



Mulla Sadra

SAYEH MEISAMI



ONE WORLD

MULLA SADRA

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For Amir and Sam

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THE MAN AND HIS WORK

When Mulla Sadra (d. 1045/1635–36) started his intellectual career, Islamic philosophy in Iran had already been through its golden days with great philosophers such as Farabi (d. 339/950), Ibn Sina (d. 428/1037), and Suhrawardi (d. 586/1191). Between Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, philosophical endeavors consisted mostly in commentaries, apologies, occasional solutions to past problems, and, above all, attempts to synthesize philosophy with both theology and mysticism. The best known commentators are men such as Qutb al-Din Shirazi (d. 710/1311), Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 672/1274), Jalal al-Din Dawani (d. 908/1502–03) and the ninth/fifteenth-century Dashtaki family. Thanks to Mulla Sadra, the synthetic vision of Islamic philosophy was given new life. He developed a synthetic approach to philosophy that became the backbone of all that emerged later. It was in line with his role as a system builder that he revived the Ibn Sinan tradition of writing voluminous books on different areas in metaphysics and touching on a variety of subjects such as being, knowledge, the soul–body relation, the beginning and end of cosmos, and God. His magnum opus, *al-Hikmat al-muta‘aliya fi’l-‘asfar al-aqliya al-arba’a* (referred to subsequently as *al-Asfar*), is comparable in its magnitude only with *al-Shifa (The Metaphysics of The Healing)* by Ibn Sina. These two philosophers, though many centuries distant in time, are

similar in representing the climax of intellectual tradition at crucial points in the history of Islamic civilization.

Mulla Sadra's philosophical system is built upon the findings of earlier masters, and in many cases his stand on philosophical and theological issues makes sense only as a response to older views. This does not detract from the originality of his philosophy, which, following the title of his magnum opus, has become famous as "Transcendental Philosophy" (*al-Hikmat al-muta'aliya*). Transcendental philosophy belongs to the larger category of mystical philosophy, which is characterized by a synthetic methodology, meaning a combination of gnosis and logic, which also draws on the Qur'an and Hadith. The result is mystical philosophy, a philosophy of the type which is tied to Islamic prophecy and which is often known in the West as theosophy. The rise and development of fully fledged mystical philosophy coincided with the transformation of Iran into a Shi'i country in the Safavid era though there had been preliminary steps in that direction in the centuries before.

It is a historical fact that many Shi'i *ulama* of Sadra's day were not happy with the esoteric side of his philosophy due to the general distrustful attitude to Sufism under the Safavids. His belief in the unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*), his reliance on interpretation beyond the surface of religious texts (*ta'wil*), and particularly the unveiling of hidden meanings in the Shi'i texts, made him the target of attacks. Nevertheless, he himself was a champion of Shi'i thought, and he identified the central Shi'i doctrine of imamate with the Sufi sainthood or Friendship of God (*wilaya*). For Sadra, the Friend of God, whom he also calls the Perfect Human (*al-insan al-kamil*), borrowing the concept from Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), is the ultimate purpose of creation. He considers the Twelve Imams as the most perfect instances of *wilaya*.

Although Sadra has been read by both Sunni and Shi'i scholars in different parts of the world, including Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey, his particular significance for the Shi'i is undeniable. The one and only World Congress on Mulla Sadra, held in 1999 in Tehran and constantly referred to by Sadra scholars all over the world, is emblematic of this significance. The reason he has turned into the most celebrated philosopher in Iran after the Islamic Revolution cannot simply be reduced to politics, though political use has certainly been made of him. Serious attempts to expand Mulla Sadra scholarship, and to introduce him to Western academia, had already started almost a decade before the revolution inside the Imperial Academy of Iranian Philosophy. And in the Shi'i seminaries of Qom, Mashhad, and Najaf, studying and teaching Sadra's works under both rational and revealed sciences has been an established tradition since the Qajar period (1170–1304/1785–1925).

