

**MULLA SADRA'S REALIST
ONTOLOGY OF THE
INTELLIGIBLES AND THEORY
OF KNOWLEDGE**

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[Introduction]

Sadra's concept of knowledge is based on two fundamental premises of his ontology. These can be stated as the primacy (*asalah*) and gradation of being (*tashkik al-wujud*). Sadra's relentless effort to define knowledge as a mode of being (*nahw al-wujud*) represents rather a new perspective within the Islamic intellectual tradition and requires a close study of his metaphysical ontology. I use the phrase 'metaphysical ontology' to emphasize Sadra's primary interest in questions of being: for him, the study of being is not a mere investigation of the properties of things or existential propositions. It is rather founded upon a quest for what Rudolph Otto has called "saving actualities".¹ Sadra's 'transcendent wisdom' (*al-hikmat al-muta'aliyah*), an expression Sadra uses exclusively and proudly for his path of thinking, is not merely a philosophical system grounded in abstract considerations of being but a 'doctrine of salvation'. This view of metaphysics is predicated upon the idea that being (*al-wujud*), the most central concept of Sadra's thought, is ultimately God's face turned to the world. The study of being is thus a step towards uncovering an aspect of the Divine, which, for Sadra, is the ultimate source of all being and knowledge.

Keeping this peculiar nature of Sadra's thought, this essay will focus on how Sadra works from his metaphysical ontology towards a concept of knowledge which claims to transcend the binary opposition of subject and object on the one hand, and places intellection within a context of 'spiritualized epistemology', on the other. Since Sadra's thought is centered around being and its modalities, a proper discussion of his view of knowledge is impossible without first analyzing his concept of being. Sadra develops a rigorous ontology of the *intelligibilia* (*al-ma'qulat*) whereby the intelligible forms (*al-suwar al-ma'qulah*) are defined as ontological actualities that reside in the world of the Forms as separate and disembodied substances. In this essentially Platonic view, knowledge (*al-'ilm*) and intellection (*ta'qqul*) are no longer defined as a property of the knower or inherent states of the mind but rather as an 'effect' of being. This view finds its expression in Sadra's elegant formulations of the unification of the intellect and the intelligible (*ittihad al-'aql wa'l-ma'qul*) – a view that has a long and controversial history in Greek and Islamic philosophy.²

Sadra's realist ontology of intelligible forms explains why he has not taken the subjectivist turn of modern philosophy at the hands of Descartes, who was Sadra's contemporary, and the extent to which his concept of the soul (*al-nafs*) and the intellect (*al-'aql*) has remained thoroughly non-subjectivist, placing the self within a larger context of meanings and relations beyond the individual self. The first part of the essay will give a brief description of how Sadra's ontology provides a basis for his defense of intelligibility as an intrinsic attribute of being. I shall then turn to Sadra's concept of knowledge with a special focus on the definition of knowledge in terms of being and its modalities as opposed to knowledge as a property of the mind and/or the knowing subject.

Being and Quiddity

Following the Peripatetic philosophers, Sadra asserts the self-evidentiality of being (*al-wujud*) by saying that being can neither be defined nor described. When we say ‘there is a tree here’ or ‘stars exist’, we have an intuitive grasp about the meaning of these statements: a tree, a horse, stars, my neighbor, and the school building down the block ‘exist’. Put in a simple language, they are within the realm of concrete existence detectable by empirical evidence based on seeing, smelling, etc., or by a priori intuitions that lend themselves to independent verification. When we want to give a logical definition of the words ‘is’ and ‘exist’, i.e., the copula, however, we are faced with a formidable task. First of all, the copula, as Kant would later elaborate, does not furnish us with any new knowledge about our subject other than asserting its existence in the external world. But we hardly think about the copula when we speak of things or look at them. In short, we gain nothing by ruminating about the copula. Secondly, we can know something unknown to us only by comparing it to better-known and familiar concepts – a procedure we follow all the time intuitively if not methodically. But there is nothing intuitively more familiar and evident to us than being. This is where the difference between what we know and what we can clearly demonstrate becomes particularly evident. That is why Sabzawari, Sadra's great commentator, says that “its [i.e. being's] notion is one of the best-known things, but its deepest reality is in the extremity of hiddenness”.³

We run into a similar difficulty when we try to ‘make being known’ (*ta'rif*) through logical definition (*hadd*) and description (*taswir*).⁴ A logical definition is comprised of genus (*jins*) and specific differentia (*fasl*). When we define man as ‘rational animal’ (*haywan natiq*), for instance, we refer to its genus, which is ‘animal’ (*haywan*), and its differentia, which is ‘rational’ (*natiq*). This, however, does not apply to being as being has no genus or differentia because to have a genus and differentia means to include something and exclude others.⁵ But as we intuitively and logically know, there is nothing outside being, and being, as the ground of all there is, does not leave anything out. It, then, follows that being has no definition.

Nor can it be described, for description is based on more evident and clear concepts than the concept defined. But we just concluded that there is no term or concept known to be more evident and clear than being. Being, then, can be explained only by itself. It is, however, obvious that this is a *petitio principii* and not a definition because definition of something by itself begs the question. This leads Sadra to the following conclusion: being has neither definition and nor proof (*burhan*)⁶ that can be employed to explain its meaning. It is the most evident notion of all concepts and the basis of our noetic structure without needing any other proof.

The only access to the reality of being is existential intuition or what Sadra calls ‘illuminative presence’ (*hudur ishraqi*) and ‘essential testimony’ (*shuhud 'ayni*).⁷ As I shall discuss below, such terms as ‘illumination’, ‘presence’, ‘unveiling’, and ‘witnessing’ play two important roles in Sadra's works. First, they emphasize the particularity of the experience of being (*wujud*): we experience being through its particular instances or ‘shares’ (*khisas*) such as the sun, cause and effect, or my neighbor. In our most

natural and primordial encounter with the world, our experiences are always particular. When I look at my daughter playing by my desk, what I see is not ‘humanity’ or ‘rational animal’ but a particular and concrete human being with distinct qualities, complexion, feelings, posture, etc. In this sense, every abstraction is a distortion of the unique nature of beings. Secondly, the experience of being as opening and unveiling establishes a strong link between the knowledge of being and spiritual illumination – a link that Sadra assumes to be of supreme importance for ‘transcendent wisdom’.

In light of these considerations, Sadra makes a categorical distinction between the concept (*mafhum*) and reality (*haqiqah*) of being. As a mental concept, being shares the qualities of a universal: it is applicable to a multitude of subjects univocally, remains abstract and generic, does not change from subject to subject, and so on. The reality of being in the extra-mental world, however, defies any such definitions and displays a constant dynamism. Every individual being is a unique existent that participates in the all-inclusive reality of being. Expressed differently, everything is an instantiation and particularization (*takhassus*) of being that unfolds itself in an infinite number of ways, modes, states, and colors. Sadra calls this the ‘self-unfolding’ and ‘expansion of being’ (*inbisat al-wujud*), which he borrows from the school of Ibn al-‘Arabi.

At this point, a further distinction is introduced between being and essence (*mahiyyah*) – a distinction that has a long history in Islamic philosophy. We can analyze this along the following lines. The human mind asks two basic questions about things that exist: is it and what is it? The first question concerns the reality of things in the external world and establishes their existence *in concreto*. When I think of the mountain, the first question that I may ask is whether it exists or not. This inquiry seeks to ensure that the object of my thought is not a figment of my imagination but rather a concrete reality in the extra-mental world. And I use a multitude of methods or tools to verify my assertion. The second question pertains to the ‘what-ness’ (*ma-hiya?*) of things, i.e., what it is that we are investigating. Having established the extra-mental reality of the mountain, my next question will be about its attributes, shared properties, nature, definition, etc., and it is here that we enter the domain of essences or quiddities (*mahiyyat*)⁸. The distinction between existence and essence is thus established by the fact that we can give a definition of things that have quiddity, viz., meaning and definition in the mind but no existence in the extra-mental world as in the case of the unicorn or square circle.⁹

But existents are not composed of two things, ‘being’ on the one hand, and ‘quiddity’, on the other, which we antecedently put together and turn into a single unity. It is just the opposite: they are single units that we as knowing subjects divide into compartments. That is why Sadra says that the distinction between being and quiddity is not a real ontological distinction. It is rather a “rational operation of the mind” (*i’tibar al-‘aql*).¹⁰ The distinction is imposed by the mind that can perceive only quiddities as the universal properties of things.¹¹ Said differently, the distinction in question belongs to the order of thought rather than being. Now, Sadra takes a further step and argues that quiddities are nothing but various modes and

particularizations of being, which the mind constructs as abstract and generic qualities. An important result of this assertion is the *ultimate* reducibility of quiddities to being whereby Sadra ascertains another premise of his ontology: the primacy of being (*asalat al-wujud*).

