuous* and *discontinuous* in philosophy. “Imagination” with the qualification *discontinuous* refers to a perceptive faculty of the soul known as the faculty of imagination; however, using “imagination” with the qualification *continuous* refers to an order of the universe which is called the imaginal world in philosophy. This world is not material, though it possesses some features of the material world, such as shape, position, and dimension. Islamic theosophers have presented the discontinuous imaginative faculty (imaginal world) in ascending and descending arcs. The imaginal world in the descending arc is located between the pure immaterial world and the pure material world and acts as an inductor to transfer the divine grace to the material world. This world is not purely material, nor is it absolutely spiritual and rational; it possesses the features of both material and spiritual worlds, and revelation takes place here. The imaginal world in the ascending arc is the same as the intermediate world where human souls will dwell after their separation from the body, and this is the contour between this world and the hereafter.

Connecting to the discontinuous imaginative faculty (imaginal world) becomes possible through the continuous imaginal world (imaginative faculty). The relationship between the imaginative faculty and the descending arc is such that the imaginative faculty in human beings is the reflector of imaginal forms in the imaginal world. In his imaginal perception, the human being connects to the descending imagination, which is actually the tablet of all truths. Therefore, people who have a degree of spiritual perfection receive revelations and perceive truths that ordinary people cannot. These are the results of connecting the continuous imaginal world or human imaginative faculty to the imaginal world in the descending arc. There is also a relationship between the imaginative faculty and the ascending arc of the imaginal world. After death, the imaginative faculty, which becomes immaterial, journeys to the intermediate world along with its imaginative body and perceives everything. Thus, the imaginative faculty explains revelations in the descending arc and proves the intermediate or imaginal world in the ascending arc.

It is important to note that the discontinuous imagination, as one of the internal perceptive faculties of the soul, should be immaterial to be able to connect with the imaginal world possessing intermediate immateriality. If one believes in the materiality of the imaginative faculty, connecting to the imaginal world will make no sense, because the material imaginative faculty is not compatible with, or relevant to, the imaginal world, which has intermediate immateriality. Scholars who believe that the imaginative faculty is material are in effect denying

the imaginal world. There is a disagreement among proponents of the imaginal world regarding this issue.

Generally, there are three views about the materiality or immateriality of the imaginative faculty and the acceptance or rejection of the imaginal world:

1. Peripatetic philosophers believe in the materiality of the imaginative faculty, and thus reject the imaginal world.
2. Suhrawardi and his followers believe in the materiality of the imaginative faculty and accept the imaginal world at the same time. However, these two beliefs are incompatible and irreconcilable.
3. Mulla Sadra believes in the immateriality of the imaginative faculty and accepts the imaginal world. Mulla Sadra objects to the idea that imagination and other perceptive faculties have a location in the brain, because this idea entails the problem of placing something in a container smaller than itself, which is impossible. He considers the internal faculties of the soul as the dignity and grandeur of the soul and believes that just as the soul itself is abstract and immaterial, its internal faculties are also immaterial. The imaginative faculty is thus also considered to be immaterial, though its immateriality is not rational but intermediate. In his *al-Asfār*, Mulla Sadra has attempted to prove the intermediate immateriality of the imaginative faculty and has responded to the objections of his opponents and predecessors in a very convincing manner.

In this article, while discussing about discontinuous and continuous imaginations and their components (ascending and descending imaginal worlds), the relationship between the first world and the two parts of the second world will be examined.

### **The Discontinuous Imaginative Faculty according to Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra**

To better understand the imaginative faculty and its functions, let us first introduce the faculties of the soul. According to Suhrawardi, humans have external and internal senses, but all internal faculties, except the estimative one (*al-quwwa al-wāhima*), are specific to human beings; they include:

1. Common sense: this faculty acts as a pond into which the streams of the five senses flow.
2. Imagination: a faculty at the bottom of the first cavity of the brain, which is the treasury of the common sense.

