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Hierarchies of Knowing in Mullā Ṣadrā's Commentary on the *Uṣūl al-kāfi*

MARIA MASSI DAKAKE

Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shirāzī was one of the most intellectually independent philosophers of his time. Though influenced by many well-developed strands of thought in Islamic intellectual history—the Peripatetic and Illuminationist schools of philosophy, as well as a number of different mystical traditions, including those of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-‘Arabī—he was able to create a synthetic whole that did not merely reconcile these divergent perspectives, but rather used them as reference points for his own mystico-philosophical perspective. Mullā Ṣadrā, however, unlike most of the mystical and philosophical thinkers who influenced his thought, was an Imāmī Shī‘ī. Despite the struggles he may have had with some of the Shī‘ī authorities of his day, the nature of which continue to be a matter of scholarly debate,¹ he embraced the principal doctrines of the Imāmī school of thought, and revered the Imāms as infallible sources of spiritual guidance. In this article, I explore the relationship between Mullā Ṣadrā’s metaphysics of knowledge and his own Shī‘ī confessional views through an analysis of his commentary on a major work of Shī‘ī canonical tradition—Kulaynī’s *Uṣūl al-kāfi*—with a particular emphasis on his commentary on the chapter entitled, “The Superiority of Knowledge” (*Faḍl al-‘ilm*). Before turning to his commentary, however, it is useful to present some of the key questions about Ṣadrā’s life and thought that complicate our understanding of his adherence to the Imāmī Shī‘ī school, and explain how our reading of his commentary on the *Uṣūl al-kāfi* might help us answer them.

Throughout his writing, Ṣadrā consciously strives to reconcile his own philosophical insights, and those of some of his predecessors, with the “scriptural” sources of Islam—the Qur’ān and, occasionally, the *ḥadīth* literature—the latter of which, for a Shī‘a, include the

1 For an overview of the issues related to Ṣadrā’s relationship with the scholars of his time, see Sajjad Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā Shirāzī: His Life and Works and the Sources for Safavid Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 1.

sayings of the Prophet and the Shi'i Imāms. Yet while the centrality of the Qur'ān to Ṣadrā's mystical philosophy can hardly be denied, the influence of the Imāms' teachings on his thought is a harder case to make. The Imāms are mentioned somewhat rarely, relative to other important thinkers dealt with in Ṣadrā's philosophical works. Even in Ṣadrā's many works of Qur'ānic commentary, the teachings of the Imāms are invoked much less than one might expect.² When he does cite the traditions of the Imāms, it is often as part of a concluding section to a metaphysical discussion in which he provides a set of transmitted or scriptural (*sami'i*) proof texts to support his philosophical point.³ Even in such cases, however, Ṣadrā does not necessarily privilege Shi'i traditions over Sunni ones; and at times, this gives the impression that the Imāms' teachings have been mentioned as a matter of expected formality, almost as an addendum to a philosophical point. Yet, near the end of his life, Ṣadrā wrote his lengthy commentary on Kulaynī's canonical collection of Imāmi Shi'a traditions. The devotion of time and effort to such an endeavor seems to indicate a reverence for the traditions of the Imāms as a rich source of spiritual and religious knowledge. But if this is the case, then why do these traditions, unlike the Qur'ān and the works of other Islamic thinkers, have relatively little place in his philosophical works?

Perhaps more problematic, however, is the degree to which Ṣadrā's gradated and fluid ontology and epistemology implicitly

2 On Ṣadrā's relatively limited use of Shi'i *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr* literature as sources for his exegetical writing, see Mohammed Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming), ch. 2.

3 See, e.g., Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Fikma al-mutā'aliya fi l-asfār al-aqliyya al-arbā'a*, ed. Muhammad Ridā Muzaffar, et al., 9 vols. (Beirut, 1981), 8:303–324 (esp. 316–317), where several traditions from the Imāms are cited; *Kitāb al-mashā'ir*, ed. with French translation, Henry Corbin (Tehran: Institut Français d'Iranologie de Téhéran, 1982), 58–63, where he quotes from the works of several Imāmi traditionists, including al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī's *Baṣṣīr al-darajāt* and Kulaynī's *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, as well as from some prominent Imāmi theologians near the conclusion of this treatise. See also James Morris, *Wisdom of the Throne* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 141, where he lists some traditions from the Imāms to support his views of the pre-existence of the soul; and *Yūfān va 'arf namāyān* (*Kasr asnām al-jāhiliyya*), trans. M. Bidārfār (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Zāhrā, 1992), 150–157, where this treatise concludes with a series of *ahādīth* from the Prophet and the Imāms.

contradict Twelver Shi'i *ḥadīth* narrations on the status of the Imāms. For Twelver Shi'a, the Imāms occupy an ontological category all their own; one that exists below that of the prophets, but transcends that of ordinary human beings. This hierarchy is clearly articulated in Shi'i *ḥadīth* literature, which also represents this spiritual hierarchy as fixed from pre-temporal times. In Shi'i *ḥadīth* literature, the Imāms' biological connection to the Prophet was mythologized to mean that he was created from pure Muhammadan light (*nūr Muḥammadi*),⁴ or in an alternative formulation, from a pure clay, superior to that from which other human beings were crafted.⁵ Thus, no matter how pious, learned, or spiritually pure an individual might be, he could never ascend to the level of the Imāms. Even if many Shi'i scholars have rejected some of these mythological traditions as exaggerations, at least with regard to their literal meaning, the doctrine of the unique and superior knowledge of the Imām has continued to fund Shi'i conceptions of their own unique claim to religious knowledge as the community of their followers. Imāmi *ḥadīth* literature indicates that the Imāms surpassed all others in knowledge, even, perhaps, the pre-Muhammadan prophets. For just as the Prophet had inherited the knowledge of all previous prophets, the Imāms were believed to have inherited the knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad, and thus the knowledge of all pre-Islamic prophets as well.⁶ Moreover, the Imāms were considered to be in sole possession of the true interpretation of the Qur'ān, as recorded by 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib from the Prophet himself, and as passed down from Imām to Imām. Beyond this, the Imāms were said to receive a form of divine knowledge and inspiration on a continuous basis.⁷

4 For Imāmi traditions about this, see al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī, *Baṣṣīr al-darajāt*, ed. al-Sayyid Muḥammad al-Sayyid Ḥusayn, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār Jawād al-A'immā, 2007), 1:59–60; al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad Daylamī, *Irshād al-qulūb*, 2 vols. (Qum: Manshūrāt al-Riḍā, 1970), 2:11, 235, 258. See also Mohammad Ali Amir-Mo'ezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 57–59.

5 Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, ed. Muḥammad Ja'far Shams al-Dīn, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭā'arūf li-l-Maṭbū'āt, 1990), 2:5–8; Ahmad b. Muḥammad al-Barqī, *Kitāb al-mahāsīn*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1951), 133–135. See also Eitan Kohlberg, "Imam and Community in the Pre-Ghayba Period," in Said Arjomand (ed.), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 31.

6 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:280–283; Qummī, *Baṣṣīr*, 1:246–250.

7 Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:308–310; Qummī, *Baṣṣīr*, 2:118–120.

