

CHAPTER 35

Mullā Ṣadrā: his life and works

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Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī is one of the most revered of all philosophers in Islam, especially among Muslim intellectuals today. His full name is Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qawāmī al-Shīrāzī, and he is commonly known as “Mullā Ṣadrā” to multitudes of Muslims, especially in Persia, Pakistan and India.¹ His honorific title, Ṣadr al-Dīn (“Pundit of Religion”), indicates his accepted rank within traditional theological circles, while his designation as “Exemplar, or Authority of Divine Philosophers” (Ṣadr al-Muta’allihīn) signifies his unique position for generations of philosophers who came after him. He was born in Shiraz in southern Persia in *c.* 979/1572 to a wealthy family. His father was reportedly a minister in the Ṣafavid court, but was also a scholar. Ṣadr al-Dīn is said to have made the pilgrimage to Mecca six times, and on his seventh journey died in 1050/1640 in Basra where he is buried and where his grave was known until recent times.² Fairly extensive and accurate information on his life, his studies, his students and his works are available. Owing in part to the relative proximity of his time to ours, several autographs of his works, many letters and glosses on earlier textual traditions have survived, giving us a better insight into his personality than most of the philosophers of earlier periods. Most historians and commentators of his works divide his life into three distinct periods.³

STUDY

Upon completing preliminary studies in his native Shiraz, the young thinker travelled to Isfahan, the seat of Ṣafavid rule and perhaps the most important centre of Islamic learning in the tenth/sixteenth century. There

he first enrolled in courses on traditional Islamic scholarship, commonly called the “transmitted sciences” (*al-‘ulūm al-naqliyyah*), in which the great jurist Bahā’ al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Āmilī (d. 1031/1622) was laying the foundations of a new, well-defined Shi‘ite jurisprudence. Ṣadr al-Dīn’s comprehensive early studies of Shi‘ite views concerning jurisprudence and *Ḥadīth* scholarship and his exposure to Qur’ānic commentary by the great Shi‘ite thinker distinguish him from almost all the earlier philosophers of medieval Islam, whose knowledge of such subjects was elementary at best. This side of Ṣadr al-Dīn’s intellectual formation deeply marked his thinking and represents one of the two main trends in his works.

During the same period, Ṣadr al-Dīn began his studies of what are commonly known as the intellectual sciences (*al-‘ulūm al-‘aqliyyah*) under the tutelage of one of the greatest and most original Islamic philosophers, Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir Astarābādī, well known as Mīr Dāmād (d. 1040/1631). This famous, erudite philosopher, known as the “Seal of Philosophers” (*Khātam al-Ḥukamā*) and the “Third Teacher” – after Aristotle and al-Fārābī – was overwhelmed by his pupil’s unusual competence in constructing philosophical arguments and bestowed lavish praise on him. Had it not been for Ṣadr al-Dīn’s eclipsing prominence, Mīr Dāmād might have been remembered more than he currently is for his collection and revisions of the complete textual corpus of Islamic philosophy. In many ways Mīr Dāmād’s endeavours, funded by the enlightened endowments of the arts and sciences by the Ṣafavid court (into which he had married), led to the establishment of superior libraries where the older manuscript traditions were collected, copied and published. Evidence for this profuse activity are the impressive numbers of Arabic and Persian manuscripts now housed in major collections all over the world, all produced in Isfahan during this period. In his court-supported patronage as well as in his own works on philosophical subjects, especially his *Qabasāt*⁴ and his unpublished *al-Ufuq al-mubīn*, Mīr Dāmād’s work was the impetus for the revival of philosophy known as the “School of Isfahan”.⁵ Ṣadr al-Dīn’s lengthy studies with this visionary thinker mark the philosophical aspect, or second trend, in Ṣadr al-Dīn’s works. It represents the height of yet another “new” synthesis and reconstruction of metaphysics in Islamic philosophy after Suhrawardī. This philosophical trend soon became one of the main schools of Islamic philosophy, if not the dominant one to this day, and bears the name of metaphysical philosophy (*al-ḥikmat al-muta‘āliyah*). This name was chosen specifically by Ṣadr al-Dīn to indicate his specific philosophical intention, which needs to be adequately examined.