The Primacy and Gradation of Being

The word 'asalah', meaning to be principal and primary, refers to that which is real and gives actual reality to existents in the extra-mental world. The main question Sadra asks is which of the two, being or quiddity, has 'reality' in the external world. The philosophical significance of this question cannot be overemphasized for traditional philosophy that considered truth *and* reality to be intertwined. The Arabic word *haqiqah* can be translated as both true and real, and this is essential for finding that which is the basis of things in truth and reality. Such a thing accounts for ontological affirmation and epistemic credibility – the two qualities really existing beings have. Being (*al-wujud*) as the principal reality thus establishes things in concrete existence and saturates them with meaning.¹² Simple as it may seem, though, this idea has a long history in Islamic thought.

Ibn Sina was content with recapitulating the distinction between being and quiddity since his primary concern was to lay out a tripartite division of existents as impossible (*mumtani'*), contingent (*mumkin*) and necessary (*wajib*), and draw a categorical distinction between the last two, i.e., the created and the Creator.¹³ Even though Ibn Sina did not deal with the primacy or non-primacy of being in any clear manner and his discussions can be read to support and oppose either position, the key issue for his medieval interpreters, especially in the Latin West, was his discussion and alleged espousal of the accidentality of being. The problem had emanated from Ibn Sina's somewhat recondite analysis of how being is related to essence (*mahiyyah*). St. Thomas Aquinas and other Scholastic philosophers read Ibn Sina as arguing that being is an accident conferred upon things antecedently. In simple terms, things exist and their quiddities require being only as an accident or attribute without which they can survive the abyss of non-existence. Interestingly enough, this (mis)interpretation goes back to Ibn Rushd.¹⁴

Sadra and his followers took a different approach and interpreted Ibn Sina as saying that being is a 'special accident' in the case of contingent beings (*mumkin al-wujud*): the existence of contingent beings is a 'borrowed existence' and depends on the Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*) for their subsistence. This implies that contingent or possible beings 'receive' their existence from another source antecedently or, to use the language of theology, from high on. Now, we may conceive being as an accident ('*arad*') 'happening' to things because their concrete existence is not required by mental abstraction or, as Aristotle would say, by definition. More importantly, being is an 'attribute' granted to created things by God who, as the Necessary Being, sustains them in existence. Considered from the point of view of extra-mental existence (*al-wujud al-'ayni*), however, being is not added to things *a posteriori*, otherwise we would have to assume that things take on being as an accident without which they can 'exist' – a logically absurd and impossible conclusion.

Suhrawardi, with whom Sadra utterly differs on this particular question, founded a metaphysics of essences when he defined quiddity (*al-mahiyyah*) as the sole agent that constitutes reality. Suhrawardi proposed two

objections against the primacy of being. First, if we take existence, he said, as a real attribute of essence, then essence, in order to have this attribute, has to exist prior to existence in which case existence would be a quality of something that already exists.¹⁵ Secondly, if existence is considered to be the real constituent of reality, then existence will have to exist before being a constituent of external reality and this second existence will have to exist, and so on *ad infinitum*.¹⁶

Suhrawardi's conclusion was a turning point in the history of Islamic thought. His claim that being is only a generic term, a secondary intelligible (*ma'qul thani*), applicable to a multitude of object but to which nothing concrete corresponds in the extra-mental world, heralded the beginning of a long controversy especially in the Persian speaking world. Sadra rejected this deduction by saying that we cannot logically say 'existence exists' just as we do not say 'whiteness is white'. Existence exists by itself. In other words, the actualization of being in the external world occurs by itself and not through something else.¹⁷ When I say that "the tree exists", I do not take the tree and its existence to be two separate and separable realities. The tree as a particular being and its quiddity are given in one and the same thing all at once. Therefore being is not something that has existence just as whiteness is not something that has whiteness.¹⁸ Being is that very reality by virtue of which things exist just as whiteness is that by virtue of which things are white.

According to Sadra, Suhrawardi's false conclusion results from confusing the concept and reality of existence. When conceived by the mind, being is a universal concept without a corresponding reality in the extra-mental world. And it is at this level of abstraction that we can take existence as an attribute of something. That is why we can think of essences without their actual existence in the physical world.¹⁹ Said differently, existence as the most general notion in the mind cannot be a basis for the reality of individual existents.²⁰ The reality of being defies all such conceptualization. Although at the level of conceptual analysis one is allowed to say that existence is 'something that has existence' (*shay' lahu al-wujud*) in reality, its basic structure is that it is existence by itself or existent *par excellence* (*al-wujud huwa al-mawjudiyyah*).²¹ Sadra's conclusion is thus diametrically opposed to that of Suhrawardi: being is not an extraneous quality imposed upon existents but the very reality thanks to which they exist.²²

In rejecting Suhrawardi's essentialist ontology, Sadra reiterates an old issue in Islamic philosophy, i.e., whether being is a predicate or not, the word 'predicate' being used here in its logical sense as denoting some property or attribute of actually existing things. As in Western philosophy since Kant²³, the Muslim philosophers have usually answered this question in the negative but introduced an important distinction between the logical and ontological senses of existential propositions. From a logical point of view, we can analyze the sentence "this table is oak" into a subject and predicate. The subject of the sentence, "this table", is a noun and the predicate "oak" also a noun and an attribute qualifying the table.²⁴ Now, we can turn this sentence, composed of a subject and a predicate, into an existential proposition by saying that "the table is", "the table exists", or

“the table is an existent”. When we look at these sentences from a logical point of view, existence, stated by the copula, turns out to be a predicate and attribute qualifying the table. From the ontological point of view, however, this conclusion is absurd because it assumes the existence of the table prior to its having existence as an attribute. Given that the table in question is a real existent, the moment we say ‘table’, we have already affirmed its extra-mental reality. In light of this, one may say that Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* argument is flawed because from a strictly ontological point of view, the moment I say ‘I’ in the sentence “I think, therefore I am”, I have already affirmed my existence.

al-Farabi was the first to have noted this philosophical difficulty and proposed two ways of looking at such existential propositions. In the proposition “man exists”, existence, al-Farabi reasoned, is both a predicate and not a predicate. From the point of view of the ‘logician’ (*al-nazir al-mantiqi*), the sentence has a predicate because it is composed of two terms, subject and predicate, and is liable of being true or false. From the standpoint of the ‘natural scientist’ (*al-nazir al-tabi’i*), which here means the ontological point of view, however, it does not because the “existence of something is nothing but itself”.²⁵ The most important conclusion that Sadra derives from this analysis is that being is not an attribute conferred upon things antecedently. It is their very reality which makes them what they are, and for Sadra, this proves the primacy of being.

Having established being as the primary reality, Sadra turns to the question of how being applies to individual entities which he calls ‘shares of being’ (*khisas al-wujud*). Insofar as we talk about things as actually existing, being is predicated of all things that exist. In this most generic sense, being applies to things univocally, signifying their common state of existence. Sadra, however, takes a further step and argues that the predication of being takes place with varying degrees of ‘intensity’ (*tashaddud*), which he explains by using the word ‘gradation’ (*tashkik*).²⁶ To give an example, light is predicated of the candle, the moon and the sun univocally in that they all participate in the quality of light, luminosity and brightness. Each of these objects, however, displays different degrees of intensity in sharing the quality of light. Light is the most intense and brightest in the sun and weakest in the reflection of the moonlight on the pool. By the same token, being is predicated of the Creator, the source of all beings, and the created in that they both exist. Their share of existence, however, is not the same because God is ontologically prior and superior to contingent beings. Having the most intense state of existence, God has more ‘being’ than other things, which is another way of emphasizing the ontological discontinuity between the Creator and the created.