These traditions about the superior knowledge of the Imāms, many of which crossed the line into obvious exaggeration (*ghuluww*), nonetheless made it clear that the epistemological stature of the Imāms was as eternally unreachable as their ontological status. Even if we were to put aside the more exaggerated claims of the Shīʿī *ḥadīth* literature, the epistemological superiority of the Imāms is sufficiently established in the Imāmi doctrine of the Imāms' inerrancy (*iṣma*) in matters of religious knowledge, a quality otherwise attributed only to the prophets. The hierarchical categories of knowledge in Shīʿī thought continued below the level of the Imām, with those scholars well-versed in the teachings of the Imāms holding the highest status, followed by other devoted Shīʿīs, non-Shīʿī Muslims, and everyone else. Moreover, Shīʿī tradition developed these hierarchical categories of knowledge in the context of an early Shīʿī electionist perspective—well-attested in the Shīʿī *ḥadīth* literature—according to which one's status as a Shīʿī or a non-Shīʿī was considered to have been determined by God, or at least to have been established from pre-temporal times, indicating the futility of changing one's status in this life.⁸

Mullā Ṣadrā's ontology and epistemology is also clearly hierarchical in nature, but it differs from the Imāmi Shīʿī perspective, particularly as found in canonical books of Shīʿī *ḥadīth*, in two fundamental and interrelated ways. First, the establishment of a hierarchy among men takes place in the course of earthly life, not prior to it. From Ṣadrā's point of view, all human beings begin in the same place, originated in the common human mold, or *fiṭra*, and as a single "species," and are only differentiated ontologically and epistemologically through their actions and acquired knowledge in earthly life. They undergo a second "origination" after death, whereby the inner hierarchy of spiritual states acquired in this life becomes a manifest hierarchy of corresponding psychic bodies of different species.⁹ Second, Ṣadrā's conception of a human epistemological and

8 For a discussion of this, see Maria Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 212–218.

9 *Aṣfār* 9:19–22, where Ṣadrā claims to have obtained knowledge of these different originations through inspiration, but also considers this to be the esoteric meaning of Qur'an 10:39: *Mankind was but one community, then they differed and 59:14: . . . You suppose that they are together, yet their hearts are divided.* See also, *Wisdom of the Throne*, 144–145; Ṣadrā, *Tārīqāt 'alā Hikmat al-īshraq*

ontological hierarchy is predicated upon the gradated and constantly changing nature of both existence (*wujūd*) and spiritual knowledge, allowing for innumerable ontological levels;¹⁰ and unlike traditional Shīʿī conceptions of spiritual hierarchy as static and fixed, Ṣadrā's system assumes the possibility of a fluid and continuous movement from lower to higher states.

Given the questions discussed above, Ṣadrā's commentary on the earliest and most comprehensive canonical collection of Shīʿī *ḥadīth*, Kulaynī's *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, would seem an obvious place to look for answers. While this commentary is not complete in its extant form, what does remain offers a window onto the way in which Ṣadrā attempted to understand his lifelong religious affiliation with the Shīʿī school and his devotion to the Imāms in the context of his now fully developed philosophical perspective. Ṣadrā's commentary on the first chapter of Kulaynī's collection, entitled *Kitāb al-'aql wa-l-jahl* (The book of intellect and ignorance), contains an extensive philosophical and mystical discussion of the intellect which, of course, is foundational to his own metaphysics, as well as to that of his philosophical predecessors, and, some would argue, to the spiritual worldview of Twelver Shi'ism as a whole.¹¹

In this article, however, I have chosen to focus on Ṣadrā's commentary on Kulaynī's chapter on the *Kitāb faḍl al-'ilm* (Superiority of knowledge). Ṣadrā's commentary on this section is complete, in that he treats every *ḥadīth* found in Kulaynī's chapter, and it comprises nearly 400 pages of the extant *Sharḥ*. Ṣadrā's commentary on this chapter is particularly relevant because, for Ṣadrā, knowledge represents the purpose and ultimate end of all human creation; it is the source and the consequence of all worthwhile human endeavor and virtue, and it alone saves. Thus Kulaynī's chapter offers Ṣadrā a platform from which he can address some of the epistemological issues he wrestles with in his philosophical works, as they relate to the teachings of the Shīʿī Imāms. Moreover, because the chapter is concerned with "knowledge" in general, rather than with the more

on the margins of Qutb al-Dīn al-Shirāzī, *Sharḥ Hikmat al-īshraq* (Tehran, 1898), 476.

10 Ṣadrā, *Sharḥ Uṣūl al-kāfi*, vol. 2: *Kitāb faḍl al-'ilm wa Kitāb al-hujja*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājavi, 3 vols. (Tehran: Mu'assasa-i Muja'ala'āt va Tahqiqāt-i Farhangī, 1988), 5.

11 Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, 6–13.

abstract, philosophical concept of the intellect (*ʿaql*), it provides Ṣadrā an opportunity to comment on some of the more mundane aspects of the role of knowledge in Islamic social life, and to offer, at times, stinging criticism of the ways in which religious knowledge was defined, measured, valued and peddled in the Safavid Shiʿī society of his time.

In what follows, I begin with an overview of the key aspects of Ṣadrā's philosophy of knowledge as they are represented in this commentary, including the ontological and eschatological function of knowledge in Ṣadrā's thought. From there, I discuss the implications of this theory of knowledge for the recognition of an ontological and epistemological hierarchy among human beings—a "hierarchy of knowers." In this second section I begin with an examination of Ṣadrā's views on various approaches to religious knowledge and his criticism of the common understanding and assessment of religious knowledge among the scholars of his own time. His criticism of these scholars is well embedded in his commentary on this chapter, and they serve as an important foil for his own philosophical claims about the significance of knowledge in religious life and in human eschatology, and for his conception of an epistemological hierarchy among human beings. From there I discuss Ṣadrā's conception of spiritual knowledge among the upper echelons of the epistemological hierarchy, a conception that embraces some elements of the traditional Shiʿī view of spiritual hierarchy, but also departs from it in subtle, but ultimately radical, ways.

Ṣadrā's Philosophy of Knowledge in the *Sharḥ kitāb faḍl al-ʿilm*

Ṣadrā's epistemology as systematically formulated in his philosophical writing clearly undergirds his commentary on the *Kitāb faḍl al-ʿilm*. As with most aspects of his thought, Mullā Ṣadrā presents his perspective on knowledge and its significance for the human state as rooted in the Qurʾān and his own mystico-philosophical interpretation of the sacred text. While the Qurʾān sets out an egalitarian principle—all human beings are created according to the same primordial norm (*fiṭra*)¹² and all human actions are weighed on the same scale and entail the same recompense¹³—it also establishes a hierarchical principle. If all human beings begin in the same

¹² Qurʾān 30:30.

¹³ Qurʾān 7:8–9; 21:47.

place, they do not all end in the same place, and the twin bases of this teleological differentiation, as expressed in the Qurʾān, are the qualities of reverential piety (*taqwā*)¹⁴ and knowledge.¹⁵ Are those who know and those who do not know equal? (39:9)¹⁶ the Qurʾān asks rhetorically. The answer is meant to be clear, as the Qurʾān directly links faith with knowledge and intellect,¹⁷ while connecting unbelief to ignorance and short-sightedness.¹⁸ The believers are those who reflect on and contemplate God's revelation in scripture and in the world around them, those who use their intellects and seek to understand.¹⁹ The unbelievers are those who refuse to see and to reflect, those who are heedless—willfully ignorant—of what is before them and what is to come.²⁰

The role that Ṣadrā assigns to knowledge in the human spiritual vocation and spiritual destiny goes somewhat beyond the Qurʾān's explicit teachings on this matter. While the Qurʾān establishes a relationship between faith and knowledge, it is nonetheless faith and good works that are specifically associated with salvation in the scriptural text, although in Islamic doctrinal formulations, true faith had to be based upon knowledge (*maʿrifā*). For Ṣadrā, however, both faith and good works are only "good" (and thus spiritually efficacious) because they are forms of knowledge.²¹ It is knowledge alone that is spiritually transformative and that ultimately saves. As Ṣadrā writes in his commentary:

You know from what has come before, that religious acts, such as prayer, fasting and so on, are only for the purpose of [attaining] states, [by which] I mean, the cleansing and purification of the heart from evils, earthly desires, and attachments. The purpose of states is the [acquisition]

¹⁴ See Qurʾān 49:13. Truly the most noble of you before God is the most reverent.

¹⁵ See *Sharḥ*, 61, where Ṣadrā says that "the provision (*zād*) of the Hereafter is knowledge and piety (*taqwā*)," perhaps invoking Qurʾān 2:197, where it says that the best provision (*zād*) is *taqwā*.