COMPLETE RETREAT FROM SOCIETY

After a formal period of study, Ṣadr al-Dīn withdrew from society and from city life altogether, choosing the seclusion of the small village of Kahak, near the holy city of Qom. This period marks Ṣadr al-Dīn's increased preoccupation with the contemplative life and also the years in which he laid the ground work for most of his major works. This period is marked by long periods of meditation and spiritual practice complementing that of formal study, thus completing the programme for the training of a real philosopher according to Suhrawardī. It was during this period that the knowledge which was to become crystallized in his many works was attained.

TEACHING AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEMPLATION

Ṣadr al-Dīn's fame as master of the two branches of Shi'ite learning – the transmitted and the intellectual – soon spread across the Ṣafavid capital. Many official positions were offered to him, which he shunned, as his biographers all agree. His disregard for material rewards and refusal to serve the nobility in any form is evidenced by the fact that not one of his works bears a dedication to a prince or other patron, although such inscriptions were common practice of the day. Historians also state that Ṣadr al-Dīn's new fame met with typical jealousy on the part of members of the scholarly community, whose unfounded charges of blasphemy were a factor in his rejecting the limelight of Ṣafavid circles in Isfahan. He did, however, agree to return to public life and teach in the *madrasah* which was built and endowed by the Ṣafavid nobleman Allāhwirdī Khān in Shiraz. The new institution of learning, away from the political ambiance of the capital, suited Ṣadr al-Dīn's increasing preoccupation with both teaching and meditation.

The language used to describe Ṣadr al-Dīn's contemplative life strongly indicates his Illuminist attitude to philosophy in general and the Illuminist position of the primacy of the intuitive, experiential mode of cognition in particular.⁶ Suhrawardī had demonstrated the validity of vision-illumination (*mushāhadah wa ishrāq*) as the means for recovery of eternal truths to be used in philosophical construction. The Illuminist tradition had repeatedly employed the allegory of the inner yet objectified journey into the *mundus imaginalis* ('*ālam al-khayāl*') as the highest method for obtaining sound principles of philosophy. Suhrawardī had called for a prescribed sequence of specific actions as a necessary first step toward achieving this vision, which was believed to lead to the atemporal, immediate cognition of the whole of reality. Ṣadr

al-Dīn evidently took these dicta quite seriously. All of his biographers mention his ascetic practices (*riyāḍat*) and his visionary experiences (*mushāhadah*, *mukāshafah*).⁷ Many of Ṣadr al-Dīn's philosophical compositions inform the reader that the essence of a specific philosophical argument was first revealed to him in a visionary experience, which he then analyses within the discursive system.⁸

It is also during this period of his life that Ṣadr al-Dīn trained a number of students who went on to become significant in subsequent philosophical activity in Persia. His two most important pupils produced works that have been widely studied to this day. The first of these noteworthy students, Muḥammad ibn al-Murtaḍā – well known as Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī – wrote a treatise titled *al-Kalamāt al-maknūnah*, which emphasizes the two sides of the master's thinking: the gnostic (*irfān*) and the Shi'ite interpretation of the Qur'ānic realm of the "unseen" (*al-ghayb*) as the source of inspiration. Second is 'Abd al-Razzāq ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Lāhijī, whose Persian summaries of the master's more Peripatetic inclinations have been especially popular in Persia. His *Shawāriq al-ilhām* deserves special mention here for its inclusion of an older Ibn Sīnan view of ethics. Both of these young scholars were also married to two of Ṣadr al-Dīn's daughters, revealing an increasingly intimate relationship between master and teacher in Shi'ite learned circles, which is prevalent to this day. Several other students are mentioned in biographical sources, including two of the master's sons.

Monumental though the impact of Ṣadr al-Dīn's works and thinking has been on Islamic intellectual history, very few comprehensive, systematic studies of his philosophy are available in Western translation. The earliest extensive study was done by Max Horten, whose *Das philosophische System von Schirazi* (1913) is still a good source, despite the author's use of premodern philosophical terminology and older Orientalist views.