3. Estimation: this faculty gives directions to animals with respect to things such as escaping from their predators.
4. Fantasizing: it is located in the middle cavity in the midst of the brain. It governs combinations and divisions. It is this faculty which infers things and creates imaginal concepts and ideas.
5. Memory: the store of estimative propositions.

Suhrawardi does not accept the faculty of memory in his *Wisdom of Illumination*, and explains remembrance in terms of human connection to the lights of celestial Lordly lights. According to Suhrawardi, all faculties of the soul are the products of credits of such Lordly lights. He believes that perception is a Lordly light and the imaginative faculty is simply a manifestation of, and a medium for seeing, the imaginal form. Since he believes in the materiality of the imaginative faculty, and since the impression of the imaginal form in the faculty of material imagination means placing something in a container smaller than itself, he considers the imaginative faculty as a means of connecting the rational soul to the spirits of the discontinuous imaginative faculty world and not as a prehensile of the imaginal forms. He believes that the soul, as a preceptor of physical forms and spirits, observes these forms in the world of discontinuous imaginative faculty; however, it has been argued against him that if the imaginative faculty was material, it would be incompatible with immaterial imagination forms which become its symbols (Mulla Sadra 2003, 365).

According to Suhrawardi, the soul meets imaginative forms in the discontinuous imaginative faculty world. On the other hand, Mulla Sadra takes all forms of imagination to be located inside the soul, because the forms which the soul itself invents cannot be located in the imaginal world (Mulla Sadra 2002, 237; Ashtiani 2001, 336).

Following the viewpoint of peripatetic philosophers, Suhrawardi believes in the materiality of the imaginative faculty. He explains the imaginal world with the discontinuous imaginal world and does not illustrate the human continuous imaginal world. He even imposes some laws of the continuous imaginal world on the continuous imagination, which has led to confusion between the two. This is one of the shortcomings in the system of Suhrawardi. The fact is that imagination has two origins: one is that of the discontinuous imaginative faculty world, and the other one, which is in us, is called continuous imagination (Yazdanpanah 2010, 210).

Mulla Sadra has said that one of the shortcomings of Suhrawardi's theory is the ignorance of the continuous imaginal world and the confusions of issues related to it from those relevant to the continuous imagination. According to Mulla Sadra, issues such as false dreams,

exorbitant fantasies, and obscene forms, which may be incompatible with a person's actions, are untrue and cannot have a reality in the discontinuous imaginative faculty world, and so they must be placed in the microcosm. In other words, these forms are created by the soul and dependent on it, and as soon as the soul forsakes them, they cease to exist. Thus, it can be said that the imaginative forms are not in the world of imagination, as Suhrawardi believes, but they exist in the world of the soul and form a stage of the soul's gradation (Mulla Sadra 1981, 1:304).

According to Mulla Sadra, there are five faculties: nutritive, growing, reproductive, locomotive, and perceptive. The perceptive faculty, whose task is to perceive the truth of things, is divided into two kinds:

- a) External senses, which perceive external tangible forms
- b) Internal senses, which perceive the forms of senses and their particular meanings

Some of these internal senses are exclusively receptive, such as fancy and common sense. Others are responsible for maintaining forms and their meanings, such as memory. The imaginative faculty deals with explication and compounding of detailed forms and their meanings. Through this faculty, the soul is also able to create and invent many things (Mulla Sadra 1989, 8:56).

Internal faculties such as the imaginative faculty are characteristically instruments of the soul; that is, they are the instruments by which the soul creates some forms in the microcosm. With this portrayal of the relation of the faculties to the soul, the problem of the relationship between the great forms and the imaginative faculty is solved (Mulla Sadra 1981, 1:299).

### **The Continuous Imagination Faculty or the Imaginal World according to Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra**

Unlike materialists, Islamic philosophers and mystics believe in worlds beyond the material world. To mention a few, al-Farabi, Avicenna, Mirdamad, and Lahiji believe that the realm beyond the material is limited to purely immaterial beings. On the other hand, scholars like Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra believe that there is an intermediate world beside the pure immaterial world, which serves as the connection between the world of nature and the pure immaterial world. The beings of this world are not material as they were in the world of brain, but, because of possessing specific shape and size, they are similar to the beings of the natural world (Mesbah Yazdi 1375, 475-90).