If we exclude the Akhbari (literalist and anti-rationalist) tradition which gathered force during the Safavid period and reduced Shi'i faith to a mere surface reading of religious texts, and the anti-Sufi campaign of the Safavid regime, Shi'ism has for the most part been compatible with both philosophical rationalism and Sufi spiritualism. It cannot be a coincidence that the first systematic treatise on Shi'i theology, *al-Tajrid fi'l-i'tiqad*, was written by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi and based on Ibn Sina's philosophy. It was also he who took up the task of defending Ibn Sina against attacks by Fakhr al-Din Razi (d. 606/1209). Moreover, Shi'i theology tends for the most part toward Mutazilite ideas and methodology. Mutazilite theology, with its emphasis on logic and rationalism, is the closest to philosophy among the theological schools. From al-Mufid (d. 413/1022) to Hilli (d. 726/1325), the tendency toward Mutazilite rationalism opened the path for

more sophisticated philosophical theology among Twelver Shi'is (Leaman and Rizvi 2008, 92–93).

As for the affinities between Shi'ism and Sufism, the path taken by Ghazzali to reconcile Sunni doctrines with Sufism became the model for some major Safavid scholars. Despite the fact that Sufism was a Sunni movement in its historical origins, the closeness between the Shi'i doctrine of imamate and the Sufi *wilaya* became a source of spiritual confluence between them. For example, almost all Sufi orders regarded Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shi'i Imam, as their first master and spiritual pole (*Qutb*). There is also evidence that the Shi'i Imam and the spiritual pole were simply identified. For example, we read in a Hadith attributed to the sixth Imam Jafar Sadiq that: "God has made of our *wilaya*, we the People of the House (*ahl-al-bayt*) the axis (*qutb*) around which the Qur'an gravitates" (Amir-Moezzi 2011, 241). The adaptation of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of *wilaya* into Shi'ism, which had started with Sayyid Haydar Amuli (d. 787/1385) was completed by Mulla Sadra. In the last section of *Divine Proofs* (*al-Shawahid al-rububiyya*) he quotes Ibn 'Arabi on the continuation of divine guardianship after the death of the Prophet, without mentioning his source, and inserts terms such as "the Infallible Imams" and "People of the House" which refer to the Twelve Shi'i Imams (*al-Shawahid al-rububiyya*, 509–511).

Though Sadra seems to be more at home in the Shi'i world, he has also attracted many scholars from Sunni circles. His disciples in Mughal India, who became interested in his work shortly after his death, were mostly Sunnis. So too were scholars from Pakistan such as Mohammad Iqbal (d. 1938), Mawdudi (d. 1979), and Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), and the same is true of some of the contemporary writers who specialize in his philoso-

phy. More will be said about his influence in the last chapter of this book.

What makes Mulla Sadra so interesting to such a variety of thinkers is the inclusiveness of his system. His works bring to life the whole heritage of Islamic thought, from the different schools of philosophy to mysticism, Qur'anic hermeneutics (*tafsir*), and Hadith, and deals with issues which divided the rational and the revealed domains of Islamic traditions. As we shall see, building his philosophical system on the uniqueness of being or existence as a dynamic whole of different degrees, he created a more flexible and conciliatory approach to the problems which seemed to dissociate reason from faith, including those regarding the beginning and the end of the world and bodily resurrection. Moreover, his vast knowledge of the Qur'an and Hadith reinforced his conciliatory enterprise. He developed an organic system in which rational, gnostic, and religious elements naturally merged and helped the growth of the whole.

It is only after we read Sadra that we can figure out why Islamic philosophy and theology never drifted apart with the advent of modernity, contrary to the fate of Christian theology in the modern West. Islamic philosophy had never been the "handmaiden of theology" as it was in the medieval West; but in order to sustain its intellectual position amid accusations of dubious beliefs by certain theologians, it could choose either to claim a truth of its own or else to take a new path of reconciliation. Philosophers in the eastern Muslim world chose the second way and built a system where the truth of faith cannot be separated from the findings of reason. Mulla Sadra's work is important as the champion of this cause. He not only saved Islamic philosophy from being crushed by dogmatic attacks but also represented the culmination of philosophical debates over theological issues.