In more recent decades Henry Corbin's text editions and pioneering studies opened a new chapter in Western scholarship on Islamic philosophy, producing an awareness of the existence of original trends in the post-Ibn Sīnan period, if not a complete analytical understanding of their philosophical significance. Corbin's emphasis on the presumed esoteric dimension of Ṣadr al-Dīn's thought has tended to hinder a modern, Western philosophical analysis of "metaphysical philosophy", however.⁹ Following Corbin, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's study of Ṣadr al-Dīn's thought¹⁰ and James Morris's study and translation of a less significant philosophical work by Ṣadr al-Dīn, called *'Arshiyyah* (translated by Morris as *Wisdom of the Throne*),¹¹ also emphasize the non-systematic aspect of this philosophy. Their choice of terms such as "transcendent theosophy" does not indicate the philosophical side of the original genius of Ṣadr al-Dīn's thinking. To date the only in-depth study of Ṣadr al-Dīn's "metaphysical philosophy" is Fazlur Rahman's *The Philosophy of*

Mullā Ṣadrā. Rahman's use of contemporary philosophical terminology and approach to the Islamic philosophical system of thought represents a meaningful introduction in English that is comparable in scope and analysis to many of the European works of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

How original a thinker is Ṣadr al-Dīn? And how logically consistent and philosophically sound is his new synthesis and reformulation of what he believed to be the whole of philosophy, to which he gave the name metaphysical philosophy? These are questions that can be answered only once further studies have been undertaken by philosophers interested in these questions, and who with a trained eye can look deeper than the presumed "theosophical" aspect of Ṣadr al-Dīn's thought. This is not an easy task, for to date only a few of his works have been properly edited; fewer still (if any) have been meaningfully translated from a technical philosophical perspective.

The only scholar known to me who has analysed and written on various aspects of Islamic philosophy from a modern philosophical perspective using contemporary language and analytic approach is the distinguished Islamic philosopher Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi. While most of his works are in Persian, thus not widely accessible, his most recent study in English, titled *Knowledge by Presence*, represents a serious attempt to open a dialogue with the contemporary Western philosopher.¹² In this work, students of modern philosophy can follow the centuries-old philosophical arguments concerning the epistemological priority of the special intuitive and experiential mode of cognition, which was fully re-examined and verified by Ṣadr al-Dīn. Students may still prefer the purely predicative, propositional mode, accepting the logicist position, but they will no longer be confused by the plethora of polemical works that have generally dismissed the Illuminationist epistemological concept of "seeing" (*mushāhadah*) – the mode of knowledge by presence – simply as "mystic experience" (generally called Sufi experience). Some readers of Islamic epistemological arguments may find a remarkable resemblance to Western ideas, such as Brouwer's "primary intuition" in his Intuitionist foundation of mathematics, for example. Some may also find parallels with contemporary thinking on the problem of intuition that regards it as the result of the knowing subject's grasp of an object when the subject-object dichotomy does not apply – in other words, when they are one. Quite simply, this is what is meant by "the unity of the knower, the known, and the mind" (*al-ittiḥād al-ʿāqil wa'l-mā'qūl wa'l-'aql*), introduced by Suhrawardī and further analysed by Ṣadr al-Dīn.¹³ Much scholarship remains to be done, the first step being the editing and philosophical translation of Arabic and Persian texts. Generations of philosophers in Islam, most of whom did not consider themselves to be Sufis, have studied Illuminationist texts as well as texts in the tradition of Ṣadr al-Dīn's

“metaphysical philosophy” and have found them to represent well-thought-out, rational systems while confirming the centrality of Illumination.