The same analogy holds true for cause and effect since cause, by definition, precedes effect in the chain of causation: it causes the effect to be what it is, and this imparts on it a higher ontological status. Sadra calls this “predication by equivocality” (*haml bi’l-tashkik*)²⁷. Sadra applies gradation to the entire spectrum of being: things partake of being with different degrees of intensity and diminution, strength and weakness, priority and posterity, perfection and imperfection.²⁸ What is of particular importance for

our discussion is that the same principle is applied to the order of thought as well, and Sadra explains degrees of knowledge in the same way as he explains degrees of being. As we shall see shortly, this is a crucial step towards formulating a realist ontology of intelligible substances, to which we now turn.

Knowledge as a Mode of Being

Having provided a brief analysis of Sadra's ontological premises, we can now turn to how he develops a rigorous ontology of the intelligibles, which underpins his concept of knowledge as 'appropriation' and 'participation'. To broach this all-important subject and prepare his reader, Sadra makes a number of observations on knowledge. In an important passage of the *Asfar* titled "concerning that intellection consists of the unification of the substance of the intellector (*al-'aqil*) with the intellected (*al-ma'qul*)", he identifies man's ability to know as the most difficult and baffling problem of philosophy. Sadra states this point in the form of a historical aphorism:

"The fact that the soul is able to intellect the forms of intelligible things is the most mysterious and obscure problem of philosophy, which none of the scholars of Islam has been able to solve up to our own day. When we looked at the difficulty of this problem and pondered over the question that knowledge of the substance is substance and accident, we did not find what cures the disease and what quenches the thirst in the books of the people [i.e., philosophers], especially those of their master Abu 'Ali [Ibn Sina] like the *Shifa'*, *al-Najat*, *al-Isharat*, *'Uyun al-hikmah* and others. Rather, what we have found among his group, likes and followers such as his student Bahmanyar, the master of the followers of the Stoics (*al-riwaqiyyin*) [i.e., Suhrawardi]²⁹, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, and others who came after them, is that they did not propose anything on which one could rely. If this is the case with those who are considered to be the most respected [in philosophy], think of the situation of the people of fanciful thoughts and imaginations, and those who are the first and foremost in discussions and dialectical argumentation."³⁰

The difficulty is further augmented by the fact that knowledge, like being, does not lend itself to easy definitions. Knowledge is circular in that every time we try to define it, we are bound to do it through itself. There is no way we can exclude the term to be defined from the definition we may provide for it. Here Sadra points to a strong parallelism between knowledge (*'ilm*) considered from this point of view and being (*wujud*) as the most comprehensive reality that defies definition, and this is the first step in constructing knowledge as a mode of being:

"It seems that knowledge is among those realities whose ipseity (*inniyyah*) is identical with its essence (*mahiyyah*). Realities of this kind cannot be defined, for definition consists of genus and difference, both of which are universals whereas every being is a particular reality by itself. It cannot be made known through complete description either because there is nothing more known than knowledge as it is an existential state of consciousness (*halah wijdaniyyah*)³¹ which the knower, being alive, finds in his essence from the very beginning without veil or obscurity. It is not [in the nature of knowledge] to allow itself to be known by something more apparent and clear because everything becomes clear to the intellect by the knowledge it has. How does then knowledge become clear by anything other than itself?"³²

Even though the circular and non-definitional nature of knowledge represents common sense epistemology in Islamic thought and is shared by

various schools³³, this is where Mulla Sadra takes his departure from his predecessors by equating knowledge (*'ilm*) with being (*wujud*). For Sadra, the ultimate object of knowledge is being particularized through a myriad of modes, states and instances. In fact, in many places, Sadra defines knowledge simply as a mode of being (*nahw al-wujud*): when we say that we know something, we affirm or deny the existence of something, and this cannot be other than being. In this generic sense, being is the standing condition of all knowledge and precedes the discursive considerations of the knowing subject. That is why Sadra makes knowledge of being indispensable for a proper understanding of knowledge:

“If someone is ignorant about the question of *being*, he is of necessity ignorant about all of the principles of knowledge and foundations because it is through *being* that everything is known, and it is the beginning of all description (*tasawwur*) and more known than anything that provides description. When someone ignores it, he ignores everything besides it. As we have mentioned before, the true knowledge of *being* comes about only through unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*mushahadah*). It has thus been said that ‘he who has no unveiling has no knowledge’.”³⁴

To know something is to grasp and appropriate³⁵ its intelligible form (*al-surat al-ma'qulah*), and the intelligible forms are not mere concepts, notions or contents of the mind but substances that belong to the world of the *intelligibilia*³⁶. The key here is to understand the ontological status of the intelligible world from which the intellect obtains the intelligible forms and with which it ultimately becomes united. Following the Neoplatonists before him, Sadra establishes the world of the *intelligibilia* as an independent realm of existence where the forms and archetypal realities of things reside. In a strictly hierarchical scale of being, the intelligible world occupies a place higher than the physical and/or sensate world, which is construed to be only a dim reflection of the world of Platonic Ideas.³⁷ To use Sadra’s own words, “material forms are nothing but icons and moulds of these disembodied [i.e., intelligible] forms”.³⁸ Since the Ideas or what Sadra calls ‘intelligible forms’ exist in an immutable world above the world of generation and corruption, they enjoy universality and permanence.

The radical distinction that Plato and his followers had drawn between the *sensibilia* and the *intelligibilia* is fully incorporated by Sadra with a clear sense of ontological superiority: since the *intelligibilia* are not bound by such material conditions as generation and corruption or movement and rest, they enjoy a higher ontological status. The epistemic corollary of this view is even more important for our purposes here, and it is the conviction that since the *intelligibilia* are grounded in the immutable world of being and forms, they are cognitively more reliable than the senses.³⁹ The senses through which we come to experience the *sensibilia* help us establish the corporeal reality of things whereas their meaning and intelligible structure is disclosed by the intellect and by its participation in the world of the *intelligibilia*. The knowledge of things obtained through the intellect, which we must understand in its Sadrean sense of uniting with the intelligible world (*ittihad al-'aqil wa'l-ma'qul*), is closer to the nature of things. Even when looking at sensible objects, the intellect seeks the intelligible form and

structure in them; otherwise we would be mistaking the function of the intellect for that of the senses. In fact, this is also the basis of the Aristotelian concept ofhylomorphism and ‘abstraction’: we know things by abstracting and extracting their form from matter. This explains why Sadra considers intellection as the ‘disclosure’ of being: by knowing things, we become ‘united’ with their intelligible forms that are beyond their corporeal-sensate attributes.

Now it is clear that when Mulla Sadra, like Plato and Plotinus before him, speaks of intelligible forms and substances, he insists on the fact that they imply an ontological state of being and that this intelligible and ‘formal’ reality is more real and essential than the material properties of things that we detect through our senses.⁴⁰ In other words, when the intellect unites with intelligible forms, it does not generate a mere noetic state internal and intrinsic to the mind but becomes united with a particular actuality or, still better, particular aspect of being. In Sadra’s words, “when the soul intellects something, it becomes united with its intellective form”.⁴¹ What this view implies is that we perceive the reality of X only by standing in a cognitive relation to the intellective form of X. Every act of intellection involves taking a stance towards being and uncovering an aspect of it, and this is foundational to the unity of being and knowledge – a theme that runs through the Sadrean corpus.

To understand Sadra’s position fully, we may remember that in the Platonic tradition, sense data, reserved for the transient world of becoming, could only yield opinion (*doxa*), which is ontologically imperfect and epistemologically unreliable, whereas *episteme*, the real knowledge of things grounded in the immutable world of being, can be obtained only from the world of the Forms, which has a higher ontological status and warrants epistemic credibility.⁴² There is thus a clear juxtaposition between the *sensibilia* (*mahsusat*) and *doxa* on the one hand, and the *intelligibilia* (*ma’qulat*) and *episteme*, on the other. In this context, the opposite of being is not non-being or non-existence but becoming, and this is a crucial point for the understanding of Sadra and the Neoplatonists.⁴³ As Sadra repeatedly states, being is reality, perfection, existential plenitude, completion, comprehensiveness, permanence, light, clarity, goodness and order whereas becoming is imperfection, confusion, cloudiness, transience and illusion.⁴⁴ This accords intelligible forms an epistemic status far more rigorous and reliable than the senses. This distinction is crucial because the primary interest of the philosopher lies not in the transient and contingent world of the senses but in the universal and immutable nature of things – a quest that sets the traditional philosopher radically apart from the (post)modern ontologies of the contingent.