Peripatetic philosophers completely deny such a world within the order of the universe and consider the universe to be twofold: the pure immaterial world, which is considered to be the world of intellects, and the material world, which is called the natural world. They rule out the possibility of an intermediate reality which stands between these two existential ranks. According to them, everything possessing size is a material entity.

Contrary to the peripatetic philosophers and mystics, there are philosophers who have defended the existence of such a world. Suhrawardi is apparently the first to speak explicitly of this world. He postulates a world beyond the sensible world and under the rational world, which he calls the imaginal world or the eighth district. Suhrawardi believes in four realms for the universe:

1. The World of Dominant Lights: This includes all the immaterial intellects which do not depend on anything. These rays are of divine dignity and God's Archangels.
2. The World of Regent Lights: These Lights are responsible for devising the cosmos and the human world.
3. The Intermediate World: This includes the stars and simple and compound types of material objects.
4. The World of Dark and Luminous Pendent Forms: This is the world of the discontinuous imaginative faculty. He places the imaginal world as an independent rank of the universe, between the two worlds of immaterial intellects and nature. Since the beings of this world are from the imagination of material beings, he calls them spirits or imaginations, and because of their immateriality and dependence, he has called them immaterial or pendent.

The discontinuous imaginative faculty has also been mentioned in Islamic mysticism. Mystics believe in a world between the world of intellect and the world of matter, called the imaginal world. This world is not purely material, but includes material properties such as shape, size, and position. Since this world is between the pure rational and pure sensible worlds, the beings of both worlds are represented in it. According to mystics, the sum of all worlds is five presences, which manifest the divine nature. Sadr al-Din Qūnawī states:

Worlds are five, and the order is [the following]: the pure absence, the spirits' world, the perfect human, the imaginal world, and the world of matter and human, which is located at the center of the universe, encompassing all the worlds. (Qūnawī 2002, 10)

In this classification, the imaginal world is observable and available as an order between the pure immaterial world and the world of nature. Mystics, especially Muḥyi l-Dīn al-‘Arabī, after accepting the imaginal world, have mentioned some of its features and discussed it in wider dimensions, but they have declined using arguments and reasoning in these discussions.

Mulla Sadra, among other philosophers, has presented a philosophical and systematic explanation of this world. He believes in a vertical hierarchy of three worlds: the sensible world, the imaginal world, and the pure world of intellects. In accordance with these three worlds, there are three perceptive stages in human beings:

1. Sensory perception: there is a percipient form in the matter, and the percipient perceives the form by its specific sensible features.
2. Imaginal perception: the perception of the object is with the same characteristics and qualities of perception, but the object is not present to the external senses.
3. Rational perception: the perception of an object according to its nature, regardless of its material features

These three ranks of perception, according to Mulla Sadra, are compatible with each other and connected to the ranks of external existence; thus, the worlds of existence have three ranks corresponding to human senses (Mulla Sadra 1989, 1:333; 1991, 3:394):

1. The sensible world is accidental, objective, and perishable. In this world, both the object and its prerequisites exist.
2. The extrasensory mid-world, called the imaginal world, is the world of quantitative forms, identical to senses but devoid of substance and physical limitations.
3. The world of intellects, God’s angels, where there is no trace of the object or its physical features.

Mulla Sadra, in explaining the worlds of existence, believes that a mid-world is required for creating a relationship between the pure immaterial world and the pure material world. This mid-world is the imaginal world, which is similar to the material world in that it possesses shape and size, but is nonetheless immaterial.

Based on what has been mentioned so far, it can be concluded that the imaginal world is the intermediate between the worlds of sense and intellect and forms the mid-world. As humans perceive imaginal forms, they actually connect to the discontinuous imaginative faculty world through the continuous imaginal world of form.