LIFE AND WORKS

Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Yahya al-Qawami al-Shirazi, commonly known as Mulla Sadra, lived his life in Iran during the heyday of the Safavid dynasty under Shah Abbas I (d. 1039/1629). His title, Sadr al-Muta'allihin or "the highest among divine philosophers" was bestowed on him by the generations after him. No detailed life story is available for him, but we know that he was born in Shiraz into an influential family in 979/1572, and that his father was a court official. As he was the only son in the family, he received a lot of attention from his father, who encouraged him to begin his studies in his home town. His early education took place in Shiraz where he learned the philosophies of his predecessors, most probably on his own, as it is not clear yet whether he had a teacher there or not. According to recent scholarship, at that time philosophy education was not available at the religious seminaries of Shiraz (Rizvi 2007, 7) and his first encounter with philosophy was in Qazvin. In search of intellectual and spiritual guidance and attracted by the cultural achievements at the Safavid capital, he travelled to Isfahan, which by then had turned into the political and religious heart of Shi'i Iran.

Much of Sadra's knowledge, in both rational and revealed sciences, stems from his training in Isfahan. Under the guidance of the most celebrated philosopher of the time, Mir Muhammad Baqir Astarabadi known as Mir Damad (d. 1040/1631), he expanded his knowledge of philosophy both in the Peripatetic and Illuminationist fields. Mir Damad is famous for his reading of Ibn Sina in the light of Suhrawardi, so he must have been a strong influence on his student's synthetic methodology. Although Mulla Sadra later diverged from some of his teacher's major

principles, he remained grateful and aware of his philosophical debt to him. He also developed some of his ideas in response to questions which had first been raised by Mir Damad.

The next big influence on Sadra was Baha'al-Din al-'Amili famous as Shaykh Baha'i (984/1576) who, like his intellectual companion Mir Damad, developed a strong spiritual connection with Sadra beyond a mere teacher–student relationship. The first thing Sadra did upon his arrival in Isfahan was to enroll in Baha'al-Din's classes (Ziai 1996, 636), having briefly met with him in Shiraz. He learned as much as he could in different branches of Islamic sciences and mysticism from this wonderful teacher, who is still remembered in Iran as a legendary scientist and sage. Baha'al-Din was a top-rank jurispudent and succeeded his father as Shaykh al-Islam of Isfahan. He was also well-read in Sufi traditions and some scholars believe that he was even attached to a Sufi order (Lewisohn 1999, 89), though there is not sufficient evidence for such a claim. He must have been the most important source of Sadra's deep knowledge and mystical reading of Shi'i thought.

Moreover, both his teachers were influential figures of the time due to their affiliation with the court and that they served as head of the jurists or *shaykh al-Islam* of Isfahan. There is no proof that Sadra also studied under Mir Findiriski, a third leading figure in the intellectual life of Safavid Isfahan. Sadra never mentioned him in any of his works (Nasr 2006, 218).

It was most probably due to the death of his father that he decided to return to his home town Shiraz in 1010/1601. He found the intellectual climate of Shiraz very unwelcoming and described it as showing “little justice, huge oppression, degrading the highest and the noblest, raising the lowest and the vile, and the appearance of the vicious ignorant and the ugly

philistine in the guise of the wise” (*al-Asfar* I, 7). Harassed by hostile jurists, he eventually retreated to a small village named Kahak near Qom, where he lived a life of contemplation for five years or more. Though the details of the conflicts are not available, we can see from his writings that his feelings must have been deeply hurt. In *Risala-yi si asl* (*The Three Principles*), the only treatise he ever wrote in Persian, he bitterly addresses his detractors in his mother tongue:

O grand scholar and arrogant theologian! How long will you put the mole of fear on the face of intimacy, and throw the dust of foulness in the eyes of trust to cause pain; keep on rejecting and scolding and oppressing the people of purity and the companions of constancy; put on the garb of pietism and hypocrisy and the cloak of deceit and guile; drink from the chalice of hubris at the hand of the charming devil; do your best to refute truthfulness and spread falsity, condemn the wise and applaud the ignorant ...

