

Ibrahim Kalin

Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mullâ Sadrâ on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition.

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Recent Western scholarship shows an increasing tendency to re-evaluate the philosophical worth of post-Avicennian Islamic thought. The emerging consensus appears to be that we no longer have warrant to end our involvement with Islamic philosophy in the twelfth century Andalusia of Averroes. On the contrary, it is now widely recognized that despite their negligible influence on European contemporaries, later proponents of the Islamic philosophical tradition retained a high level of sophistication up until the seventeenth century when Mullâ Sadrâ devised the synthesis upon which Iranian philosophers have built to this very day.

This change of tide notwithstanding, a great deal of work remains undone when it comes to bringing Western scholarship on major thinkers such as Mullâ Sadrâ (d. 1640 CE) on par with the standards we are accustomed to in the case of the European classics. Although recent major contributions by Cécile Bonmariage, Christian Jambet, and Sajjad Rizvi, among others, have emended the situation, Ibrahim Kalin's recent study on Sadrâ's epistemology is an extremely welcome addition to the literature, all the more so considering that the main focus of earlier Sadrâ scholarship was on his metaphysics. Even though epistemological questions cannot be strictly separated from Sadrâ's metaphysical concerns – for reasons that Kalin ably lays out in his introduction – the fresh approach enables Kalin to shed new light on Sadrâ. On the other hand, since Kalin has to cover a great deal of general doctrinal ground in order to make Sadrâ's epistemology comprehensible to a modern reader, the book may also serve a purpose as a general introduction to Sadrâ.

Kalin starts from what Sadrâ is perhaps best known for, i.e., the foundationalist thesis of the primacy of existence (*asâla al-wujûd*), and the related idea that existence comes in degrees (*tashkîk al-wujûd*). In brief, the idea is that all that there is is existence in its various modes and degrees, the differences between which then provide the grounds for our various determinations of existence by means of concepts that denote essences. Given the primacy of existence, knowledge too has to be understood first and foremost as a type of existence which consists in the identity of that which knows and that which is known in a single act of existence. In other words, knowledge is a single act of existence, and although we can conceptually distinguish its subject from its object, neither of them will be found to really exist without the other. Such a strong interpretation of what Kalin calls the 'unification argument' puts Sadrâ at odds with most of the earlier Islamic philosophical tradition; indeed, Sadrâ frequently develops his own theory through a critical exposition of his predecessors' errors. Kalin has soundly adopted a parallel method of procedure and chosen to explain Sadrâ by recourse to the better known and perhaps sometimes more readily understandable theories of his objects of critique. The

only qualm I have is that slightly too often for comfort the thinkers under critique are shown only in their Sadrian portrait, where a more charitable articulation of the differences might actually have facilitated the elucidation of Sadrâ's thought. (Take, e.g., the discussion of Avicenna's theory of God's knowledge of particulars [174ff.]).

For presumably the same reason, Kalin has the two main chapters of the book preceded by a historical review of the unification argument in ancient and Islamic philosophy. Such a chapter is of course perfectly justified, and Kalin does a fine job by following many of the major steps of that history from Plato to Suhrawardî in about 80 pages. However, considering that this ends up taking more than a third of the entire text (excluding the appendix and indices), one has to ask whether the chapter could have been trimmed down in favor of the actual discussion of Sadrâ. The approach seems too broad on at least two counts. The first concerns the scope of the thinkers included: we could reasonably do without an exposition of Plato and Averroes, neither of whom exercised immediate influence on Sadrâ. Nor do we need lengthy introductions of figures like Alexander of Aphrodisias in a context with such a precise purpose. Second, Kalin now covers a great deal of material that is undoubtedly relevant to the unification argument in general but does not significantly contribute to the understanding of its Sadrian version. The abundance of material on such topics as the debate on whether our contact with the intelligibles should be understood as conjunction (*ittisâl*) or as unification (*ittihâd*), or the development of the theory of the various stages of intellect, ends up shifting the emphasis away from the main point. Furthermore, it might have been helpful had the Arabic translations of ancient Greek texts been used in conjunction with the originals.

The two subsequent chapters constitute the most useful part of the book. In Chapter 2, Kalin aims at 'a detailed analysis of Sadrâ's theory of knowledge', starting from its general basis in his notion of existence, in order to make sense thereby of his theory of knowledge as a mode of existence. Eventually, this treatment provides the basis for understanding Sadrâ's exceptionally broad version of the unification argument. On the whole, this chapter is extremely informative, and Kalin follows Sadrâ's argumentation very closely, providing a great deal of textual evidence in the process. Occasionally, though, one wishes for a somewhat stronger reconstructive take on the material, for we speed through a series of topics – the mutual entailment of immateriality and intellectuality, Sadrâ's criticism of earlier theories of knowledge, the relation of perception to intellection, Sadrâ's take on the notion of active intellect, the unification argument, self-knowledge, and God's knowledge – at such a pace that the reader will face a considerable task in forming an overall picture of Sadrian epistemology. In a way Kalin's undeniable strengths also cause what might be called a minor weakness in the book, for the constant reliance on Sadrâ's course of argument occasionally renders the account somewhat paraphrastic, with quotes sometimes twice the length of their exposition. This would be fine if Sadrâ's text were readily comprehensible as such, which unfortunately is not always the case. Perhaps the second chapter, and the book as a whole, would have benefitted from a concluding chapter that would have enabled Kalin to sum up the abundant material into a succinct and thereby slightly clearer thesis.

In Chapter 3, Kalin deals with the Peripatetic conception of knowledge as founded on syllogistics from certain premises *vis-à-vis* intuition as an alternative source for knowledge (both of which have their merits in Sadrâ's explicit assessment), as well as Sadrâ's understanding of the traditional philosophical idea of knowledge as the properly human goal. While Kalin is absolutely right in arguing that Sadrâ tries to negotiate a synthetic middle course between the syllogistic and the intuition-based conceptions of knowledge, the fruitfulness of his emphasis on the mystical connotations of intuition can be debated. For instance, Sadrâ's arguments for the indefinability and immediate intuitive evidence of existence seem to follow quite naturally from Avicenna's remarks concerning our knowledge of the first intelligibles. On the other hand, Suhrawardî's criticism of Aristotelian syllogistics was also based on a strong notion of the self-evident appearance of objects of knowledge to intuition, yet the discussion remained firmly within a philosophical register. Thus, although Kalin should be lauded for setting out to pursue one of the most crucial and interesting threads in post-Avicennian Islamic epistemology, the emphasis on problems related to mysticism betrays the hopes of the philosophically inclined reader to some extent.

The main body of the book is appended with an English translation of a brief treatise by Sadrâ that is devoted to the unification argument. Upon a quick comparison with the Arabic original, Kalin's translation seems very accurate and is supported by extensive notes. Obviously aiming at as precise a rendering of Sadrâ's thought as English allows, the translation suffers from slight inelegance and the occasional Arabic idiom. Nevertheless, the problems are far from serious, and the English text remains perfectly readable, providing a nice example of Sadrâ in action for those readers unable to peruse the original Arabic.

In conclusion, and despite the critical points made above, Kalin's book is a very solid volume, and as such an extremely welcome addition to the small but growing literature on Sadrâ. As the first systematic tradition of Sadrâ's epistemology in the West, it will provide a foundation for further work on the topic for some time to come. Kalin has here laid much of the historical groundwork upon which future scholars, perhaps Kalin himself, can attempt systematically more ambitious philosophical reconstructions of Sadrâ's thought. And although somewhat demanding on the reader, I believe Kalin's book will also prove useful as an introduction to Sadrâ.

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