¹⁶ See also Qurʾān 6:50; 11:24; 13:16, 19; 35:19; 40:58.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Qurʾān 3:7; 19:0; 13:19; 38:29.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Qurʾān 7:179; 10:7; 16:107–108.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Qurʾān 33:90–93; 10:24; 13:3; 16:11; 25:61–62.

²⁰ See, e.g., Qurʾān 71:46; 2:17.

²¹ *Sharḥ*, 74; a similar point is made on 53. See also 127, where Ṣadrā comments, "knowledge is the root of every righteous act, whether it is an act of commission, such as worship, or an act of omission, such as renunciation (*zuhd*)."

of the sciences (*‘ilm*), and this is the meaning of [the Imam's] words (a.s.): "the perfection of religion is the seeking of knowledge."²² That is, the ultimate objective of religious acts and the obligations of the *sharī‘a* is the seeking of knowledge.

Knowledge, then, is of two types: the knowledge of unveiling (*‘ilm mukāshafa*), that is: knowledge of the Essence of God and of His Attributes and Actions; and knowledge of daily actions, that is: knowledge that pertains to the manner in which one should accomplish the acts of obedience and refrain from disobedient and evil actions. The objective of the first type is knowledge for its own sake, and the objective of the second is [so that one may] act in accordance with it. But the objective of action is also knowledge. Knowledge is the first and the last, the origin and the end.

Thus one kind of knowledge is a means and the other is an end; [the latter] being the more noble and lofty. Action is only a means, since it belongs to this world, and this world is only a means to the next, and likewise all that belongs to it. There is no benefit in obedience that is not a means to knowledge, and likewise, [there is no benefit] in knowledge that pertains to [obedience], if it is not a means to action which leads to the state, which leads to pure knowledge (*‘ilm*) and sincere knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) of the Face of God.²³

While some knowledge can be a means to other knowledge, knowledge is the true end in itself. Even knowledge whose immediate benefit is a proper understanding of religious practice and obedience to divine law is ultimately a means of acquiring more knowledge, since religious practice has no meaningful purpose other than to grant increased spiritual knowledge. If "the objective of action is knowledge," the objective of knowledge is not merely proper action. Rather knowledge must be sought for its own sake.²⁴

²² Quoting the *ḥadīth* he is commenting upon here, which is found on 14–15 of the *Sharh*.

²³ *Sharh*, 15–16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

The Analogous Nature of Being (*wujūd*) and Knowledge

When examining Ṣadrā's views on knowledge, it should be noted that while knowledge is, ultimately, the only means by which a person may advance along the spiritual and ontological ladder, and thus is part and parcel of Ṣadrā's ontological theory, knowledge and being (*wujūd*) are also construed, independently, in analogous ways. Ṣadrā's theory of *tashkīk al-wujūd* (ambiguity or gradation of being) posits Being (*wujūd*) as a single, unified reality that underlies and is the source of all existent things, not as something divided and apportioned among them. Rather existent things are differentiated by their varying degrees of participation in *wujūd* as such, resulting in differing levels of "intensity" of being (*wujūd*). An individual's "intensity" of being can increase, raising that individual to higher, nobler and more intellectual levels of existence, without the occurrence of ontological disjuncture—every lower level of being is subsumed within the higher, as all being is essentially one,²⁵ with God (the "Necessary Being," *wājib al-wujūd*) alone possessing *wujūd* as such.²⁶ Mullā Ṣadrā understands knowledge in precisely the same way:

... the word "knowledge" (*‘ilm*) like the word "being" (*wujūd*) is one of those ambiguous (*mushakkak*) words that has a single common meaning, but differs in the degree of perfection or imperfection, intensity or weakness, with which it obtains. . . .²⁷

Despite its "single common meaning," Ṣadrā explains elsewhere that the word "knowledge" may refer to three different, but related things: 1) "a connection between the knower and that which is known" (*al-‘āfā bayna al-‘ālim wa-l-ma‘lūm*), which is similar to the principle of the union of the intellecting subject and the object of his intellection (*ittiḥād al-‘āqil wa-l-ma‘qūl*), a fundamental theme in all of Ṣadrā's writings; 2) "the image that obtains in the soul" of a concrete reality that it knows, be it knowledge of a universal reality or a particular one; and 3) the faculty rooted in the human soul (*al-malaka al-rāsikha*) through which things come to be known

²⁵ *Aṣfār*, 8:134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1108–115.

²⁷ *Sharh*, 5.

The more one knows the reality of things, and is able to extract their immaterial reality from their bodily and imaginal manifestations, the more one extracts one's own spiritual reality from its bodily form, thereby making "epistemology an exercise in ontology."³² Ṣadrā writes:

... the intellect (*'aql*) is a form (*ṣūra*) which is separate from matter, change, deficiency, nothingness, and evil. [It is] the closest of all created things to Him, the All-High, and the noblest of all existentiated things in His sight. Man, in his first mode of being, is potential in intellect (*'aql bi-l-quwwa*) and actual in corporeality (*jismānī bi-l-fī*) and it is part of his vocation to move from potentiality to actuality and from darkness to light, and thus to become actual intellect after having been potential intellect and actual soul. And it is only through knowledge that one becomes an illuminated substance (*jawhar nūrānī*), that is to say, through that faculty which is established and obtained in the human soul subsequent to repeated intellectual perceptions and insights and through prolonged, intelligent thought and contemplation. . .

And this intellectual faculty is the source of all happiness and goodness and the repulsion of all misery and evil, and it is the goal of all effort and movement and the end of all right action and obedience. And what virtue or good quality is better and nobler than that through which the human animal is transformed into an angel drawn nigh, and the dark substance into an intellectual light, and blindness into vision and the one who was in error into one who is rightly guided and rightly guiding, and the lowest into the highest and the one who had been imprisoned in the lowest depths (*sijjīn*) into one who soars to the the most exalted heights (*'ilīyīn*).³³

32 Ibrahim Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Muḥīṭ Ṣadrā on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xv.

33 This is a reference to the Qur'anic dyad, *'sijjīn* and *'ilīyīn* (Qur'an 83:7-8, 18-19), which some interpret as referring to the lowest level of Hell and the highest realm of Paradise, respectively.

and truths are manifested.²⁸ For Ṣadrā, knowledge exists in itself and for its own sake, while it also denotes that faculty by which all things come to be known and a mode of relation between knower and known. Analogously, "being" (*wujūd*) exists in and of itself, and is also that by which all other existent things have their being, just as light exists and can be seen in itself, but is also that by which all other things are seen.²⁹

If knowledge is analogous to being in its gradated existence, it is also, from another perspective, a reality possessing being or *wujūd*—and indeed, possessing being in the highest degree. This is because, for Ṣadrā, the highest echelons of being are occupied by those existents that are immaterial in nature. Knowledge—both as a faculty and as the final end of this faculty—represents purely immaterial reality: "Knowledge, for the intellect, is a conveyor of the presence of immaterial form to the exclusion of materials and bodies, and there is no doubt that the noblest of possible existents and the highest and the most radiant of them is that existent that is not attached to bodily things."³⁰ Being immaterial in its own nature, the acquisition and possession of knowledge advances an individual toward increasingly intellectual and immaterial modes of his own existence. For Ṣadrā, knowledge plays the most important role in the final entelechy of every human being, given that it represents the faculty and the means by which an individual proceeds from one ontological level to the next.³¹ Knowledge nourishes the intellectual faculty, whose increasing maturation and intensification in turn yields the possibility of acquiring higher levels of spiritual—indeed salvific—knowledge. Both pure knowledge itself and the faculty for acquiring that knowledge, the intellect (*'aql*), are immaterial realities. The more one strengthens the faculty of intellect, the more one grasps the true knowledge of things—that is, in their immaterial reality—for the like can only know the like.

28 *Ibid.*, 72.