An important premise from which Sadra draws most of his conclusions can be stated as follows: the mode of being proper to intelligible forms is higher than the mode of being proper to material substances. The order of intelligibility has a higher ontological status because it transcends the limitations of corporeality. Intelligible forms have a concrete existence of their own and are even more concrete and ‘powerful’ than corporeal substances. That is why Sadra states that “the realization of perceptual forms

for [in] the perceiving substance is stronger in realization (*tahsil*) and perfection (*takmil*) than the realization of natural forms in matter and its kinds.”⁴⁵ The “intellective horse” (*al-faras al-‘aqli*), i.e., the intelligible reality/form of the horse is more real than the physical horse in the barn: the intellective horse is a simple unique being containing in its simplicity all of the lower species and instances of ‘horse-ness’. In this sense, the real horse is not the physical horse composed of flesh and bones but the ‘archetypal horse’ detached and disembodied from the entanglements of material existence. An individual horse may die, disappear, take various colors, sizes, and types, all of which lend themselves to impermanency and imperfection whereas the ‘intellective horse’ remains constant and determines the context within which we attribute specific qualities and ‘meaning-properties’ to the physical horse. After all, the idea of horse-ness does not die with the perishing of the individual horse. In Sadra’s words:

“These forms [i.e., the archetypal forms] are more exalted and nobler than what is to be found in lower existents. Thus this animal in flesh, composed of contradictory qualities and forms in constant change, is a parable and shadow for the simple animal while there is still a higher [animal] above it. Now, this is the intellective animal which is simple, singular, and containing in its simplicity all of the individual instances and classes of material and mental existence under its species. And this is its universal archetype, i.e., the intellective horse. This holds true for all species of animals and other existents ... When the being of something intensifies, it passes from its present species to a higher one even though every intensification takes place with full involvement in its current species [i.e., after exhausting all possibilities and potentialities in that species].”⁴⁶

When the mind perceives a sensate object, it transforms it into a mental concept but leaves its sensate and corporeal properties behind. When we look at a mountain, for instance, our minds do not become rock. When we think of fire, our minds do not become hot. For Sadra, this simply means that the mind does not appropriate such ‘weak qualities’ as position, time, matter, growth, etc. By eliminating such material qualities, we do not become less knowledgeable about things but come closer to grasping their intelligible forms and, eventually, uniting with them.

Intelligibility, Disembodiment and Knowledge

In establishing the ontological status of intelligible forms as ‘more’ and ‘higher’, Sadra adopts an old Peripatetic principle⁴⁷ and identifies the basis of intelligibility as incorporeality and disembodiment (*tajarrud*). According to this view, the more removed a thing is from corporeality, the closer it is to have more meanings or meaning-properties. The possibility of a substance becoming more intense in intelligibility is proportionate to its being disengaged and disembodied from the limitations of material existence. Sensible qualities are local and transient whereas intellectual properties are universal and non-spatial. The *experience* of hotness and coldness in physical entities, for instance, is bound by time and space and its existence depends on the presence of hot or cold objects. The particularity of sensible objects makes their experience a limited one in that they can be sensed only as individual objects, under specific circumstances, in definite time and space coordinates, etc. Hotness and coldness as *universals*, however, do not require the presence or absence of any such object, and their application to infinite number of objects is not enhanced or hampered by the quantity of hot and cold objects. Things of such a universal nature are more real in the sense that they have a higher share of intelligibility.⁴⁸

This leads to a tripartite classification of knowledge, whose roots go back to Ibn Sina. When a substance is completely immersed in matter and corporeality, it is called sensation (*hiss*) and forms the basis of sense-perception. For both Ibn Sina and Sadra, this level represents the minimal definition of existence. When it is partially disembodied from matter, it is called “imaginal” (*khayal*) and represents an intermediary stage or isthmus (*barzakh*) between matter and pure intelligibles. Lastly, when something is completely disengaged from material attachments, it becomes a pure intellect (*‘aql*) and intelligible (*ma‘qul*), making intellection (*ta‘aqqul*) possible.⁴⁹ This new classification is introduced here to substantiate the ontological basis of the degrees of disembodiment as a condition of knowledge.

Since Sadra considers intelligibility as a function of being and defines it in terms of complete or partial disembodiment (*tajarrud*), he comes back to the concept of *tashkik* (gradation of being) and argues that things are subject to intensification (*tashaddud*) and diminution (*tada‘‘uf*) in accord with their ontological state.⁵⁰ As stated before, the principle of gradation establishes a hierarchical order of being in which substances undergo an upward or downward journey. When a being actualizes its dormant potentialities and attains further perfection in terms of its properties, qualities, and so on, it intensifies in being. To bring this into sharper focus, Sadra reverses common sense ontology. Instead of defining existential properties of things (*lawazim al-wujud*) as qualities acquired by a substance, he construes them as various modes and states of being in which a subject intensifies or diminishes. When a red apple, for instance, is ripened, it increases in redness rather than merely assuming the quality of ‘more redness’. By the same token, when substances actualize their potentialities and become more perfect, they eventually increase in being, namely intensify in existention and intelligibility. This is predicated upon the idea that actuality implies

perfection while potentiality signifies privation and imperfection. In the language of Neoplatonism, actuality means full realization and establishment in existence because such a substance is not deprived of any qualities and attributes it potentially possesses. By contrast, a potential substance is marred by imperfection because it is considered to be ‘non-existent’ until it realizes its potential from within or by an external agent.⁵¹

The link between the ontological state of things and their proximity to, or distance from, the intelligible world is established by the form (*al-surah*) – the very term both Platonists and Peripatetics use profusely to account for meaning in things. ‘Form’ as disembodiment and intelligibility underscores the assumption that the further removed a thing is from corporeal existence, the closer it is to pure intelligibility.⁵² Sadra explains this as follows:

“Forms of things are of two kinds. The first is the material form that subsists with matter, position, space, and so on. This kind of form, due to its mode of material existence, can be neither intelligible in actuality nor sensible (*mahsusah*) except accidentally. The second kind is the form that is disengaged from matter, position and space either completely, in which case it is an intelligible form in actuality, or partially in which case it is an imaginal or sensate form in actuality. It has become clear in the view of all philosophers that the being of the intelligible form in actuality and its being for the intellector are one and the same thing from one point of view without disagreement. In the same way, the being of a sensible, insofar as it is a sensible, is identical with its being for the sensate substance.”⁵³

A peculiar aspect of Sadra’s gradational ontology and its application to the concept of knowledge is what is called ‘axiarchism’ i.e., the view that the world is grounded in value and that the reality of being can be explained primarily in valuational terms.⁵⁴ The ontological hierarchy that Sadra applies to knowledge invests his gradational ontology with an axiological dimension in that the language of ontological states is saturated with qualitative and valuational terms. An ontologically higher substance is not only more in terms of its existential properties but also more perfect, real, reliable, worthier of consideration, has more light and luminosity, and more likely to be the immediate concern of the philosopher. We can also say that ontologically higher existents are closer to being true, good, and beautiful – terms that are to be understood in their Platonic sense. For Sadra, being signifies pure light (*al-nur*) and light is goodness as opposed to darkness that represents ‘evil’. At this point, Sadra, following Ibn al-‘Arabi, defines being as goodness par excellence (*khayr mahd, summum bonum*) because being is not only the ontic and/or physical ground of things but also the source of such axiological qualities as reality, meaning, truth, intelligibility, goodness, beauty, plenitude, perfection, etc. The following depiction of the world of the *intelligibilia*, which Sadra quotes from the *Theology of Aristotle*, provides a good summary of the axiological overtones of intelligibility:

“The higher world is the perfect living [reality] in which everything is contained for it has originated from the primary perfect source. In it is to be found every soul and every intellect, and there is absolutely no poverty and need here since the things in here are all filled with richness and life as if it

is life that exceeds and gushes forth. The life of these things issues forth from one single source, not as if it is just one single heat or one single wind alone but all of them are one single quality in which there is every food [i.e., livelihood for them].”⁵⁵

Referring to Plato this time, Sadra describes the intelligible world as follows:

“There are two worlds: the world of disengaged substances that pertain to the intellect and the soul, and the world of luminous and dark bodies. The world of disembodied substances is the world of knowledge and vitality in which God created a perceptual, intellective and imaginal form vis-à-vis what is to be found in the world of physical bodies, which is their vitality and the mirror of their appearance. The Divine Book refers to this: “For those who of their Lord’s Presence stand in fear, two gardens [of paradise are readied]”.⁵⁶ Concerning this matter, the noble Plato has said that the world is of two kinds: the world of the intellect in which are to be found the intellective Forms (*muthul*), and the world of sense (*hiss*) in which are to be found the obscurities of sensation⁵⁷ ... The existence of the world of the intellect is the principle of all other beings and their sustainer, active principle, and ultimate goal. Their clear vision is hidden to man because of the excess of their manifestation and our veiling from them because of the distraction of material bodies. We can reasonably point to the unity of this world and the simplicity of everything in it and the multiplicity of this world [of physical bodies] in view of the number of individuals. It should be known that the luminous Platonic Forms are substances in themselves and their being is the source of the substances of this world and their quiddities. They are also the realities of these sensate bodies.”⁵⁸

Gradation of being, as defined by Sadra, leads to the hierarchy of the cosmos on the one hand, and the ultimate reducibility of all qualities to being, on the other. One favorite example that Sadra is fond of using to illustrate this is ‘man’ (*al-insan*) and his relation to plant and animal kingdoms. As a higher state of being, ‘humanity’ contains everything that belongs to plants and animals. Plants thrive on vegetation, animals possess vegetative faculty with a host of other qualities missing in plants such as mobility and sensation, and man contains all of these qualities at a higher level or in what Sadra calls ‘ontological simplicity’ (*basit*). Man contains the totality of plant and animal attributes in a ‘simple manner’, and being a simple substance vis-à-vis the lower states below it, man gains a higher ontological status. Sadra expresses this with a somewhat cryptic phrase that we do not find in other philosophers: “a simple reality is all things” (*basit al-haqiqah kull al-ashya*).⁵⁹ The exact meaning of this phrase can be clarified only within the specific context in which it is used. When we apply it to the concept of man, it signifies that ‘man-ness’ contains all qualities and properties that belong to ‘plant-ness’ and ‘animal-ness’. Another example is light and its degrees of intensification. A candle light is imperfect compared to moon light and moonlight is imperfect compared to the light of the sun. The sun, the most condensed source of light, is ontologically higher than all other forms of light. Ontological simplicity,

then, implies not only 'non-compositeness' but also, and perhaps more importantly, intensity, priority, and completeness.

Sadra applies the same framework to intelligible substances, and this is a crucial difference between him and the Peripatetic philosophers who accept gradation (*tashkik*) only for logical concepts. The intelligible world, just like the order of being, allows gradation in terms of intensification and diminution: an intelligible substance becomes more intense and higher when it contains all of the intelligible realities below it. To use our previous example, man contains in himself all possible intelligibility and meaning available to animal and vegetative states. When we talk about the essence of man-ness, we do not exclude from it anything that belongs to the definitions of animal-ness and plant-ness. 'Human-ness' as an intelligible form contains all of the lower and imperfect states of meaning in a simple manner. In this sense, man ranks higher than plants and animals not only in the hierarchy of the natural world but also in meaning and intelligibility.

The Simple Intellect and the Intelligible World

This principle plays such a central role in Sadra's epistemology that he comes back to its application to the world of the *intelligibilia* over and over again, phrasing it this time as the simplicity of intelligible realities: "a simple intellect is all intelligibles" (*'aql basit kull al-ma'qulat*). Put in simple terms, the simple intellect becomes all that it knows and it knows its objects of knowledge in a simple manner. At this point, it becomes clear in what sense and order Sadra uses intelligibility. Since Sadra always works against the background idea of the primacy of being, he defines intelligibility not in terms of the knowing subject's mastery of the world but in relation to the degrees of being. This leads Sadra to a tripartite division of being with three corresponding stages of disembodiment.

Sensible forms apply to corporeal bodies, and their disembodiment (*naz'*) from matter is conditioned by such attributes as quantity, change, time, etc. Sadra calls this type of disembodiment 'imperfect and conditioned'. Imaginal forms apply to things which are suspended between purely material and purely intelligible realms of existence. Sadra calls their mode of disembodiment 'medial' (*mutawassit*). Intellective forms are the intelligible realities of things, which are above the limitations of corporeal and imaginal existence. Their mode of disembodiment is called 'perfect' or 'complete' (*tamm*) because at this level of gradation nothing is left out of the ontological definition of things.⁶⁰ When the soul or the intellect in actuality reaches this stage, it becomes ready for an even higher journey to the world of the Proximate Angels (*al-mala'ikat al-muqarrabun*). It is at this stage of complete disembodiment that the soul, which was once a pure potentiality, becomes a simple intellect:

"By virtue of these meanings, the soul becomes a knower and an intellect in an order of intellection from the First Principle to the Intellects, which are the Proximate Angels, to the Souls, which are the Angels, after the first and then to the heavens and the elements and the form (*hay'ah*) of everything and their nature. Thus it becomes an intellectual knower illuminated by the light of the First Intellect."⁶¹

In another passage, Sadra posits the simple intellect (*'aql basit*) as the link between the order of being and order of thought:

"When the soul passes from potentiality to actuality, it becomes a simple intellect, which is all things. This is a matter that has been firmly established in our view. The explanation of this is as follows: knowledge and intellection (*al-ta'qqul*) is a mode of being, and being is united with quiddity. In the same way, knowledge is united with what is known (*al-ma'lum*). Some beings are low in degree and weak and some lofty and strong. Those that are low [in degree] have very little share in meanings (*ma'ani*) and confined to one single meaning like a single quantity (...) whereas those that are noble [in rank] are the essence of the plenitude of meanings even if they are small in quantity or have no quantity at all like the rational soul.

By the same token, knowledge has various kinds, some of which are low in degree such as sense-perception [since] it is impossible to sense multiple sensibles through a single sensation. [But] some are higher in rank, such as

intellection, in that a single intellect is sufficient to intellect an infinite number of intelligibles, as in the case of the simple intellect. In short, whatever has a higher status in being is more capable of [attaining] the knowables (ma'lumat) and more intense in containing quiddities. ... when we know something through its perfect definition, we know it with its full truth and reality even if we cannot know all of its parts [i.e., its sensate and intellectual properties] at once due to the impossibility of knowing the very truth and reality of anything at a given time.”⁶²

The simple intellect perceives all intelligibles because simplicity implies intensity in being, and this enables the intellect to become capable of appropriating intelligible forms in a more condensed and comprehensive manner. The simple intellect is not merely intellect in actuality but rather the highest rung of intellection, at which level one comes to know the reality of something in its totality. In contrast to sense experience where one's access to objects is screened through the available sense data and hence limited to particular instances of sensate objects, the simple intellect or simple knowledge signifies intellectual cognition that comprises in principle everything there is to know about our object of knowledge. When the simple intellect knows the 'concept' of humanity, for instance, it can run through the entire spectrum of what it means to be human and know all of its modes, accidents, properties, etc. For Sadra, this conclusion is warranted because to know something in a 'simple manner' is to unite with its intelligible essence, which is another way of asserting the unification of the intellect with the intelligible (*ittihad al-'aql wa'l-ma'qul*). Here, we are once again reminded of the idea that the intelligible reality of things is ontologically more real and epistemologically more reliable than their corporeal templates, and this principle applies *mutatis mutandis* to simple intellects that yield simple knowledge. Sadra restates his case in the following paragraph with a historical note:

“The realization of this matter [i.e., the unification of the intellect and the intelligible] is not possible except by having recourse to the principles that were mentioned in the beginnings of this book [i.e., the *Asfar*] concerning the view that *being* is the principal reality in existence and the quiddity is derived from it. It is certain that *being* allows intensification and diminution, and whatever is strong in being (*qawiyy al-wujud*) becomes more inclusive and encompassing of universal meanings and intellectual quiddities that are disengaged [from matter]. When *being* reaches the level of the simple intellect, which is completely disengaged from the world of corporeal bodies and quantities, it becomes all of the *intelligibilia* and all things in a manner more virtuous and nobler than what they are based upon. Whoever has not tasted this path cannot understand the simple intellect, which is the source of all knowledge in detail (*al-'ulum al-tafsiliyyah*). That is why you see most of the virtuous people finding it very difficult and unable to verify in spite of their deep involvement in the sciences of wisdom as in the case of Shaykh Suhrawardi in the *Mutarahat*, *Talwihat*, and *Hikmat al-ishraq* who has clearly rejected this view, and Imam [Fakhr al-Din] al-Razi and those who enjoy their ranks.”⁶³