MAJOR WORKS

More than fifty works are attributed to Ṣadr al-Dīn.¹⁴ They may be divided into two main trends of his thought: the transmitted sciences and the intellectual sciences. Ṣadr al-Dīn’s works on subjects that predominantly relate to the transmitted sciences, covering the traditional subjects of Islamic jurisprudence, Qur’ānic commentary, *Ḥadīth* scholarship and theology, are best exemplified by: (1) *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-kāfi*, a commentary on Kulaynī’s famous work, the first Shi’ite *Ḥadīth* compilation on specifically juridical and theological issues; (2) *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, an incomplete Qur’ānic commentary (*tafsīr*); (3) a number of short treatises each devoted to commentary on a specific chapter of the Qur’ān; (4) a short treatise called *Imāmat* on Shi’ite theology; and (5) a number of glosses on standard *kalām* texts, such as Qūshchī’s *Sharḥ al-tajrīd*.¹⁵

Ṣadr al-Dīn’s more significant works, widely accepted by Muslims to represent the pinnacle of Islamic philosophy, are those that indicate the intellectual sciences. His major works in this group include: (1) *al-Asfār al-arba’at al-aqliyyah* (“Four Intellectual Journeys”),¹⁶ Ṣadr al-Dīn’s definitive philosophical corpus, which includes detailed discussions on all philosophical subjects; (2) *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyyah* (“Divine Testimonies”),¹⁷ generally accepted to be an epitome of the *Asfār*; and (3) glosses on Ibn Sīnā’s *Shifā’* and on Suhrawardī’s *Hikmat al-ishrāq*.¹⁸ Both of these glosses, available only in facsimile editions, are indicative of Ṣadr al-Dīn’s mastery of elaborating, refuting or refining philosophical arguments. Unlike many previous commentaries and glosses, he is not content simply to elucidate a difficult point, but is concerned with demonstrating or refuting the consistency and philosophical validity of the original arguments. Mullā Ṣadrā also wrote a number of shorter treatises some of which, such as *al-Hikmat al-arshiyyah* (“Wisdom from the Divine Throne”), *al-Mabda’ wa’l-ma’ād* (“The Beginning and End”) and *Kitāb al-mashā’ir* (“The Book of Metaphysical Sciences”) have become very well known and taught in philosophical circles in Persia. In India Mullā Ṣadrā’s *Sharḥ al-hidāyah* (“Commentary upon the Book of Guidance of Athīr al-Dīn Abharī”) became the most famous of his works and is taught in traditional *madrasahs* to this day.

To conclude one can say that in more ways than one Ṣadr al-Dīn’s “metaphysical philosophy” represents a new trend in Islamic philosophy. Ṣadr al-Dīn makes every effort to examine fully every known philosophical

position and argument concerning principle and method. He then selects what he considers to be the best argument, often reformulates it and finally goes about constructing a consistent system. His systematic philosophy is neither Peripatetic nor Illuminist but a novel reconstruction of both, serving as testimony to the continuity of philosophical thought in Islam. That Ṣadr al-Dīn's system differs from today's emphasis on a specific aspect of "rationality" does not mean that its founder conceived it to be "irrational" nor predominantly given to "mystical experience". The system does, however, emphasize a world view in which intuitive vision is integral to knowledge.