29 For Ṣadrā, both knowledge and being (*wujūd*) are analogous to light. For references to knowledge as light, see, e.g., *Sharḥ*, 96. It is, however, an "intellectual" light, not a "sensible" light, in that unlike sensible light, it is "radiant by its own essence" (96). For the analogy between being and light, see, e.g., *Asfār*, 1:63-64.

30 *Sharḥ*, 4.

31 *Ibid.* See also 28.

Thus knowledge is the great elixir, since through it the black and stagnant heart becomes valuable currency in the market of the hereafter and hard and rigid iron becomes a white pearl, indeed a luminous star³⁴ which gives light to the inhabitants of heaven and earth. And it is the antidote through which one discerns truth from falsehood and through which one is able to distinguish wickedness from goodness, and it is the light which brings the dead back to life and which advances before and to the right of the believers³⁵ on the Day on which good and evil deeds are recompensed, and it is the capability through which one is able to ascend to the realm of the Throne.³⁶

Knowledge is the sole means through which human beings can fulfill their ultimate, and indeed, only vocation. Therefore, the continuous acquisition of knowledge is incumbent upon all people, regardless of the level of knowledge they may have already attained.³⁷

If the concepts of being and knowledge are parallel in their unified and gradated natures, and linked in their teleological orientation toward immateriality, Ṣadrā also posits the unfolding of knowledge from one level to the next in a way that parallels his conception of ontological movement, which he refers to as “substantial motion” (*al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*). According to Ṣadrā, human ontological development occurs initially through a divine overflowing or effusion (*ijfāda*) of being until it reaches the level of the human form. Once having reached this form, a human being becomes responsible for using his own faculty of intellect to move upward toward greater degrees of ontological perfection. This view approximates the Avicennan emanationist scheme in a general way, but as Ibrahim Kalin has recently argued, Ṣadrā’s formulation places much less emphasis than Ibn Sīnā does on the role of the “active intellect” (*al-ʿaql al-fāʿil*), and union therewith, as a means of intellectual advancement and realization, seeing the process as one that is primarily driven by the individual’s own effort, and his

34 An allusion to Qurʾān 24:35, the “Light Verse.”

35 A reference to Qurʾān 57:12.

36 *Sharḥ*, 51–52.

37 *Sharḥ*, 8–9; see also 76, where he says that the acquisition of knowledge is obligatory on the basis of *sumna*, consensus, and intellectual proof.

own internal, if potential, intellectual faculties.³⁸ For example, in a commentary on a *ḥadīth* attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib which states that seeking knowledge is more incumbent on men than the seeking of wealth, Ṣadrā contrasts wealth, which is divided and apportioned by divine decree, with knowledge, which is acquired only through an individual’s concerted effort to acquire it.³⁹

While Ṣadrā may not assign a central role to the active intellect in a human being’s movement from one level of existence to another, he does acknowledge the role that human “knowers,” or teachers, play in assisting the downward flow of knowledge from the divine principle of all knowledge to its human seekers.⁴⁰ These advanced knowers absorb divine knowledge into their own being, such that they are transformed into the very “coffers of God,” that is, the storehouses of His knowledge in the earthly realm:

... verily knowledge is stored in the coffers of God, hidden from both lofty and base minds, and [these coffers] are the people of knowledge. Mankind, in his primordial state, is empty of [this knowledge] by virtue of his being far removed from [any] relationship to the lofty world of the *malakūt*, and it is only possible for him to become one of the people of knowledge and to accumulate [it] if he seeks [it] and exercises contemplation and effort and devotes himself to the purification of the heart and its refinement until he comes to resemble the mines of knowledge and the coffers of true knowledge (*maʿrifa*), like a piece of hot iron resembles fire through its proximity to it, and thus becomes like it in its properties of illumination and burning. Likewise, individual men, if they contemplate the *malakūt* and seek knowledge with perseverance in acquiring it, come to resemble an intellectual coffer and become like it.⁴¹

Here Ṣadrā’s transformative view of knowledge is poetically conveyed as he compares the individual seeking knowledge to a piece of iron moving ever closer to the fire. When close enough to the fire, the iron

38 Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy*, 148.

39 *Sharḥ*, 16–17.

40 *Ibid.*, 96, 115.

41 *Ibid.*, 17.

becomes red hot, and so acquires not only light and heat, but also properties of illumination and burning that originally belong to the fire itself. While remaining iron, it has nonetheless been transformed so that it possesses in a virtual but efficacious way the ontological qualities of fire, and is capable of actively transmitting those qualities to something other than itself. Having sought out the coffers of divine knowledge, the seekers have become coffers themselves. The knowing human soul, enlightened by divine knowledge, comes to possess perfection and luminosity in such fullness that it overflows and becomes, not only a passive recipient of knowledge and "light," but also an active illuminator of others.⁴²

Thus the transformation of the learner into a teacher is not achieved by the mere quantitative accumulation of knowledge, but via a process of substantial transformation that makes him resemble the very divine source of knowledge he had been seeking. The teacher exists on a higher ontological level⁴³—a level of greater intensity of being (*wujūd*)—able not merely to disseminate his acquired knowledge, but to assist others in their own ontological transformation. The ontologically transformative process of teaching and learning is discussed throughout his commentary on the *Kitāb faḍl al-ʿilm*, and in one passage, Ṣadrā makes this point through an interesting reference to the Qurʾānic license to use hunting dogs. Although dogs are generally considered unclean in Islamic tradition, the Qurʾān allows people to consume the meat of animals caught by trained hunting dogs. The relevant verse reads, in part, *Say, "Lawful unto you are all good things." And as for the hunting dogs you have taught, teaching them from that which God has taught you, eat of that which they catch for you (5:4)*. Ṣadrā does not quote the verse, but is clearly alluding to it when he says, "Indeed the prey of a 'taught' (*muʿallam*) dog is pure, purified by the blessing of knowledge, even though he was originally impure."⁴⁴ The implication is that because the dog has been "taught" some of the knowledge that God had "taught" its master, the dog's original ontological state of impurity (*najās*) has been transformed.

42 Ibid., 84.

43 See *Sharḥ*, 3–4 where Ṣadrā cites several *ahādīth* on the status of the "men of knowledge" in the next world on account of their having taught others.

44 Ibid., 88.

Given the importance of human teachers in the acquisition of knowledge, and thus in human ontological transformation, Ṣadrā stresses the importance of seeking knowledge from qualified teachers and through interaction with learned men:

Verily, many religious as well as earthly aims cannot be obtained except by seeking the assistance of another and the greatest of all of these is the acquisition of knowledge and understanding in religion, for this is the greatest and most important of all acts of worship and obedience and this is impossible except through interacting (*mukhālafat*) and conversing with teachers and learned men. . .

Thus the one who is in need of learning, inasmuch as it is a religious duty upon him, which he cannot fail to accomplish, for such a person, seclusion is forbidden. And he would be in disobedience to God were he to seclude himself in his home, unless it was the case that he was not capable of the discussion and examination of the sciences (*ʿulūm*), and he would prefer to occupy himself with worship and content himself with following what he has heard, and with what he has believed from the outset. It is thus not unreasonable that seclusion in the case of such a man should be preferable. . . though in the worship of an ignorant man there is little good.