(*Risala-yi si asl*, 8–9)

As the Persian proverb goes, “Even your enemy may do you good if that is supposed to be,” and Sadra’s retreat actually proved intellectually and spiritually fruitful. It was in this period that he laid the foundations of transcendental philosophy and began working on his *al-Asfar*. Around 1022/1613 he returned to Shiraz but continued to visit other cities and went on several pilgrimages.

Later, at the peak of his intellectual career in 1040/1630, Sadra resumed his teaching in Shiraz. He was invited to teach in Shiraz by Imamquli Khan (d. 1042/1633), who had succeeded his father Allahwirdi Khan as the governor of Fars, Sadra’s home province, and did so at the Khan School (*Madrasa-yi Khan*) which had been built in 1024/1615 by Allahwirdi Khan (most prob-

ably in Sadra's honor). He stayed in Shiraz and taught at the Khan School for the rest of his life, though he travelled a great deal. According to recent scholarship (Rizvi 2007, 30), he died in 1045/1635–36 in Basra, on the way home from his seventh pilgrimage to Mecca. There is no good evidence as to where he was buried.

Mulla Sadra and his wife Ma'suma (d. 1061/1651) had six children, three sons and three daughters. All three sons followed in their father's footsteps and became scholars, though only a few works by the first son, Ibrahim, survive. He specialized in Islamic Law, Hadith, theology, and philosophy, completely turning his back on Sufism. In line with the ways of the world in those days nothing much is reported about the daughters except that they were married to three of Sadra's students. Sadra treated all his students as members of his own family.

There is hardly any major philosopher or theologian in the east of the Muslim lands that Mulla Sadra had not read. His vast knowledge of earlier ideas and schools is noticeable in all his works, particularly *al-Asfar*. Three people, however, influenced him more than anyone else: Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, and, above all, the Andalusian mystic, Ibn 'Arabi.

While Ibn Sina provided the philosophical framework, concepts, and terminologies, Suhrawardi was the source of inspiration for Sadra's new methodology, in which discursive thought is effective only where intuitive wisdom is available. As for Ibn 'Arabi, his mystical worldview constitutes the foundation of transcendental philosophy. As we shall see, the ideas and methods of these three can be traced everywhere in Sadra's works.

Mulla Sadra wrote over fifty books and treatises on a variety of topics which we can categorize under two main headings:

rational and religious sciences. The first includes all the philosophical domains which, in modern categorizations, fall under ontology, epistemology, cosmology, metaphysical psychology, eschatology, moral, and political philosophy. We should add to this list the philosophical commentaries that he wrote on books by other philosophers. His two great commentaries, one on Ibn Sina's *al-Shifa* (*The Metaphysics of The Healing*) and the other on Suhrawardi's *al-Hikmat al-ishraq* (*The Philosophy of Illumination*), are among the great classics of Islamic philosophy.

Mulla Sadra's best-known work under the first heading is the voluminous *Transcendental Philosophy in Four Intellectual Journeys* (*al-Hikmat al-muta'liya fi'l-asfar al-aqliya al-arba'a*), commonly referred to as *al-Asfar*, which includes ontology, epistemology, psychology, cosmology, eschatology, and theology. He started writing *al-Asfar* in Qom and finished it after returning to Shiraz. It has been published in nine volumes, and is both a collection of Sadra's philosophical speculations and an encyclopedia of Islamic philosophy and theology. All the characteristic principles and ideas of the Sadrian system appear in it, and most of his other philosophical treatises simply repeat and expound the same ideas with occasional changes. The synthetic methodology of *al-Asfar* became the hallmark of transcendental philosophy. Sadra not only incorporated different schools of philosophy, theology, and mysticism into his system but also created a dialogical context in which we can judge his position in comparison with and in contrast to earlier Muslim scholars.