### **Types of Continuous Imagination**

According to Islamic philosophers, the universe is composed of two arcs: the ascending arc and the descending arc. The grace of existence first reaches the world of intellect, then the imaginal world, and finally the world of nature. The rational beings of the world of intellect are the mediums through which grace is transferred to the beings of the imaginal world; and the beings of the imaginal world are the mediums through which grace is transferred to the beings of the world of nature. The imaginal world, which is the means by which God's grace descends from the world of intellect to the world of nature, is called intermediate or descending imagination. As God's grace reaches the natural world, since the matter has the capacity of achieving perfection, the grace will start rising again and return to its origin through the same stages from which it descended. Thus, the reality of existence inevitably has the rank of imagination in its ascending path. The imagination which intercedes in the ascent and perfection of the world of nature towards the world of intellect is called the intermediate or ascending imagination. In other words, humans evolve and move upwards in the material world by the substantial motion and in the ascending arc: they first enter the imaginal world, and then by advancing in their perfection, they enter the rational and immaterial world.

It should be noted that since Suhrawardi rejects the immateriality of the imaginative faculty, he cannot prove the ascending arc of the imaginal world, because its proof is based on the acceptance of this immateriality.

In the descending arc, rational beings in the world of intellect are the first to receive divine grace, then the beings of the imaginal world, and then the beings of the world of nature; and all these worlds are the effects of the nature of reality and the subject of divine grace. The imaginal world which is the medium of the descent of God's grace from the world of intellect to the world of nature is called the descending intermediate world. After that, the sequence of existence in the ascending arc returns conversely to the source and the target point, since the matter is the potentiality of existence and capable of indefinite perfections, with the assistance of divine grace, it goes toward perfection. (Mulla Sadra 1998, 1:45).

Mulla Sadra believes that the intermediate or descending imagination is different from the ascending imagination. The intermediate or imagination of existential descendants is the intermediate world before this world, which is interpreted as the descending imagination, but the intermediate world or imagination after this world is the ascending intermediate (Mulla Sadra 2002, 227). He states:



It must be understood that our coming from that world to this one is not similar to our returning from this world to that one. That is, all people are equal in their descending path from the original world to this one and no one has superiority; but, in the ascending path, at each moment we move from an inferior world to a superior one by our knowledge and actions. Thus the difference between ascending and descending arcs is that of potentiality and actuality or that of the succinct and the delineated. Therefore, human beings are potential in the descending path and are actual in the ascending path, or they are like succinct words in their descending path, capable of various meanings, but their meanings can only be clear once they are delineated. Therefore, human beings are at first (in the descending path) united and are eventually (in the ascending path) different with respect to their states, attributes and actions. (Mulla Sadra 1987, 321)

The descending intermediate world is called the unseen possibility—because its creatures can appear in the natural world—but the creatures of the ascending intermediate imagination cannot return to the world of nature, so it is interpreted as the unseen impossible (Mulla Sadra 1989, 9:46).

### **The Relationship between the Continuous Imaginal World and the Discontinuous Imaginative Faculty in the Descending Arc**

The imaginative faculty can lead the soul to one of the two directions: it can make the rational soul a puppet of the material world, indulging in sensual forms and physical imagination, or it can lead him to the unseen world (the descending imaginal world) and transmit him to perfection (Suhrawardi 1994, 2: 231). According to Suhrawardi, perceiving the descending imaginal world and its forms is made possible through the imaginative faculty. Man can connect to the descending imaginal world while awake or asleep through this faculty and can be exposed to its truths by means of revelations and true dreams (Suhrawardi 1994, 2:240). According to Suhrawardi, if external senses recessed, this faculty would be the manifestation (representative) of forms that are in the world of imagination, like a mirror which represents the forms of the imaginal world which, according to him, possesses intermediate immateriality (Suhrawardi 1995, 2:211-12).

To criticize this theory, it can be said that given that there should be homogeneity between the perceiver and the perceived, this faculty must have intermediate immateriality to be able to observe the forms which have intermediate immateriality, because the material imaginative faculty cannot endure receiving immaterial forms.