What prevents the soul as a simple intellect from perceiving intelligible essences on a continuous basis or “all at once” (*daf'ah wahidah*) is the intervention of sensible and imaginal faculties. The faculty of imagination (*khayal*) acts as an intermediary between the sensible and the intelligible domains and cannot sustain incorporeal forms or meanings at the same level as the intellect. But since the intellect belongs essentially to the world of the *intelligibilia*, it is capable of making multiple meanings present (*istihdar*) to itself all at once. As the saying goes, says Sadra, “it is in the nature of the intellect to make many one (*tawhid al-kathir*) and of the senses [to make] one many (*takthir al-wahid*).”⁶⁴ At this juncture, Sadra establishes an isomorphic unity between the intellect and the intelligible world, and it is this intrinsic isomorphism between the two that enables the intellect to know all things.⁶⁵ In many ways, this is what Aristotle had in mind when he said that “only the like can know the like”.⁶⁶ The soul or the simple intellect remains a single and unitary substance (*jawhar basit*) in knowing various things, and multiplicity in intellection is attributed to the differences of such ‘epistemic tools’ as sensation and imagination. Unobstructed by the contingencies of sensation, knowledge now becomes ‘presence’ (*hudur*) and ‘unveiling’ (*kashf*):

“The soul that knows a multitude of things through intellectual realization and disembodiment from the garment of being human does not become destitute of their knowledge but rather more [intense] as unveiling and clearing (*wuduh*). In spite of this, when the soul goes above the differences of time and space, its knowledge of things becomes present in it completely all at once as in the case of the knowledge of separate substances whose knowledge [of things] is completely present in them in actuality without the obscurity of potentiality.”⁶⁷

The simplicity of the soul leads Sadra to an important tenet of his epistemology, i.e., the particular nature of knowledge as it is acquired in the soul. Disengagement or disembodiment as a standing condition of intelligibility renders knowledge an existential state of consciousness. Knowledge is, thus, a particular and simple ‘identity’ or state (*huwiyyah shakhsiyyah basitah*) despite the fact that the human mind tends to consider all knowledge under the rubric of universals (*kulliyat*) that act as intermediaries between the order of being and the order of thought – a dichotomy that Sadra seeks to overcome through his realist ontology of intelligible forms.

In light of these considerations, it is not difficult to see why Sadra insists that our ‘ordinary’ or natural encounter with the world is not mediated through second-order concepts but given in first-order experiences. In perceiving the tree in front of me, my knowledge-experience is a direct act of ‘seeing’, which involves an intuition of some kind and which is not predicated upon such universals as the species, genus, or differentia. It then follows that our most intimate and primary standing towards the world remains particular and specific, and the larger context within which this experience is made possible is provided by the all-inclusive reality of being. It is only at the level of second-order conceptualization that we speak of intelligible forms as abstractions, concepts, and notions. This is also what is

meant by the ‘presence’ (*hudur*) of something to itself and to other things: presence implies something concrete and particular.

In stressing the immediacy and self-evidentiality of perception, Sadra adopts Suhrawardi’s terminology and uses the words “vision (*ibsar*) and “witnessing” (*mushahadah*) to describe the particularity of knowledge-experience.⁶⁸ In his discussion of perception as a case of knowledge-by-presence (*al-‘ilm al-huduri*), Suhrawardi states that “perception takes place only when the soul has a [concrete] vision [of something] and vision is not through a universal but particular form. It then follows that the soul has an illuminative and presential knowledge [not mediated] through a [representational] form.”⁶⁹ The world as representation is an abstract, mediated and second-order world whereas our most primordial experience of it, as in the case of seeing and hearing, is never captured fully in representations of any kind. Hence Sadra’s relentless attacks on the representational theory of knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-irtisami*) and knowledge-by-acquisition (*al-‘ilm al-husuli*), and his staunch defense of knowledge-by-presence (*al-‘ilm al-huduri*).

Following Suhrawardi’s insight, Sadra attempts to establish intellection in terms that we would normally attribute to sense-experience. Sadra’s main concern seems to construe intellection as a unique, simple and particular encounter with the world in a manner as immediate as sense-perception without the limitations of corporeal existence attached to it. Thus he says that

“knowledge, as we have explained before, is the non-material being, and being in itself is not a universal nature belonging to a particular genus or species even if it is divided into species through the differentia or into individuals through individual properties or into classes through accidental conditions. Every knowledge is a particular and simple identity not to be grouped under a universal meaning [i.e., concept] belonging to an essence.”⁷⁰

Sadra further states that intellection takes place not through the “incarnation of an intelligible form in the soul but through archetypes (*muthul*) that reside in the mind and the soul’s unification with them.” Since the intelligible forms of things are ontologically real substances inhabiting the world of the *intelligibilia*, the soul as the simple intellect can know things and their perceptual properties only by uniting with their intelligible essences. With this, Sadra asserts, one more time, the unification of the intellect and the intelligible.

Sadra’s construction of intelligible substances as ontological actualities has a number of implications for his concept of knowledge and the ‘constructivist’ theory of intelligibility. The realist ontology of the intelligible world prevents intelligible forms, ideas, concepts, and meanings from becoming mere psychological and mental states residing in the mind. Intelligible forms are not mere instruments through which we know the extra-mental world. Rather, they are the very basis upon which the world is what it is. In fact, we may even go so far as to say that without the intelligible forms, there would be no such thing as the ‘world’. Put differently, objects as we know them do not precede intelligibility. What we

conventionally call 'reality' is not an aggregate of objects devoid of intelligibility to which clusters of meaning and signification are attributed *a posteriori*. The world is given to us already imbued with meaning, and that is why we are as much dependent on the world for meaning as it is dependent on our 'subjectivity' for epistemic order and structure.⁷¹

In the *Asfar*, when discussing the primacy of self-knowledge over against knowledge-by-representation, Sadra makes an interesting contrast between physical instruments and light to show the place of intelligibility in our experience of the world. Intelligible forms are not like manual instruments with which we operate but which are dispensable in themselves. Rather, they are like the light that makes vision possible:

"One cannot say that these forms are instruments for the soul's intellecting things other than itself. Rather they are intelligible for the soul by themselves in the sense that whatever corresponds to them outside the soul [i.e., in the extra-mental world] becomes intelligible for the soul through them. Because we say that if these forms were not intelligible for the soul in the first place, they would not be perceived by it. The mediation of these forms in perceiving things is not like the mediation of manual instruments (*alah sina'iyah*) in carrying out bodily works (*al-a'mal al-badaniyyah*) but rather like the sensate light in perceiving visible things whereby the light is seen first and then everything else is seen through it."⁷²

Sadra's attempt to define knowledge in terms of being and its modalities leads him to a 'non-subjectivist' concept of knowledge. In contrast to modern epistemology that anchors meaning and knowledge in the knowing subject and its paraphernalia, Sadra places intellection within the larger context of being, which encompasses the mind. Sadra thus considers the 'non-self' essential for the knowledge of the self. 'Going out of' the self and uniting with the intelligible world is now posited as a standing condition of knowledge. This renders Sadra's theory of knowledge a thoroughly non-subjectivist enterprise. By defining intelligibility as belonging to the world of the *intelligibilia*, Sadra dethrones the knowing subject as the sole or even the proper depository of meaning, placing the concept of agency in a larger context of ontological meanings and relations.