As for one who is capable of acquiring distinction in the sciences of religion and the principles of certitude, in his case, secluding himself before he acquires learning and understanding is clear profligacy. For this reason, someone said: "Acquire understanding, and then practice seclusion."⁴⁵

Although Ṣadrā himself retired from public life for lengthy periods of time at least twice in his life, he insists that the practice of seclusion is only legitimate for one who is truly incapable of learning and thus of benefitting from learned company, or for one who has already acquired sufficient learning from others.⁴⁶

45 Ibid., 34.

46 Ṣadrā elsewhere describes the true "friends of God" (*ātīdārān-i khudāvand*, likely a direct Persian translation of the Arabic, *awliyāʾ Allāh*) as those who prefer solitude to engaging too much in the world and the company of others;

Knowledge and Eschatology

For Ṣadrā, salvation is dependent upon the progressive and inexhaustible seeking of knowledge, and upon the sincerity and faithfulness of the seeking. But knowledge is not only the path to a blissful life in the hereafter, it is also the essential content and ontological reality of that life, for "the hereafter is none other than the capacity for knowledge and perception (*idrāk*)."⁴⁷ The Garden is pure knowledge, for

verily the perfection of pleasure is in the perception of the Beloved and the perfection of pain is in remoteness from the Beloved. . . the deeper and more intense the perception, and the nobler, more perfect, more permanent and purer that which is perceived, the nobler and more intense will be the pleasure.⁴⁸

Pleasure in the hereafter is not material in nature, nor can it be measured in physical terms; rather pleasure and pain in this context are measured by one's ability to perceive the divine realities of the hereafter. To the extent that one has cultivated the faculty for such perception in this life, one will be joyful in the next; to the extent that one has allowed this faculty to atrophy, one will be tortured by the eternal obscuration of these blessed realities. Most people, according to Ṣadrā, never reach the level of pure intellect, and remain at the level of the imaginal soul. Even these may be resurrected, however, since they have managed to reach an ontological degree that has some separation from pure matter.⁴⁹ But because their capacity to perceive intellectual realities has not been fully developed, they are unable to fully enjoy the intellectual pleasures of Paradise.⁵⁰

Those who reach the highest levels of spiritual knowledge and being are most removed from their physical nature, and have

see Ṣadrā, *ʿIrḡān va ʿarīf namāyān*, trans. Bidāfar, 97–98. In the passage above, however, he indicates that gaining real knowledge from others must precede this, at least for most people.

47 *Sharḥ*, 50; see also 51, where Ṣadrā says, ". . . the life of the Hereafter is life through knowledge."

48 *Ibid.*, 69–70. For the role of perception in the experience of the hereafter, see *Asfār*, 9:121–125.

49 *Sharḥ*, 297: 315–316.

50 *Ibid.*, 211–212; see also 145, where he states, "But as for the supreme triumph in salvation, none attains it save the gnostics (*ʿarīfīn*)."

thus virtually attained or approximated "immateriality." They are not only more capable of perceiving intellectual realities, but also more capable of being intellectually perceived themselves since they are more "intelligible." Thus when commenting upon the controversial issue of God's "gazing upon" the righteous in the next life as mentioned in the context of a *ḥadīth* attributed to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, Ṣadrā indicates that God, being perfectly immaterial, can only know, or "gaze upon," immaterial realities, that is, the inner, non-material aspect of things. Thus only those who possess an inner "heart illuminated by knowledge" will enjoy the otherworldly blessing of God's gaze.⁵¹

All acquisition of knowledge leads to ontological transformation, but it does not always lead to spiritual advancement or salvation. Knowledge must be sought out and acquired from human teachers, but one must use this knowledge in conjunction with various religious and spiritual practices to bring about a positive spiritual transformation. Ṣadrā often speaks of intellectual advancement in conjunction with the purification of the soul, *tazkiyyat* or *tasfiyyat al-nafs*,⁵² while also warning of the danger of seeking mystical insights without the intellectual preparation that sufficient knowledge provides. In his commentary on the *Kitāb al-ḥujja* [The book of proof] in Kulaynī's *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, Ṣadrā states that the true path to God is found at the juncture (*barzakh*) of intellectual contemplation (*tafakkur*) and spiritual purification (*tasfiyya*). This, he tells us, was the way of both al-Ghazālī and the Illuminationists (*Ishrāqiyyīn*).⁵³ Thus there are those who acquire knowledge in this life, but perish in the next for lack of spiritual practice and sincerity. In fact, Ṣadrā asserts that their punishment will be even more intense than that of ordinary sinners, because of their heightened faculties of perception:

. . . for the changes brought about by the practice of the speculative sciences and educational exercises move

51 *Ibid.*, 25.

52 See, for example, 47, where he states that God has favored mankind with two potential capabilities—one for knowledge and the other for patience and suppressing passions and vain desires; and when both are brought to fruition, they yield spiritual advancement. Ṣadrā frequently connects the acquisition of knowledge with the purification of the soul; see, e.g., *Sharḥ*, 17: 20, 46, 59, 83.

53 *Ibid.*, 423.

souls intensely, and bring whatever characteristics or actions were hidden in their essences from potentiality to actuality, regardless of whether these are good or evil in nature. And the soul, when it strengthens and intensifies and moves from potentiality to actuality, its experience of pain and loss. . . is stronger, and its experience of torture derived from its perception of torturous things and its attaining to hateful things is more intense, in contrast to more deficient souls who remain in potentiality regarding both evil and good [characteristics], such as the mentally deficient (*bulh*), children and others who are weak of soul, and the rest of the common people who are not capable of saving themselves (*lā yastatī'ūna hīla*) and are not guided to any way (*lā yahtadūna sabīl*).⁵⁴ For these, because of the limitedness of their substances and the deficiency of their minds, when they are punished, their punishment is not intense, but likewise, when they are rewarded, their reward is not great.⁵⁵

Here, as elsewhere, Ṣadrā indicates that acquiring knowledge hardly lets one off the hook, so to speak, in terms of the next world. In fact, he asserts that “the danger of knowledge is greater than the danger of ignorance, and God’s argument against the people of knowledge is more certain, and He will tolerate from the ignorant that which He would not tolerate a tenth thereof from the knower.”⁵⁶ The corruption of the best is the worst.

54 A reference to Qur’ān 4:98. A *ḥadīth* attributed to the Imāms adduces this same Qur’ānic verse to explain the status of those who do not subscribe to the Shi’i perspective, but fail to do so out of inability, rather than willful rejection. See Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, 2:383–385; Abū Ja’far Muhammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Ikhtiyār mar’ifāt al-rījāl*, ed. Ḥasan al-Muṣṭafawī (Mashhad: Dānīshgāh-i Mashhad, 1969), 141–142.

55 *Sharḥ*, 211–212.

56 *Ibid.*, 119–120; see also 214, where Ṣadrā states that one of the exquisite tortments of the false or worldly knower in the hereafter is witnessing his former students who, unlike himself, took his teachings sincerely and used them to spiritually transform and advance themselves, in the bliss of paradise, while he is in hell; indicating that the power of knowledge exists independent of its conduit.

The Hierarchy of True Knowers

It is clear that knowledge forms the basis of Ṣadrā’s conception of ontological and spiritual hierarchy in this world and the next. However, this hierarchy is not based on the pure accumulation or quantity of knowledge, but rather on the quality of that knowledge, the purity and perfection of its source, and the reality and profundity of its transformative effect on the soul. One must begin the ontological journey by seeking knowledge from human teachers, as Ṣadrā makes clear, but which knowledge and which teachers? Are there certain religious sciences that should be preferred to others as a means of acquiring, or preparing oneself to receive, higher forms of knowledge, and who holds the keys to these sciences? These questions lead us to examine Ṣadrā’s views on the nature of religious learning and the religious sciences of his time, which take up considerable space in his commentary on the *Kitāb faṣṣal al-‘ilm*.

Ṣadrā on the Religious Scholarship of His Time

Ṣadrā lived within the intellectually vibrant and contentious social context of the Safavid empire at its political peak. Both Sufi and Shi’i approaches to Islam flourished concurrently, and often competed with each other for political and social influence. Within Safavid Shi’ism and Sufism, the intellectual approaches of the scholarly elite co-existed, sometimes uneasily, with popular and purely devotional manifestations. Ṣadrā stood, no doubt, with the scholarly elite, but the Shi’i scholars were themselves divided into two approaches to religious knowledge: the Akhbārīs, who viewed the Qur’ān and the traditions of the Prophet and the Imāms as the most reliable sources of religious knowledge and religious law, and collectively as a sufficient source; and the Uṣūlīs, who felt that religious law had to be arrived at through an arduous process of *ijtihād* which included a careful weighing of the Qur’ān and traditions of the Prophet and the Imāms within a system of jurisprudential and rational principles (*uṣūl*). While the Akhbārī/Uṣūlī debate principally concerned Islamic law, it came to have implications for other fields as well. For example, since the Akhbārīs relied primarily upon “transmitted” (*naqlī*), rather than “intellectual” (*aqlī*) sources of religious knowledge, they tended not to look favorably on the more ‘aqlī sciences of philosophy and

certain forms of mysticism.⁵⁷ Lying at the heart of the Akhbārī/Uṣūlī debate was the fundamental issue of what should be considered the true source of religious knowledge and, by extension, who could claim religious authority on the basis of such knowledge. Ṣadrā has much to say about the provenance of true religious knowledge in his commentary, and is highly critical of those who claim status and authority on the basis of what he considers to be the mere pretense of scholarly attainment. So where do we locate Ṣadrā with regard to these two approaches to religious knowledge?