Divine Proofs (*al-Shawahid al-rububiyya*) is equally wide in thematic scope, yet it is not as voluminous as *Asfar* but a summary of its major themes. Another work is the *Metaphysical Prehensions* (*al-Masha'ir*), which is one of Sadra's most widely read works

and which has been translated into both French and English. It is a clear exposition of his ontological doctrines and contains all the arguments for the most fundamental theses of Mulla Sadra's philosophy. Two other works, namely, *The Wisdom of the Throne* (*al-Hikmat al-'arshiyah*), which has been translated into English, and *The Beginning and End* (*al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ad*), summarize the whole of Sadra's metaphysical cosmology. In India, where Sadra has had followers for a long time, the most widely read book is his commentary on Athir al-Din Abhari's *Book of Guidance* (*al-Kitab al-hidayah*). The significance of Abhari's book for the readership of the time was due to the fact that it was a formulation of Ibn Sina's thought, which was dominant in the medieval period. Sadra also wrote a number of shorter treatises on subjects such as the unity of the knower and the known, the origination of the world, resurrection, etc. On the whole, his philosophical works form a huge and consistent system in which we hear echoes of his past philosophic masters side by side with his own philosophical, mystical, and religious ideas.

Under the heading of religious sciences we may mention the commentary on *al-Usul al-kafi* by Kulayni (d. 328/939). Kulayni's work is the first Shi'i collection of Hadith focusing on theology and jurisprudence. It has served as a textbook at religious seminaries around the Shi'i world for centuries, and Sadra's commentary on this work has secured him a place among the experts in Hadith scholarship and Islamic jurisprudence. In addition, Sadra's Imami theology is expressed in *al-Asfar, al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ad*, and several other works are mainly based on the first systematic book on the subject, *al-Tajrid fi'l-i'tiqad* by Nasir al-Din Tusi. Sadra's Shi'i theology was also influenced by the theological philosophy of Isma'ili authors such as Hamid al-Din Kirmani (d. 412/1021) and the Brethren of Purity. But

he was also well read in Sunni theology and particularly inspired by Ghazzali's Asharite ideas.

Drawing on philosophical and mystical teachings, Sadra wrote a remarkable number of works on different chapters and verses of the Qur'an – unprecedented in relation to past philosophers in terms of scale and depth alike. *Keys to the Invisible World (al-Mafatih al-ghayb)* is the most important work in this area, particularly the first two *Keys (Miftah)*. The first *Key* explains Sadra's theoretical hermeneutics and the second *Key*, while explaining some major Qur'anic themes and objectives, deals with practical understanding of how to benefit from the Qur'an (Rustom 2012). As for other Qur'anic commentaries, *Mysteries of the Verses (Asrar al-ayat)* and his interpretation of certain Qur'anic chapters such as the Opening (*al-Fatihah*), the Cow (*al-Baqarah*), the Earthquake (*al-Zalzal*) are very important.

There are overtones of mysticism in almost all his works, but Sadra also devoted a whole book to Sufi teachings, *The Elixir of Gnostics (Iksir al-arifin)*, the reworking of a Persian Sufi book by Afzal al-Din Kashani (d. 610/1213–14). In this as in many other works he pays tribute to Sufi poetry. He often quotes from famous mystical Persian poets such as Rumi (d. 672/1273) and Shabistari (d. 720/1340). But with one exception all his works are in Arabic. The exception is the above-mentioned *Treatise on Three Principles (Risala-yi si asl)*, which adduces Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and poetry in favor of the truth of gnostic findings against the detractors of mysticism, who he dismisses as “pseudo-scholars full of evil and corruption” (*Risala-yi si asl*, 7).

Thus, looking at Mulla Sadra's fruitful career, we see a man of brilliant philosophical talent, genuine spiritual concerns, and strong belief in the truth of religious faith. For him, discursive thought, mystical findings, and religious knowledge are comple-