With regard to the relation between the imaginative faculty and the descending arc, Suhrawardi believes that the descending imagination is the place of motifs and forms of the universe and that its events and circumstances have images in this world. It is through these images and the connection between the imaginative faculty and the descending

imaginal world that revelations occur and knowledge about the future becomes possible (Mulla Sadra 1989, 9:46).

The immaterial imagination is, therefore, the place of the particular forms perceived from the unseen world (the descending imaginal world), and its connection to the descending arc plays an essential role in mystical intuitions, revelations, and inspirations.

### **The Relationship between the Continuous Imaginal World and the Discontinuous Imaginative Faculty in the Ascending Arc**

Illuminationist Theosophers, including Suhrawardi, accept the imaginal world in the descending arc, but since they deny the intermediate immateriality of the continuous imagination, they do not accept the ascending arc of the imaginal world. They believe that the particular faculties of the soul are part of the faculty of material imagination and do not exist after the decay of the body. If nothing remains for the connection to the ascending arc after death, the connection between the discontinuous and continuous imaginal worlds in the ascending arc cannot be explained. The acceptance of the discontinuous imaginative faculty in the ascending arc becomes problematic and thus the question of resurrection remains unanswered.

Suhrawardi, in *Hikmat al-ishrāq (Wisdom of Illumination)*, views the soul as the administrator of the body and states that the soul uses the body in order to attain perfection; and after achieving the complete perfection in resurrection, it gets rid of the physical body completely and joins the world of pure light and the rows of archangels in the outstanding imaginal world (Suhrawardi 1998, 223).

From this, it can be understood that Suhrawardi believes in spiritual and physical resurrection but does not take physical resurrection to be true for all souls. According to him, perfect individuals in knowledge and practice have only a spiritual resurrection and not a physical one, because the perfect souls are devoid of all material possessions and physical dependencies. The souls with less perfection are deprived of joining the world of lights and are transferred to the imaginal world. Suhrawardi does not directly admit the physical resurrection but interprets and justifies the physical resurrection, which exists in the tradition, by the descending imaginal world (Suhrawardi 1998, 354; Heravi 1979, 194).

Suhrawardi understands the physical resurrection in terms of the dependency of the soul on the imaginal forms, and elaborates the resurrection of bodies in terms of imaginal bodies (Ashtiani 2001, 88), while Mulla Sadra believes that the dependency of the soul on the imaginal and intermediate bodies and physical resurrection makes no sense without there being an appropriate way of dependency, which is the immateriality of the imaginative faculty, and it prevents the physical

resurrection of the continuous imagination that is annihilated after death, for Peripatetic and Illuminationist philosophers unanimously hold that the rational soul, in the first stage of its incipience, is immaterial and survives after the body's death and the particular faculties of soul are mortal after death. Therefore, after the annihilation of the particular faculties, the imaginative faculty and the habits and attitudes and intentions dependent on these faculties, among other faculties, will not survive and so they would not be able to cause pains and pleasures after death (Mulla Sadra 2002, 86).

Suhrawardi interprets all the promises of the prophets regarding physical pleasures in the heaven and sufferings in the hell and the resurrection of bodies in terms of pendent forms (Mulla Sadra 1996, 181). However, after separation from the body, the soul will be resurrected by the forms of its actions, which are located in organs and faculties of the rational soul, and not its imaginal form (Mulla Sadra 2002, 144). Therefore, the realization of the above promises and the resurrection of souls in the descending arc (the immaterial world of souls) is not possible. It is impossible that the criterion for the questioning in the graves and the resurrection—the imaginal body—be in the descending arc, because punishments and rewards come from actions and intentions (Shaygan 1992, 247-49). It is said that the imaginative faculty is a substantial faculty which does not reincarnate in the body and its parts, does not consolidate into it, and is not located in the direction of the material world, but is immaterial (Mulla Sadra 1981, 9:191).

Mulla Sadra states that the human imaginative faculty is immaterial which means that the particular aspects of the soul are not material, and that the soul is self-substantial, rather than being immanent in the matter; otherwise, it would not exist independently of the matter and potentialities, and would thus be perishable.