The very fact, noted above, that Ṣadrā devoted precious time during what is believed to be the last years of his life to this commentary on the transmitted traditions of the Imāms would suggest some sympathy for the Akhbārī view. This was the view ascendant in his own time, which held that such traditions represented an essential and reliable source of religious knowledge. Moreover, Ṣadrā devotes extensive space in this work to discussing the *isnāds* attached to the traditions he comments upon, providing sometimes voluminous notes on the transmitters as found in the *riḡāl* literature. He thus gives the appearance of taking the transmitted (*naqlī*) science of *ḥadīth* quite seriously, and he is careful to attend to the methodological concerns of this science before launching into his metaphysical commentary on the traditions.

At the same time, throughout the commentary, Ṣadrā is critical of those who limit themselves purely to the acquisition of the transmitted (*naqlī*) sciences. He derides and belittles those who memorize the words of dead men,⁵⁸ and who collect reports, traditions, and scholarly opinions like trinkets, rather than concerning themselves with the divine sciences and the transcendent knowledge they need to transform themselves from lower ontological and epistemological states to higher ones. For example, he describes those who falsely claim knowledge, while being spiritually “ignorant”:

[This is] the one who is ignorant of heart, deceived and deluded, claiming to possess knowledge because he has memorized opinions (*aqwāl*), and undertaken journeys, and because he is seated in the company of *shaykhs*

57 See Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy*, 201, and Rizvi, “Reconsidering the Life of Mulla Sadra Shirazi (d. 1641): Notes Toward and Intellectual Biography,” *Iran* 40 (2002), 187.

58 *Sharḥ*, 44.

and learned men (*riḡāl*), when his true state is that he is ignorant and possesses no knowledge, and his heart is blind, without insight (*baṣīra*), self-satisfied with what he possesses of the outward aspects of opinions, and the forms of *ahādīth*, and theological disputations, and philosophical sophistries, or supposedly Sufi fantasies and distortions, or poetic orations through which he attracts common souls and the rest of the “worldly scholars” (*ulamāʾ al-dunyā*) who are fooled by him, and [who is] drawn to money and high position and prestige and fame, and he is one whom the life of the world has deceived away from the hereafter.⁵⁹

. . . Know that most of those in delusion and conceit are a group who are limited to the knowledge of *fatwās* and rules, and the memorization of issues of *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*, and who claim that this is knowledge of religion and knowledge of the Book of God and knowledge of the *sunna* of the Lord of the Messengers [Muḥammad], and who abandon knowledge of the path to the hereafter, and struggling against the soul, and purifying one’s inner state of blameworthy qualities, and forbidding the soul from passions, and purifying the heart through ascetic practice. . . and who reject entirely the path of gnosis and religious understanding. . .⁶⁰

One might be tempted to read Ṣadrā’s contempt for those who marked religious and intellectual status on the basis of an ability to reproduce the words of others as a stance against the Akhbārī school, which advocated reliance on transmitted teachings in the attainment of religious knowledge. Reading this and other passages carefully, however, we see that Ṣadrā’s critique is not directed at any one school of thought, but is rather an attack on intellectual pretension,⁶¹ on worldly approaches to religious learning,⁶² and on small-mindedness in all its forms.

59 *Ibid.*, 57.

60 *Ibid.*, 58–59; for similar criticism, see 50, 126–127.

61 For a lengthy *ḥadīth* on intellectual pretension with Ṣadrā’s commentary, see *Sharḥ*, 297–301.

62 For criticism of those who use knowledge primarily for worldly gain, see *Sharḥ*, 57, 135, 139, 211. For similar criticism of worldly *ulamāʾ*, see, e.g., Ṣadrā, *Seh*

In the passages quoted above, Ṣadrā is equally disparaging of those obsessed with other matters he considers petty and spiritually useless, even when they fall in the domain of the *‘aqlī* sciences, including theological debates, “philosophical sophistries,” and “Sufi fantasies.” He is critical in general of those who spend their time in what his contemporaries might have considered “intellectual pursuits,” but which bring one no closer to an understanding of spiritual reality. For example, he criticizes those who concern themselves with the legal minutiae of various hypothetical legal scenarios,⁶³ or who engage in theological debate merely to prove their intellectual dominance.⁶⁴ In fact, at times he compares the perspective of the *naqlī* traditionalists favorably with those who substitute their own individual opinion (*ra’y*) on a religious matter for the known teachings of the Prophet and the Imāms.⁶⁵ In his commentary on the numerous *al-hādīth* in Kulaynī’s chapter on the Imāms’ strident rejection of the practice of *qiyās* in determining legal rulings, Ṣadrā follows the tone of the Imāms’ antipathy to this practice. He asserts that *qiyās* offers “neither sound knowledge nor a strong opinion” (*zann qaṭ’ī*),⁶⁶ and in fact leads to a spiritually destructive pride and desire for worldly dominance that one does not find among those who limit themselves to the *naqlī* sciences, which do not provide the same prestige.⁶⁷ Of course, even the Uṣūlīs did not engage in *qiyās* strictly speaking, given the Imāms’ widely reported prohibition, but Ṣadrā’s commentary elsewhere suggests criticism of those who consider *ijtihād*, more generally, as a reliable method of arriving at truth.⁶⁸

asī, ed. M. Khwājavi (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Mullā, 1997), 17–20.

63 *Sharh*, 214.

64 *Ibid.*, 42.

65 *Ibid.*, 294. See also *Sharh*, 39, where Ṣadrā recommends that regarding subjects that cannot be adequately apprehended by one’s intellect, one must defer to the teachings of the Prophet.

66 *Ibid.*, 315.

67 *Ibid.*, 303.

68 See *Ibid.*, 108–109, where Adam’s fall is said to result from an “error of *ijtihād*”; and 320 where true knowledge comes neither from “hearing,” that is the *naqlī* sciences, nor from *ijtihād*. On 97 the knowledge of the *mujtahidīn* and those who practice the speculative sciences is likened to the light of flames and lamps, in contrast to the more “celestial” light of true knowers, because their knowledge does not come directly from the essential source of knowledge, just as the light of flames and lamps does not come directly from the sun.

Taken as a whole, his commentary indicates that he is not critical of any one school of thought or any one branch of the religious sciences; rather his criticism is directed against all who seek knowledge with worldly intention, as well as those who would limit necessary and worthwhile religious knowledge to any one form, be it theology, jurisprudence, Qur’anic recitation, *ḥadīth* transmission, or the experiential knowledge of Sufism divorced from other forms of religious knowledge.⁶⁹ For Ṣadrā, these sciences are a means to an ultimate end, which is access to the divine knowledge that transcends and is the source of them all.⁷⁰ He writes,

... every universal principle of knowledge has an opening onto the acquisition of this luminous faculty called guidance, since even if it is speculative, it has an essential effect on the illumination of the heart; and if it is practical, it has an effect through the intermediary of acting upon it, with regard to purifying the inward nature and refining the mind and purifying the soul.⁷¹

The truth may be accessed by many different paths, and all sound knowledge, when it is undertaken with proper intention, leads in the direction of “purifying” and “refining” the soul.