mentary. Transcendental philosophy is a systematic attempt to reconcile philosophy, mysticism, and theology. In transcendental philosophy the central methodological consideration is that one cannot reach the truth without intellectual intuition for which spiritual illumination is necessary. The approach is holistic in that the intellect and the soul work not separately but as a unified whole. True knowledge is a matter of discovery, which is the final result of this intellectual–spiritual journey. Thus Mulla Sadra’s system of transcendental philosophy is to a large extent built on his “study afresh of the sources of Islamic revelation along with the sayings of the Shi’i Imams and his own experience and intellectual vision of reality made possible by both the outward and inward dimensions of the revelation” (Nasr 2006, 225). On the whole, the Qur’an and Hadith take center stage in Mulla Sadra’s works. His philosophy cannot be understood independently from his deep faith in Islam, particularly its spiritual core. The crucial place – and considerable number – of his commentaries on the Qur’an testifies to this fact. What distinguishes his work is the synthetic approach, encompassing Islamic mysticism and philosophy, kept in check by a determination not to go astray from the real meaning of the sacred text. (He warns against commentaries that do so in his opinion.) To him, only those who are “firm in their knowledge” (*al-rasikhun fi’l-‘ilm*) (4: 162) can take on the interpretation (*ta’wil*) of the Qur’an.

MULLA SADRA AND THE SCHOOL OF ISFAHAN

Attempts to draw on human reason and the tools of Aristotelian logic in order to understand and explain religious themes have

a history of being treated with suspicion. Rationalist endeavors, from the earliest steps taken by Mutazilite theologians to the philosophers in the golden ages of Islamic civilization and later have regularly been criticized. The intellectual connection between Islamic philosophy and that of the Greeks was a problem, not to mention the incongruence between certain philosophical views and Muslim scripture. The most concrete examples of this opposition were the Asharite campaign against Mutazilites, al-Ghazzali's criticism of Ibn Sina in his *al-Tahafat al-falasifa*, and the late Safavid Akhbaris (a minority in Twelver Shi'ism) against all kinds of reasoning in the religious matters even jurisprudence. Despite all the opposition from different quarters, philosophy in the Muslim world managed to survive in close relationship with religious sciences. However, in many cases Muslim jurists, as the guardians of Islamic Law (*shari'a*), inflicted a lot of pain on philosophers, especially when the political conditions of the day were in their favor. This hostility was at its worst in the case of mystical philosophy due to the role of Sufi doctrines, which have been as alarming to jurists as philosophy, or more so. The execution of two brilliant Persian philosopher-mystics at a young age, Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani (d. 525/1131) and Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (d. 587/1191) are the most tragic examples. Ironically, after these executions the future of philosophy in Iran moved in the direction of mystical philosophy, culminating during the Safavid era.

The school of Isfahan, to which Mulla Sadra belongs, was founded at the capital of the Safavid dynasty. It is important to note that the title "school of Isfahan" is more of a convenient appellation rather than referring to a historical entity. It is only a loose term, used in modern scholarship to locate several major Safavid scholars, including 'Amili, Mir Damad and

their students. Under the Safavids, Twelver Shi'ism, as the key to the national, political, and religious identity of Iran (Persia), was cherished and guarded by kings and clerics alike. This religious and political urgency led to the formation of an unusually powerful clergy. They were on guard against all kinds of "unorthodox" ideas and manners, but the main target of their attacks was Sufism. Due to the Sunni roots of Sufism and certain complications in the political life of the Safavids with respect to their early connections with Sufi orders, the anti-Sufi suppression arose mainly as a result of political rivalry and became apparent only in the mid seventeenth century, under Shah Abbas II. Yet, during the reign of Shah Abbas I, mysticism as a theoretical field of study different from practical or popular Sufism was still in vogue. Jurist-philosophers such as Mir Damad and Shaykh Baha'i founded the school of Isfahan and its characteristic mystical philosophy, based on the synthesis of mystical ideas with philosophy and Shi'i theology. Both rose to the position of chief jurist of Isfahan, with Mir Damad succeeding Baha'i, and they were equally trusted and respected by the court. The conceptual distinction between mysticism (*irfan*) and Sufism (*tasawwuf*), which is still made by many scholars, especially in Iran, originated in the disapproving attitude of the school of Isfahan toward popular Sufism. Mulla Sadra devoted a whole treatise, *The Breaking of the Idols of Ignorance (Kasr Asnam al-jahiliyya)* to this cause, and emphatically denied any connections with the Sufi orders of the time.