His theory of the immateriality of imagination clarifies all states of the human soul after death mentioned in the Qur'an. According to Mulla Sadra, questions in the grave, rewards and punishments, and the issues related to hell, physical resurrection, and particular perceptions after death are all issues which can be explained in terms of the imaginative faculty and the proof of its immateriality (Mulla Sadra 1989, 8:214).

According to Mulla Sadra, human imaginative faculty is quintessential and does not have a connection with the material body. It uses the body as a means to attain perfection and leaves it as soon as this has been achieved. It then enters the first origin of the worlds of the hereafter. Since the imaginative faculty survives after death and does not decay along with the body, it travels to the intermediate world along with the imaginal body; and as it imagines in this world, it also

perceives everything after death (Mulla Sadra n.d., 299; 1962, 36). Thus, it imagines its essence while separate from the world and finds itself with the same body and face which were buried; and so, it perceives the sufferings and pains of the body (Mulla Sadra 1962, 102-104).

To conclude, the reality of everything obtained in this world is manifested through the imaginative faculty. Since human beings are not equal in their level of imagination, their intermediate worlds are not equal either; some are in the intermediate heaven and some are in the intermediate hell. This bliss or torment is from a special ability of the imaginative faculty to invent and create imaginal forms. When the physical nature of a human being is strong, his imaginative faculty is weak in composing imaginal forms and creating the trance of the other world; however, when the physical nature is destroyed, the soul's faculty can create more powerful imaginal forms. With the help of this faculty, the soul can create the pleasures and pains of the hereafter without the elemental material. That is, blissful people, due to their morality and deeds, can cause all kinds of otherworldly pleasures. This is an ability which the people of dignity and God's saints have in this world, and others will only attain in the hereafter. When an individual exists in this world and is bound to the senses, the imaginative faculty cannot create anything, because of sensorial engagement and impacts of the organs and parts of the body. After death, when the physical senses are shut down, the imaginative faculty becomes powerful and creates powerful forms which allow him to feel greater pleasures and pains than those of the material world. Thus it can be said that in the Hereafter, people are tormented and blessed by their imagination; other than that, there is no reward or punishment (Mulla Sadra 1962, 151; 1985, 99).

## **Conclusion**

1. The continuous imaginal world is the same as the perceptive faculty of the soul, which is called the imaginative faculty. The discontinuous imaginative faculty is a level of the universe which is between the material world and the pure immaterial world and is the connection of these two worlds. It is called the imaginal world in philosophy.
2. Some mystics and Islamic theosophers have discussed the discontinuous imaginative faculty or the imaginal world in the descending and ascending arcs. The imaginal world in the descending arc is different from the imaginal world in the ascending arc.
3. The descending arc of the imaginal world is the abode of revelation, true dreams, and unseen inspirations. It is through the descending arc that knowledge of the unseen and knowledge of

the future may be accessed. The ascending arc is the land of the after-death souls.

4. Connecting to the discontinuous imaginative faculty world in the descending and ascending arcs is possible through the continuous imaginal world or the imaginative faculty only if this faculty possesses intermediate immateriality. This is due to the fact that the discontinuous imaginative faculty possesses intermediate imagination.
5. Since Suhrawardi has not accepted the immateriality of the imaginative faculty, he cannot explain the connection between the continuous imaginal world and the discontinuous imaginative faculty correctly. Mulla Sadra, on the other hand, has proven the immateriality of the imaginative faculty and has managed to explain the connection between the discontinuous and continuous imaginations in the descending and ascending arcs.

Establishing the immateriality of the imaginative faculty and its relation to the discontinuous imaginative faculty in the descending arc has allowed us to make sense of the revelations and inspirations of mystics and saints. Furthermore, understanding the immateriality of the imaginative faculty and its relation with the ascending arc can explain the promises of the prophets, because issues such as the intermediate world, the futility of bodies, and physical resurrection can then be understood.

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