Whatever the political situation of Ṣadrā may have been at various points in his life—and the existing biographical evidence does not seem sufficient to determine his political position with any real certainty⁷²—the virulence of his criticism of those who trafficked insincerely or ignorantly in the religious sciences can be sufficiently explained by his transcendent conception of knowledge itself, as the single path by which one might purify and save one’s soul, and by which one reaches the very proximity of God. It seems clear that one who held such a view as consistently and, it appears, sincerely, as Ṣadrā did, would have little tolerance for those who peddled knowledge in the intellectual marketplace for worldly

69 *Ibid.*, 4–5.

70 *Ibid.*, 55, 60.

71 *Ibid.*, 83.

72 See, in general, Rizvi, “Reconsidering the Life of Mullā Ṣadrā.” Nonetheless, hints of political motivations behind at least some of his criticism can be seen in places where he chides the “worldly scholars” for aiding the “*sultāns* of oppression” and the “commanders of injustice” (*umara’ al-jawr*); see *Sharh*, 135.

gain. Furthermore, for Ṣadrā, knowledge, like being, was a unitive reality, differing only in intensity, and so there could be no tolerance for those who would divide knowledge into separate, isolated branches, or make them compete in importance. Most importantly, for Ṣadrā, the acquisition of knowledge was theorized, and meant to be experienced, as a purely vertical movement toward greater intensity of being and proximity to the divine. Those who considered knowledge to be the mere collecting of variant opinions would seem, by contrast, to be traversing a purely horizontal plane—and the “journey for knowledge,” much celebrated in Islamic intellectual history but dismissed by Ṣadrā,⁷³ is a perfect metaphor for this “horizontal” pursuit.

Perhaps a more important consideration when trying to situate Ṣadrā's epistemology in the context of the intellectual politics of his day, particularly in relation to the Akhbārī/Uṣūlī debate, was the extent to which those on both sides of this debate represent an epistemological break from the Shiʿī scholars of earlier times. While it might seem natural to view the Akhbārī/Uṣūlī divide as a continuation of the traditionalist/rationalist scholarly divide of the fourth/tenth–fifth/eleventh centuries, Robert Gleave explains in two recent studies of the Akhbārī school that while the traditionalist and rationalist Shiʿī scholars of earlier times held that the attainment of certain religious knowledge was possible, albeit via competing scholarly methodologies, both the Akhbārīs and the Uṣūlīs of the Safavid era accepted and worked with the assumption of varying degrees of “inevitable doubt” in religious knowledge, particularly as regards formulations of the law.⁷⁴ Ṣadrā, by contrast, was clearly in pursuit of certain knowledge that approximated, or perhaps even reached, the knowledge of the prophets themselves.⁷⁵ Given this, the Akhbārī/Uṣūlī debate, with its competing strategies for managing uncertainty in matters of religious (particularly legal) knowledge, would have meant little to Ṣadrā, at least intellectually.

73 Ibid., 57, 66–67.

74 Robert Gleave, *Inevitable Doubt: Two Theories of Shiʿī Jurisprudence* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 28, 107–110; and Gleave, *Scripturalist Islam: The History and Doctrines of the Akhbārī Shiʿī School* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 5–7, 77, 88.

75 See *Sharh*, 218, where he compares those whose knowledge is based on certitude with those whose faith is acquired “from the mouths of men” and from “blind imitation” (*taqlīd*), and whose knowledge is therefore shaken by the slightest doubt.

Ṣadrā has a terminology and a set of metaphors that he repeatedly draws upon to distinguish between the spiritually and ontologically transformative knowledge that he considered to be the only real vocation of human life, and the various intellectual and transmitted sciences that passed for religious knowledge in the society of his time. He refers to those scholars who were masters of the traditional religious sciences as the “conventional knower(s),” using the phrases *al-ʿālim al-rasmi*⁷⁶ or *ʿulamāʾ al-rusūm*, which he claims to have adopted from ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī's, *Istīlāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*.⁷⁷ He also makes widespread use of Ghazālī's division of religious knowledge into “knowledge of transactions” (*ʿilm al-muʿāmalāt*), which can be known through transmitted reports and through human reasoning, and “knowledge of unveiling” (*ʿilm mukāshafā*),⁷⁸ which can only be attained through divine bestowal, usually after a long period of spiritual and intellectual preparation. Like Ghazālī, Ṣadrā maintains that only a tiny minority of people attain to the “knowledge of unveiling,” and that such people are “rarer than red sulfur,”⁷⁹ although he criticizes Ghazālī for limiting the pursuit of this knowledge to those who are spiritually unsatisfied by the *ʿilm al-muʿāmalāt*.⁸⁰ In keeping with Ṣadrā's continuous metaphorical association of knowledge (and being) with light, he also explains the

76 Ibid., 211.

77 Ibid., 67. See ʿAbd al-Razzāq Qāshānī, *Laiṭīf al-ʿilām fī ishārāt ahl al-ihām: muʿjam al-muṣṭalahāt wa-l-ishārāt al-ṣūfiyya*, 2 vols., ed. Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1995), 1:489, where *rusūm* is defined as all that pertains to the created world and all that is other than God.

78 *Sharh*, 5–6, 36–37. Ṣadrā opens his treatise, *Ikṣir al-ʿarīfīn* with a similar distinction between ordinary religious knowledge and the “knowledge of unveiling”; see Ṣadrā, *The Elixir of the Gnostics*, trans. W. Chittick (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2003), 4. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī presents this distinction in the introduction to his *Ihyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2005), 1:12, but says that the “knowledge of unveiling” is not something to be written in books, but only something to be attained by the true seekers, for even the prophets did not speak of this knowledge except in symbolic terms.

79 *Sharh*, 36–37. The phrase “rarer than red sulfur” seems to have been a common metaphor for rarity, employed in at least one Shiʿī *ḥadīth* to describe the rarity of the Imāms' true followers (Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 2:241–242, h. 1; Daylamī, *Aʿlām al-dīn* [Qum: Muʿassasat Al al-Bayt li-Ihyāʾ al-Turāth, 1408/1988], 123). For other references to the “knowledge of unveiling,” see 16, and 20–21 (where he quotes Ghazālī's own discussion of these terms).

80 *Sharh*, 8–9.

differences between various kinds of knowers through an analogy to different intensities and sources of light. The knowledge of the prophets and the saints (*awliyā'*) is like the light of the sun, which illuminates by its own divinely-bestowed essence and nature, and is dependent upon no external source for its light; the light of the advanced and serious "knowers" who take their knowledge from the prophets and the saints is like the light of the moon and the fixed planets, which give off a less intense light that is nonetheless a reflection of the light of the sun, and on which they are dependent; the sincere worshippers, who do not possess or seek advanced knowledge, are like the stars, which give off even less light, and whose minimal light is effaced by the presence of the full moon.⁸¹ According to Ṣadrā, it was the ancient Persian philosophers who first realized this analogy; but it was later expounded by his Ishrāqī predecessor, Suhrawardī, whom he quotes in this context.⁸²

If Ṣadrā borrows much of the terminology for his hierarchy of knowledge from his predecessors, his discussion of this hierarchy as it is found in the *Sharḥ uṣūl al-kāfi* also makes use, perhaps inevitably, of Shī'ī terminology and conceptual frameworks that would be deeply resonant to a learned Shī'ī audience; but he broadens and nuances those terms and frameworks in ways that simultaneously reinforce and undermine key Shī'ī notions of spiritual hierarchy. I will review some of these hierarchical conceptions of knowledge as found in Twelver Shī'ī tradition, and then analyze Ṣadrā's use and modification of these ideas in his commentary.

Shī'ī Views of Ontological/Epistemological Hierarchy: The Fixed Status of the Imāms

At the heart of Shī'ī notions regarding the spiritual authority of the Imāms is the belief that they possess extraordinary—even miraculous—knowledge. The term "*alim*" is used in Shī'ī *ḥadīth* literature to refer to the Imām,⁸³ and the Imāms are collectively identified with select groups of "knowers" in the Qur'ān. When the Qur'ān asks, "Are those who know and those who do not know equal?"⁸⁴ a

81. *Ibid.*, 74–75.