A complex of factors must have helped the school of Isfahan to flourish. Apart from the theoretical nature of mystical teachings in this school, the background of its founders in the religious sciences and jurisprudence was an important factor, so were their high social status and noble connections. Mir Damad came from

a very influential religious family and his father was the son-in-law of ‘Abd al-Ali al-Karaki (d. 940/1533), a highly revered and influential jurist of the early Safavid period. Thus, financially and politically he stood on firm ground. His affluence and status guaranteed that his school would survive independently and be secure from the attacks of the other jurists as long as he was alive. In the case of Baha’al-Din al-‘Amili, his position as the head of the jurists (*shaykh al-Islam*) of Isfahan was a strong protection for his mystical tendencies, which are quite apparent especially in his poetry. Last but not the least, the new religious and political identity of Safavid Persia as the Shi‘i land of Islam rivaling both the Ottoman Empire and the Mughal dynasty required well-versed scholars to add an intellectual dimension to the religious and political body of the state, and the major exponents of the school of Isfahan, Muhammad Baqir Mir Damad (d. 1041/1631), Mir Abu’l-Qasim Findiriski (1050/1640–41), and Baha’al-Din al-‘Amili (d. 1030/1621) were indeed well-versed in many disciplines, including philosophy, mathematics, mysticism, theology, and jurisprudence. In the case of ‘Amili, one should add knowledge of astronomy and architecture to the list, while Mir Findiriski also had some knowledge of Hinduism. These scholars raised a generation of students whose contributions to the intellectual and spiritual traditions have remained influential to the present day.

As the clergy gained more and more control, particularly over the court of the next king, Abbas II (d. 1045/1666), who came to the throne at age ten, the pressure from Shi‘i hardliners grew stronger on the next generations of philosopher-mystics, including Mulla Sadra and his two students and sons-in-law Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji (d. 1072/1661–62) and Muhsin Fayz Kashani (d. 1090/1679–80). At that time there set in a

smear campaign in both writings and sermons against Sufi beliefs and practices. It was against the anti-Sufi polemic of his day that Fayz wrote *The Judgment (al-Muhakama)*. There he referred to the sayings of Imams in order to argue that genuine scholars and ascetics never blame each other, but hold each other in respect as there are different ways to God (Fayz Kashani, 1371 S.H., 101–102). Though the intellectual elites never stopped studying Mulla Sadra's philosophy, there is no evidence that it was taught openly until later in the Qajar period. The earliest and best commentaries on Sadra's works, such as those by Mulla Ali Nuri (d. 1831) and Hadi Sabziwari (d. 1873) were written in that era.

TRANSCENDENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Sadra himself only used the term “transcendental philosophy” in the title of his major book, but later it came to be used for his philosophical system in general. In a general sense, all Islamic metaphysics is transcendental, as it seeks the origin and the end of cosmos beyond the sensible world. In addition, the importance of theological issues in their religious urgency for Muslim philosophers gave their systems a noticeably transcendental color. This has been the case from the earliest attempts to answer questions about the nature of reality, including the natural and the supernatural, by means of Greek logic and metaphysics. The Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*) of Farabi and Ibn Sina is much more than the First Cause or the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle's universe; it is the Giver of being to all that exists.

Sadra's philosophy is transcendental also in a very specific sense of the term. His whole system is created to prove that the

* S.H. stands for Hijri Shamsi which is the Persian calendar.

world exists as a relation to God. To be is not just a matter of receiving your existence from the Creator but to be a manifestation of its Being, outside which there is merely nothingness. Sadra claimed that he had not reached this conclusion with the help of reason alone, but mainly through that kind of existential and spiritual experience which mystics would go through. Being is *the* reality of God and the world, and there is no way of beholding this truth other than by “the eye within” (*al-Shawahid al-rububiyya*, 8).