Notes

1 Rudolph Otto, *Mysticism East and West* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), p. 34.

2 See my “Knowledge as the Unity of the Intellect and the Object of Intellection in Islamic Philosophy: A Historical Survey from Plato to Mulla Sadra”, *Transcendent Philosophy: An International Journal for Comparative Philosophy and Mysticism*, Vol. 1, Number 1, (June 2000), pp. 73-91. I have extensively analyzed the unification argument in my dissertation entitled “Mulla Sadra’s Theory of Knowledge and the Unification of the Intellect and the Intelligible (*ittihad al-‘aqil wa’l-ma’qul*)”, which I am currently preparing for publication. In addition to the relevant sections of the *Asfar*, I, 3, Sadra’s *Risalah fi ittihad al-‘aqil wa’l-ma’qul* is devoted to the analysis of the unification of the intellect and the intelligible. I translated this treatise into English and will publish it as an appendix to my Ph.D. dissertation. The Arabic original of the *Risalah* has been edited and published by Hamid Naji Isfahani in *Majmu’a-yi rasa’il-i falsafi-yi Sadr al-Muta’allihin* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Hikmat, 1375 (A. H. Lunar)) pp. 63-103.

3 *The Metaphysics of Sabzawari*, translated by M. Mohaghegh and T. Izutsu, (New York: Caravan Books, 1977), pp. 31-2.

4 Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, *al-Hikmat al-muta’aliyah fi’l-asfar al-‘aqliyyah al-arba’ah*, (cited hereafter as *Asfar*) edited by M. Rida al-Muzaffar (Tehran, 1383, A. H.), I, 1, p. 25. Cf. also Alparslan Açikgenç, *Being and Existence in Sadra and Heidegger*, (Malaysia: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1993), pp. 19-23.

5 Cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 92b 10-15.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 26. The meaning of Sadra’s statement that “whatever has no definition has no proof” is that any concept defying definition needs no proof and demonstration for its ‘why-ness’ (*limma*; because the ultimate proof is the why-ness of that particular thing in question). This idea goes back to Ibn Sina. Cf. his *al-Shifa’*, *Ilahiyat*, p. 29. Sadra explains this point by saying that “being has no purpose beyond itself and it is the ultimate agent of all agents, the form of all forms, and the aim of all aims. It is the ultimate aim and goodness *par excellence* (*khayr al-mahd, summum bonum*) in which all realities come to an end.” *Asfar*, I, 1, p. 54.

7 *Kitab al-masha’ir*, edited by Henry Corbin with French translation as *Le Livre des pénétrations métaphysiques* (Téhéran: Institut Français d’Iranologie de Téhéran, 1982), p. 24. Sadra also says that “the knowledge of being can be acquired either by seeing by presence (*al-mushahadah al-huduriyyah*) or by rational argumentation by analyzing its effects (i.e. its appearances) and concomitants, but this kind of knowledge obtained through reasoning is only a flimsy knowledge.” *Asfar*, I, 1, p. 53.

8 At his point, two meanings of *mahiyyah* need to be explained. *Mahiyyah* in the particular sense (*mahiyyah bi’l-ma’na al-akhass*) is the answer to the question ‘what is it?’ (*ma hiya?*). *Mahiyyah* in the general sense (*mahiyyah bi’l-ma’na al-‘amm*) is that by which a thing is what it is (*ma bi-hi al-shay’ huwa huwa*). The second meaning of *mahiyyah*, which is the ontological sense here, is nothing other than being because for Sadra the only reality is being. The first meaning of *mahiyyah*, which concerns the logical essence, is usually translated as ‘quiddity’ to distinguish it from ‘essence’ in the general and ontological sense. See Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence*, (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1971), p. 75.

9 *Asfar*, I, 1, pp. 55-56, 61. Cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 92b.

10 *Asfar*, I, 1, p. 46.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

12 Cf. my “Dawud al-Qaysari on Being as Truth and Reality” in *Knowledge is Light: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Zeylan Morris, (ABC International Group Inc, Chicago, 1999), pp. 233-249.

13 Cf. David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 24-25.

14 For Ibn Rushd’s objections against Ibn Sina see his *Tahafut al-tahafut*, edited by Sulayman Dunya, (Cairo: 1964), vol. II, p. 80; English translation by Van den Bergh *The*

Incoherence of the Incoherence, (London: Luzac, 1978), p. 118. St. Thomas followed Ibn Rushd and criticized Ibn Sina on the basis of this misreading. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, translated with an Introduction by A. Maurer, (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983). Etienne Gilson follows the traditional Thomistic interpretation of Ibn Sina on this particular point. See his *Being and Some Philosophers*, (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), p. 52 and *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), pp. 190-1. For Ibn Sina's own discussion of the problem, see *Danish nama-i 'ala'i*, translated by P. Morewedge as *The Metaphysica of Avicenna (Ibn Sina)* (Columbia University Press, 1973). See also F. Rahman, 'Essence and Existence in Avicenna' *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies*, IV (1958), 1-16 and P. Morewedge, 'Philosophical Analysis and Ibn Sina's 'Essence-Existence' Distinction' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 92.3 (1972), pp. 425-435.

15Ibid., p. 54-55. Cf. *al-Masa'il al-qudsiyyah in Rasa'il Falsafi*, ed. S. J. Ashtiyani (Qum: Markaz-i Intisharat-i Daftar-i Tablighat-i Islami, 1362), p. 12.

16Ibid., p. 40, 48. Cf. also Mehdi Aminrazavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination*, (Surrey, U.K.: Curzon, 1997), pp. 33-5.

17After stating that being realizes itself by itself, Sadra responds to the following objection: if the realization of being depends on itself, then being assumes the position of the Necessary Being (*wajib al-wujud*). In response, Sadra says that "the meaning of the Necessary Being is that it necessitates its own existence and reality by itself without being in need of any active agent and performer whereas the meaning of the realization of existence by itself is that when it is realized it is either by itself like the necessary being or through an active agent whose realization is not in need of another existence by which it subsists. This realization takes place only after the effect of the agent with its existence and its qualification with existence". *Asfar*, I, 1, p. 40-41; cf. *al-Masa'il al-qudsiyyah*, p. 13.

18*Asfar*, I, 1, p. 40.

19Ibid., p. 59.

20Ibid., p. 61.

21Ibid., p. 41, 120.

22As a repercussion of the doctrine of the primacy of existence, we find in Mulla Hadi Sabzawari's *Sharh al-manzumah* (Qum: Nab Publications, 1995), Vol. II, p. 60, the statement that "existence is the source of all explanations in which all descriptions come to an end. And it is the source of all sources and descriptions. When the Prophet, may peace and blessing be upon him, was asked 'by what did you know your Lord?' he replied that 'I knew everything by Him'".

23 Cf. John E. Smith, "Is Existence a Valid Philosophical Concept?" in his *Reason and God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 122.

24Izutsu, *op. cit.* p. 3.

25 Al-Farabi, *al-Masa'il al-mutafarriqah*, ed. by F. Dieterici, (Leiden, 1890), p. 90. Al-Farabi was the first Muslim philosopher to formulate a clear distinction between the logical and ontological senses of existential propositions. See N. Rescher, "al-Farabi on the Question: Is Existence a Predicate?" in *Studies in the History of Arabic Logic*, (University of Pittsburg Press, 1963), pp. 39-42 and *ibidem* "The Concept of Existence in Arabic Logic and Philosophy" in *Studies in Arabic Philosophy*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1966), pp. 69-80; Fadlou Shehadi, *Metaphysics in Islamic Philosophy*, (New York: Caravan Books, 1982), pp. 45-69.

26 Fazlur Rahman translates *tashkik* as "systematic ambiguity", which I find itself to be ambiguous. The sense of *tashkik* is quite clear in Sadra's writings: it refers to the hierarchy and gradation of being in terms of existential intensification or diminution.

27*Asfar*, I, 1, p. 36-7

28Ibid., p. 36. The question of analogical gradation in essences is beyond the scope of our present study. For the classical formulation of the problem, see the discussion of *tashkik* in al-Tahanawi's *Kashshaf istilahat al-funun* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Milliyah, 1998), Vol. II, pp. 530-3.

29 It is interesting to note that in some places Sadra refers to Suhrawardi as a 'Stoic' (*riwaqi*) in his writings. For a discussion of this point, see John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardi and the Heritage of the Greeks* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 187-190.

30 *Asfar*, I, 3, pp. 312-3.

31 I translate the word *wijdan* as an existential state of consciousness to bring out the etymological connection between *wujud* (being) and *wijdan* (consciousness), both of which come from the Arabic root *w-j-d* meaning to 'find' and 'to be found'. The word *wajd* meaning 'ecstasy' comes from the same root and completes the picture: "finding" being results in a state of ecstasy. We may also say that one finds being in a state of ecstasy.

