

Review of Revelation, intellectual intuition and reason in the philosophy of Mulla Sadra: an analysis of the al-Hikmah al-'Arshiyya, by Zailan Moris

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Revelation, Intellectual Intuition and Reason in the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra: An Analysis of the al-Hikmah al- 'Arshiyya. By Zailan Moris. London, Routledge Curzon, 2003, 238 pp. Price PB £18.99. ISBN 0-7007-1503-7.

Sadra al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (1571-1640)—or ‘Mulla Sadra’, as he is more commonly known today—is probably the most penetrating and comprehensive thinker in the later Islamic philosophical tradition, but the accidents of history have meant that the serious study and teaching of his most original works has subsequently been restricted, for the most part, to Imami Shiite circles in Iran and immediately neighbouring regions. The fact that this substantial new overview of Sadra’s central philosophical theses (originally prepared as a 1994 doctoral dissertation at the American University) is the work of a noted Malaysian woman intellectual is therefore a hopeful sign that considerably wider Muslim audiences are at last beginning to recognize the potential contemporary significance of the perennial issues and the distinctive guiding insights that are so carefully developed in Sadra’s pioneering thought.

The title of this volume already carefully signals and reflects the contrasting—and most often publicly conflicting—intellectual and religious dimensions of Islamic thought, practice and authority which provided the distinctive problematic underlying all of Sadra’s more original works, both popular and more specialised: i.e., the disparate gamut of alternative traditions and interpretive approaches that were often summarized by the shorthand expressions ‘*aql*’ (‘reason’), ‘*naql*’ (‘transmitted’ religious sources), and ‘*kashf*’ (spiritual ‘unveiling’). Thus the first three chapters of this study (pp. 1-83) provide a dense and, for all but the most specialised readers, indispensable historical overview of the wider intellectual and personal contexts and background for Sadra’s philosophy, focusing on the epistemological categories and assumptions of the Qur’an, hadith, and the subsequent religious and rational sciences in Islam; on the distinctive interpretive approaches of preceding philosophical, illuminationist, and Sufi schools of thought; and a brief survey of Sadra’s life and major works.

The remaining three chapters (pp. 85-205), forming the philosophical core of this study, are devoted to a careful analytical and theological examination of Sadra’s distinctive ‘synthesis’ of the three broad interpretive approaches listed in the title, as that synthesis is developed in relation to the ‘four fundamental principles of Mulla Sadra’s philosophy’ (p. 86): transubstantial motion (*haraka jawhariyya*); the union of knower and known; the

survival of the human imaginative power; and the unity, gradation, and ontic primacy of being. Virtually all students and interpreters of Sadra's thought would agree on the central, integrative and original role of these four familiar theses, which are illustrated in great detail throughout all of the philosopher's mature works, most fully in his famous 'Four Journeys' (*al-Asfār al-Arba'a*). However, in a step which greatly facilitates the wider accessibility and verification of her exposition here, Dr. Moris has given the majority of her supporting references in relation to the extremely concise and relatively accessible summary of Sadra's more original philosophical conclusions provided in the work mentioned in her subtitle, which is readily available in an earlier English translation and commentary ('*The Wisdom of the Throne*'); curious philosophers unfamiliar with Arabic can now also supplement those citations by referring as well to available English (and French) translations of an equally short companion treatise focusing more extensively on ontology, Sadra's *Kitāb al-Mashā'ir*.

The author's defining approach to Sadra's philosophical perspective is clearly summarised in the title of chapter 4 here: 'Does There Exist a Synthesis of the Truth Claims of Revelation, Intellectual Intuition, and Reason in Mulla Sadra's Philosophy?' Thus she first outlines (in chapters 4 and 5) how Sadra has constructed such a synthesis in regard to the four above-mentioned fundamental principles of metaphysics and eschatology/epistemology (a familiar pairing throughout Islamic thought), and then concludes with a preliminary evaluation of the 'success' of Sadra's synthesis with respect to (a) its agreement with the principles of Qur'anic teaching (and some related metaphysical hadith); (b) its internal coherence; and—admittedly a somewhat less cogent philosophical criterion—(c) the subsequent impact of Sadra's system on Islamic thought, primarily in Iran (Sabzavāri) and neighbouring Shiite scholarly settings, but also in more widely influential figures in the Sunni Muslim world such as al-Afghāni and Shāh Walīullāh. The author does make it clear that she is well aware that other philosophical criteria and pertinent critiques could have been brought to bear in critiquing or questioning key features of Sadra's thought, as has of course been the case, both in his own time and through centuries of ensuing polemics. But no doubt because each of those potential debates could easily require a volume of its own, most of those underlying issues remain to be explored more thoroughly by thoughtful and critical readers familiar with the many traditions and issues in question.

Non-specialist readers with some knowledge of cognate traditions in Western philosophy are likely to read Dr. Moris's study at first, with its constant emphasis on Sadra's complex 'synthesis' of earlier conflicting Islamic intellectual (and corresponding socio-

political) traditions, as an approximate equivalent of that immense body of Catholic philosophico-theological literature which presents the works of Thomas Aquinas as a similarly all-encompassing and successful synthesis of Christian scripture, tradition, and the host of once-conflicting philosophical and spiritual traditions that are drawn together in his thought. And there can be no doubt that for Mulla Sadra, just as for Aquinas, a satisfactory integral correspondence between the metaphysical and epistemological exigencies of scripture and tradition, on the one hand, and the corresponding demands of ‘intellectual intuition and reason’, on the other, was a sine qua non for the success of his intellectual enterprise. However students of philosophy and of Islamic intellectual history, in any age, would surely note that such a purportedly successful ‘synthesis’ of theological, spiritual, and intellectual requirements was also claimed and argued for, with great detail and subtlety, by each of the many earlier Muslim thinkers and traditions that are so carefully passed in review in the *Asfār*—and whose intellectual successors, in varied guises, still continue to pursue their own distinctive paths in contemporary Islamic polemics and religio-political controversies.

Within his own truly revolutionary socio-political context (so dramatically illustrated in many key turnings of his own life, and in the heated polemic prologues to almost all of his own writings), Mulla Sadra’s own distinctive theological and philosophical ‘synthesis’—like those of his forerunners and competitors—was not meant simply as some grand intellectual monument to admire from afar. Above all, it was meant to justify, communicate, and encourage certain particular forms of both personal and collective *action* and initiative—while effectively critiquing, demolishing, and discouraging the contrary alternatives. Like so many classical Muslim writers who surely inspired Mulla Sadra (*one thinks especially of Ghazali’s Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* and of Avicenna’s *Shifā’*), Dr. Morris’s study carefully takes her readers to the summit of Sadra’s monumental synthesis. Then she leaves them to work out their own indispensable conclusions as to how they must understand and apply those principles in their own circumstances today.

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