That the journey of the intellect is also an existential experience and a spiritual ascent is a neo-Platonic legacy which appeared in different degrees in Peripatetic philosophy. Even in the context of Ibn Sina’s rationalism the soul can temporarily become connected to the divine source of knowledge only after it has purified itself of corporeal attachments (*al-Isharat wa’l-tanbihat* Book III, ch. 13). However, it was Suhrawardi who for the first time highlighted the methodological significance of mystical intuition for doing philosophy. At the beginning of *The Philosophy of Illumination* (*al-Hikmat al-ishraq*) he criticized the followers of Peripatetic philosophy for relying too much on reason and neglecting intuitive wisdom. He says:

Just as by beholding sensible things we attain certain knowledge about some of the states and are thereby able to construct valid sciences like astronomy, so we observe certain spiritual things and subsequently base divine sciences upon them. He who does not follow this way knows nothing of philosophy and will be a plaything in the hands of doubt.

(*The Philosophy of Illumination*, 4)

In the context of his intuitive vision of reality and inspired by Persian mythology, Suhrawardi came up with his metaphysics

of lights, according to which light is the only positive reality in the world, beginning with God as the Light of Lights down to His creation which consists in lower grades of light, and darkness which is the absence of it. He passed this monism to Mulla Sadra. They both believed in the oneness of metaphysical reality. However, Mulla Sadra chose Being over Light, and similarly to the gradational light of Suhrawardi's philosophy, he explained diversities in the universe based on the different grades of being. The chapter on Sadra's ontology will deal with the details of this doctrine.

Sadra's philosophical approach diverged from that of Suhrawardi and his followers, most prominently Mir Damad, over the distinction of being from quiddity. This conceptual distinction not only separated Islamic philosophy from its Greek origins, but also became the source of a major division within Islamic philosophy itself. One can classify Islamic philosophers roughly into those who believe in the authenticity of quiddity and others who believe that authentic reality consists in being alone.

The term quiddity (*mahiyya*), which can be interchangeably used with essence, originates in Aristotle's philosophy. Essence is the actual reality of things, both material and immaterial. For example, the very reality of an apple is the essence of apple-ness which is inherent in any particular apple. All apples share this essence and differences among them such as their colors, smells, and sizes are only accidental, not essential. Islamic philosophers begin with this essentialism but go beyond. For Farabi and Ibn Sina, though quiddity is a reality, it is realized through the existentiating (*ijad*) act of the God or the Necessary Being. Apples exist in the real world because the Creator has conferred existence on them. Therefore, being or existence is additional to

quiddity when we consider the relationship between the two in the realm of conceptual analysis; outside the mind, quiddity and being are not separable.

Following Suhrawardi this distinction became a subject of debates and a source of divisions in Islamic philosophy. In a revolutionary move, Suhrawardi argued that only quiddities as particularized objects are real while existence is merely the construction of the mind. This position was further developed in the school of Isfahan by Mir Damad and some of his students, such as Rajab Ali Tabrizi (d. 1080/1669). Mulla Sadra too began with this position but later built his philosophical system in opposition to it. Transcendental philosophy is characterized by the belief in the unrivaled reality of being, a doctrine according to which being or existence is not only real but also the only reality. Quiddities or essences are nothing but reflections in the mind of external existential differences.

As we shall see later, Sadra addresses all philosophical and theological issues from this point of view. For example, in his epistemology he explains knowledge as a form of being, which results in his theory of the existential unification of the knower and the known. Similarly, in trying to explain the dynamics of change and evolution in nature, he builds his arguments on motion in substance that is justifiable only if substance is an existential fluid rather than a static quiddity. His picture of resurrection is equally built on this principle. So too are his proofs of the existence of God and all theological questions about Him.

In reading Mulla Sadra one must keep in mind that reason, intuition, and revelation form one organic whole. It would be impossible to appreciate his attempts to provide logical proofs for his ideas about the nature of reality, knowledge, creation,

God, etc., without understanding his background in Islamic mysticism as shaped by Ibn 'Arabi and his commentators such as Sadr al-Din Qunavi (d. 673/1274), Dawoud Qaysari (d. 751/1350), or without appreciating his knowledge of the religious sciences, particularly Shi'i ideas. In the same fashion, it would be unjust to reduce his work to either mysticism or theology. It is true that when you look at his system from above, you may ultimately see nothing but God in His manifestations, but this observation is possible only when one has tackled the rational system, which is woven from philosophical concepts, ideas, premises, and sophisticated logical arguments.