32 *Asfar*, I, 3, p. 278.

33 Cf. Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), pp. 48-49.

34 *al-Shawahid al-rububiyah*, ed. by Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani (Mashhad: al-Markaz al-Jami' li'l-nashr, 1981 (2nd edition)), p. 14. Ibn al-'Arabi uses the expression "he who has no unveiling has no knowledge" in the *Futuhat*: "Sound knowledge is not given by reflection, nor by what the rational thinkers establish by means of their reflective powers. Sound knowledge is only that which God throws into the heart of the knower. It is a divine light for which God singles out any of His servants whom He will, whether angel, messenger, prophet, friend, or person of faith. He who has no unveiling has no knowledge". Ibn al-'Arabi, *al-Futuhat al-makkiyah*, I, 218, 19, quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 170.

35 The Arabic word for perception is *idrak* and means "to reach, to attain, to overtake. It is sometimes translated by classical authors into Persian by *yافت*, that is, "finding", a word which is also employed sometimes to translate *wujud*". See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 214.

36 As Sabzawari points out, the word "form" (*al-surah*) has two meanings. One is the form in the Aristotelian sense, i.e., that to which abstracted concepts correspond in the representational theory of knowledge (*al-'ilm al-husuli*). The second meaning is "essence" but not in the sense of quiddity (*mahiyyah*) as an abstraction of the mind but in the sense of concrete essences that belong to the intelligible world. See *Asfar*, III, p. 284, note 3.

37 Sadra describes this hierarchy as follows: "Thus every reality that is simple from all points of view is the Necessary Being --exalted by His Remembrance--, and it is the plenitude of everything in the most exalted, superior and virtuous way, from which nothing is negated except deficiencies and imperfections. And It is all things, and the plenitude of something is more real and firmer in itself. The pure separate realities (*al-mufaraqat*) that come after It are in proportion to their simple-ness and proximity to the Necessary being, and they are the plenitude and wholeness of the things that are causally below them. The same holds true for every higher reality in comparison to what is below it, for every cause in comparison to its effect, and for every complete [being] in comparison to a deficient [being]." *Ittihad*, p. 95.

38 *Asfar*, I, 3, p. 304.

39 Cf. John Peter Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism: A Study in Ancient Platonic Theology* (Hanover & London, 1991), p. 4.

40 Sadra's discussion of the Platonic Forms (*al-muthul al-aflatuniyyah*) is a good example to illustrate the ontological priority of intelligible substances. After quoting from the *Uthulujiya* attributed to Aristotle, Sadra concludes that "every cosmological being has a luminous and intelligible form in the world of the *intelligibilia* that only man can attain when he perceives the universal intelligibles. If his perception of them is through the body, opaqueness, and darkness, then his perception would be deficient." *Asfar*, II, p. 68.

41 *Ittihad*, p. 97.

42 Cf. Nicholas P. White, "Plato's Metaphysical Epistemology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. by Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 284.

43 Cf. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, VI, 5.2.6-22.

44 Using the language of actuality and potentiality, Sadra says that “the good (*al-khayr*) in things comes from the fact that they are actual whereas evil (*al-sharr*) stems from what is potential. A thing cannot be evil in every respect otherwise it would be non-existent. And no being, in so far as it is something existent, is evil. It becomes evil as a privation of perfection such as ignorance, or it necessitates its own non-existence in other things such as darkness (*al-zulm*)”. *Asfar*, I, 3, p. 58.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 321.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 304.

47 Cf. *Metaphysics*, XII, 1074b-1075a. The idea that the further removed a thing is from its material accidents (*'awarid*) and attachments (*lawahiq*), the more real it is because it is closer to its “formal” (*al-suri*) reality is well expressed by Ibn Sina in the *Najat* when he discusses various forms of perception (*idrak*). Admitting degrees of abstraction (*tajrid*), Ibn Sina states that “it appears that all perception is the taking of the form of the perceived”. See *Kitab al-najat*, ed. by Majid Fakhry (Beirut: Dar al-Ufuq al-Jadidah, 1985), pp. 207-209. Ibn Sina elaborates on the same issue in the *Shifa'*. Cf. *Avicenna's De Anima: Being the Psychophysical Part of Kitab al-shifa'*, ed. by Fazlur Rahman (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 58-60.

48 Sadra applies the same principle to the knower: one has to be detached from the limitations of material existence in order to perceive intelligible forms. This is where Sadra gracefully blends philosophical speculation with the purification of the soul. As he states in various aphorisms, one cannot unite with the intelligible world, the ultimate goal of philosophy, without disengaging oneself from the gross states of existence. In fact, matter (*al-maddah*) is an obstacle for the soul to unite with the intelligible world. Cf. Sadra's remarks in *Asfar*, I, 3, p. 369.

49 *Asfar*, I, 3, p. 286.

50 A logical result of this is what Sadra calls the “penetration of knowledge” (*sarayat al-'ilm*) in all things including animals, plants and minerals. Just as being penetrates all things, knowledge and intelligibility are to be found in things with varying degrees of intensity and reality. Since “rocks and material bodies” too exist, albeit, at the lowest level of existence, they also partake of minimal intelligibility: “Knowledge is a single reality and it is necessary in the Necessary being and contingent in contingent beings in accordance with the reality of being. As we have pointed out before, the source of knowledge, volition and the like is being but some people among the intelligent are incapable of understanding the penetration of knowledge, power, and volition in all existents even in rocks and material bodies just like the penetration of being into them.” *Asfar*, III, 1, pp. 335-6. Cf. also *Asfar*, IV, 1, pp. 163-4.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 343-4. See also Baqillani who places the potential in the category of non-existence. *Kitab al-tawhid*, p. 34-44, quoted in Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

52 Sadra says that a substance whose form is not disengaged from matter cannot be known since matter means ‘darkness’ and thus ignorance as opposed to ‘light’ and ‘presence’, which signifies knowledge. Cf. *Asfar*, I, 3, p. 387 and IV, 1, p. 69.

53 *Asfar*, I, 3, pp. 313-4.

54 Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism*, p. 104. For a fuller exposition and defense of this view, see John Leslie, *Value and Existence*, (New Jersey, 1979).

55 *Ittihad*, p. 100; Cf. also *Asfar*, I, 3, p. 340.

56 The Qur'an, 55/46. Translation by Muhammad Asad.

57 Cf. *al-Shawahid*, p. 205.

58 *Asfar*, I, 3, pp. 503-4. See also *al-Shawahid*, pp. 156-162 for Sadra's detailed discussion of Platonic Forms.

59 *Asfar*, I, 3, pp. 324-5 and *Ittihad*, pp. 93-4.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 362 and also 416.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 362.

62 *Asfar*, I, 3, pp. 377-8.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 373-4.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 380.

65 Sadra confirms the same point about isomorphism in a slightly different way: “From the standpoint of the soul: how can an essence, which is denuded of the intellect, think intellectual forms which are separate from its essence and whose being is extrinsic to its own being? In the same way, the establishment (*thubut*) of something for something else in a general sense is secondary to the establishment of what has already been established. By the same token, the presence of an intellectual being (*ens rationis*) to something else is secondary to its own intellectual being, or a concomitant of it. The intelligible in potentiality is the material form that cannot be established except for an intelligible in potentiality like the physical bodies and quantities among the things with physical location. In a similar manner, the intelligible in actuality cannot be established except for an intelligible in actuality.” *Ittihad*, p. 91.

66 *De Anima*, 405 b.

67 *Asfar*, I, 3, p. 379.

68 *Ibid.*, pp. 296, 316-17, and 385.

69 Suhrawardi, *al-Mashari' wa'l-mutarahat*, p. 485. Cf. Sadra's remarks: “Perception is nothing but the soul's attention to and witnessing of what is perceived. Witnessing takes place not through a universal but a particular form. Therefore the soul by necessity has an illuminative and presential knowledge and not a form superadded to it [antecedently]”. *Asfar*, III, 1, p. 162.

70 *Asfar*, I, 3, p. 382.

71 This is how John McDowell reads Kant's maxim that “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”, and argues that Kant's transcendental argument can be read to lend support to the view that the non-subjective world presents itself to us as saturated with meaning and order even at the level of sense perception. See his *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 18, 39-42.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 318.

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