❧ NOTES ❧

- 1 Numerous studies on Mullā Ṣadrā have been published in the past few decades, mainly in Persian, but a few also in English. Among the Persian studies Jalāl al-Dīn Āshīyānī's *Sharḥ-i ḥāl wa āra'-i falsafī-yi Mullā Ṣadrā* (reprint: Tehran, 1981) stands out for its depth of analysis. Fazlur Rahman's *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany, 1975) is the only English-language analytical study of Mullā Ṣadrā's systematic philosophy.
- 2 An account of his life is given in S. H. Amin, *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra Shirazi* (London, 1987): 1–35. See also the introduction of S. H. Nasr to his edition of Mullā Ṣadrā's *Siḥ aṣl*: 5–14. A first-hand report on Mullā Ṣadrā's grave site in Basra is given by Sayyid Abu'l-Ḥasan Qazwīnī in "Sharḥ-i ḥāl-i Ṣadr al-Muta'allihīn wa sukhānī dar ḥarakat-i jawḥariyyah", in *Siḥ maqālāh wa du nāmāh* (Tehran, n.d.): 1–4.
- 3 See, for example, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, "Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Shīrāzī", in *Siḥ maqālāh wa du nāmāh*: 15–26.
- 4 See Mīr Dāmād, *al-Qabasāt*, ed. M. Mohaghegh and T. Izutsu (Tehran, 1977), which includes an extensive account of Mīr Dāmād's life and works.
- 5 For a general account of the School of Iṣfahān see S. H. Nasr, "The School of Ispahan", in M. M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, (Wiesbaden, 1966): 904–32.
- 6 See Fazlur Rahman, *op. cit.*: 3–7.
- 7 See, for example, Āshīyānī, *op. cit.*: 6–7.
- 8 See, for example, Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Asfār al-arba'ah* (Tehran, 1960): 1–6; 8. Āshīyānī considers the intuitive foundations of Mullā Ṣadrā's system of *al-Ḥikmat al-muta'āliyah* to be, in part, due to Suhrawardī's Illuminist position in epistemology. See Āshīyānī, *op. cit.*: 102–16.
- 9 For example Corbin in his translation of Mullā Ṣadrā's work *Kitāb al-mashā'ir* – which is of lesser philosophical value than other works such as *al-Asfār al-arba'ah* (*op. cit.*) and *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyyah* (ed. Jalāl Āshīyānī, Mashhad, 1967) – translated *Le Livre des pénétrations métaphysiques* (Tehran, 1964), and chose a theosophical terminology to emphasize an esoteric dimension of Mullā Ṣadrā's thought. This type of interpretive translation does not serve to inform the Western reader interested in analytical philosophy as it avoids the logical side of Mullā Ṣadrā's system of metaphysics. Even the title, *al-Ḥikmat al-*

- muta'āliyah*, chosen by Mullā Ṣadrā to specify his predominantly reconstructed system of metaphysics, when translated “transcendental theosophy”, will at best lead to a misunderstanding for those interested in the analytical aspect of Mullā Ṣadrā's thought.
- 10 S. H. Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī and his Transcendent Theosophy: Background, Life and Works* (Tehran, 1978), and his “Mullā Ṣadrā”, in Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*.
 - 11 See James Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne* (Princeton, 1981). Morris, too, emphasizes a presumed “transcendental” element in Mullā Ṣadrā's thought, which is, however, a clear and systematic concern on the part of the great thinker to construct a valid, consistent system of metaphysics where a well-defined philosophical terminology is employed to refine mostly classical ontological and epistemological arguments. The new system is called *al-ḥikmat al-muta'āliyah*, best translated as “metaphysical philosophy”. This philosophical system bears little resemblance to the theosophical writings of Swedenborg (as claimed by Corbin) or Rudolf Steiner, or the ideas of the Theosophical Society (although it does share elements in common with theosophy as it was originally understood namely as *theosophia* (literally divine wisdom or *al-ḥikmat al-ilāhiyyah*)) [eds].
 - 12 See Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (Albany, 1992).
 - 13 This epistemological principle is among the set of twelve philosophical problems commonly believed to constitute Mullā Ṣadrā's greatest achievements in advancing philosophical arguments. See, for example, Qazwīnī, *op. cit.*: 4–5; and Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *op. cit.*: 21–5. I have elsewhere shown, however, that the principle of the unity of the subject and object as intuitive consciousness of a thing as-it-is was first fully developed by Suhrawardī in his theory of knowledge by Illumination. See my *Knowledge and Illumination* (Atlanta, 1990): 143–55.
 - 14 See Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *op. cit.*: 25–6. For a bibliography of Mullā Ṣadrā see Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn*: 40–50.
 - 15 Many of these works remain unpublished, some have been printed in facsimile editions, and *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-kāfi* has been published in an as yet incomplete version in Tehran (1992).
 - 16 This work has been edited and published by M. Ridā al-Muzaḥḥar (Tehran, 1960); an older facsimile edition of this work is also available (Tehran, n.d.).
 - 17 This work has been edited and published by Jalāl Āshtiyānī (Mashhad, 1967).
 - 18 Both are printed in facsimile editions: *Sharḥ al-shifā': al-ilāhiyyāt* (reprint: Tehran, 1988); and *Ta'līqāt* (Gloss on *Ḥikmat al-Isḥrāq*) in Shīrāzī, *Sharḥ ḥikmat al-Isḥrāq* (Tehran, 1895), margins.

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