82. *Ibid.*, 74, where he quotes Suhrawardī's *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, although the editor notes that the corresponding passage is found in Suhrawardī's *Ḥayāt al-nūr*.

83. Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:269–270.

84. Qur'ān 39:9.

Shī'ī *ḥadīth* attributed to Muḥammad al-Bāqir reads this as a reference to the spiritual distinction of the Imāms.⁸⁵ When the Qur'ān declares that none knows the inner meaning of its verses except "those firmly-rooted in knowledge" (*al-rāsikhuna fī l-ilm*),⁸⁶ this is likewise understood as a reference to the Imāms.⁸⁷ The Imāms were considered to be the referents of other Qur'ānic terms of nobility: they were, of course, the "People of the House" (*ahl al-bayt*),⁸⁸ and the possessors of authority (*ūlū l-amr*)⁸⁹ who had to be obeyed.⁹⁰ They were also the *awliyā'* (sing., *walī*), the true possessors of the spiritual station of *walāyā*. This is based, in part, on an interpretation of Qur'ān 5:55 that identifies the *awliyā'* of the believers as being God, the Prophet, and those who believe, who perform the prayer, and give the *zakaāt*, while bowing down. Both Shī'ī and Sunnī sources widely consider this verse to refer specifically to 'Alī b. Abī Tālib; thus 'Alī is the *walī* of the believers, a title that can then be extended to the Imāms among his descendants. The identification of 'Alī and the other Imāms as *walī/awliyā'* is also based on the famous Ghadir Khumm *ḥadīth*, wherein the Prophet said, "For whomever I am their master (*mawlā*, var. *walī*), 'Alī is also their master; O God, befriend (*wālī*) the friend of 'Alī (*man wālāhu*) and be the enemy of his enemy."⁹¹

The Imāms were the true "heirs of the Prophet" and are believed to have exclusively inherited esoteric knowledge of the Qur'ān and other spiritual teachings from the Prophet Muḥammad through 'Alī. According to Shī'ī *ḥadīth* literature, this exclusively "transmitted" knowledge was further enhanced by miraculous and divinely bestowed intellectual capabilities (for example, a knowledge of multiple sacred languages),⁹² by secret esoteric writings and books

85. Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, 1:269; al-Barqī, *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn*, 127–128.

86. Qur'ān 3:7.

87. Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:269. I.e., to the inclusion of the Imāms along with the Prophet among those "firmly rooted in knowledge."

88. Qur'ān 33:33.

89. Qur'ān 4:59.

90. Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:262.

91. For an extensive discussion of this tradition in relation to the terminology of *walāyā* in early Shī'ī *ḥadīth* tradition, see Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, ch. 2, 5.

92. See Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:283–284.

in their possession,⁹³ and by a form of indirect divine inspiration.⁹⁴ No single technical term was definitively ascribed to the Imams' special mode of divine inspiration;⁹⁵ rather, the Imams were said to be those who were "spoken to" (*muhaddath*).⁹⁶ The followers of the Imams were similarly considered to enjoy access to a more elite spiritual and intellectual station by virtue of their attachment to the Imams. A tradition attributed to Muḥammad al-Bāqir, for example, identifies his Shi'ī followers with the Qur'anic *ulū l-ʿalbāb*, or "people of intellect";⁹⁷ and a widely reported tradition states that the teachings of the Imams are difficult, and that only "an angel drawn nigh, or a sent prophet, or the heart of a believer that has been tested for faith" (understood to mean the learned among the Imams' followers) can truly grasp them,⁹⁸ thus placing learned Shi'īs in the company of angels and prophets as those who alone can bear the weight of the Imams' teachings.

A Ṣadrīan View of the Hierarchy of Knowers: The Prophets and the *Awliyāʾ*

In his commentary, Ṣadrā frequently mentions "the prophets and the *awliyāʾ*," as those who together occupy the highest level of his ontological and spiritual hierarchy. He considers both to be analogous to the sun, radiating knowledge from their very essence, rather than passively transmitting the knowledge of others. However, the role of *walāya* in Ṣadrā's formulation of ontological hierarchy,

93 *Ibid.*, 1:283–285, 294–298.

94 *Ibid.*, 1:298–309.

95 In a few places, it is referred to by the terms *ilhām*, or more rarely, *wahy*, which is usually used for prophetic revelation, see Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, 72.

96 Kulyānī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:230–231; for a fuller discussion of this term in Imāmī Shi'ī thought, see Eitan Kohlberg, "The Term *Muhaddath* in Twelver Shi'ism" in *Belief and Law in Imami Shi'ism* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1991), 539–47.

97 This is a Qur'anic phrase used often to refer to those who piously "remember" [God] and who reflect on the signs of God around them. See, e.g., Qur'an 2:269, 3:7, 13:19, 39:9. For Shi'ī traditions that identify this phrase as a reference to the Shi'īs, see Kulyānī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:269; al-Barāqī, *Kitāb al-mahāsīn*, 127–128.

98 Kulyānī, *al-Kāfi*, 1:466–467; Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, 110 vols. (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1957–), 2:183–197, 208–213; Ja'far b. Muḥammad al-Ḥadrāmī, *Aṣl Ja'far al-Ḥadrāmī in al-Uṣūl al-sittat 'ashar* (Tehran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Kitāb, 1951–2), 65. Ṣadrā adduces this *ḥadīth* in the *Sharḥ* (49) to indicate the essentiality of knowledge and its acquisition to the Shi'ī community.

coupled with his obvious reverence for the Imams, has led some to overstate, perhaps, the importance of strictly Shi'ī conceptions of *walāya* and *imāma* in his work.⁹⁹ For it is clear, even in Ṣadrā's commentary on the sayings of the Imams themselves, that the category of the *awliyāʾ* includes not only the Imams, or even the Imams and their most learned followers, but rather extends to all who have been ontologically transformed through the acquisition of knowledge and the practices of spiritual purification. Ṣadrā describes this expanded category of saintly knowers using terms often associated with the Imams in mainstream Twelver Shi'ī tradition: they are those "firmly-rooted in knowledge" (*rāsikhūna fi l-ʿilm*),¹⁰⁰ they are the "People of the House,"¹⁰¹ and they are the "possessors of authority" (*ulū l-amr*).¹⁰² Ṣadrā bases his more inclusive view of the category of saintly knowers (*awliyāʾ*) on a correspondingly broader interpretation of "descent" and "inheritance" from the Prophet.

If access to extraordinary sources of knowledge was an inheritance that Shi'ī tradition claims the Imams received from the Prophet, for Ṣadrā they were not the only heirs. In Ṣadrā's view, the Prophet and 'Alī had both genealogical descendants and "spiritual" descendants, such that it was possible to speak about a group of "spiritual heirs" to prophetic knowledge—a group that includes the Imams, but was not limited to them. Ṣadrā writes, citing a "recent authority":

One of the contemporary, distinguished [thinkers] has said, with regard to [this issue], in brief: "The family of the Prophet (s.a.w.a.s.) are all those who descend from him, and of these there are two types. The first is the one who descends from him as a formal and bodily consequence, such as his offspring and those of his blood relations who proceed from him, for whom the accepting of charity is forbidden according to the Muḥammadan *sharḥ*; and the second is the one who descends from him as an immaterial and spiritual consequence, and these are his spiritual children among those

99 See, e.g., Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics: Modulation of Being* (London: Routledge, 2009), 129–130, and Henry Corbin's introduction to his translation of Ṣadrā's *Mashāʾir*, 13–15, 80–82.

100 See *Sharḥ*, 43, 66–67, 72, 157–158.

101 *Ibid.*, 41, 43.

102 *Ibid.*, 91–92.

firmly-rooted in knowledge and the perfected saints and the divine sages who draw from his lamp-niche, whether they precede him in time or are contemporary [or posterior] to him." And there is no doubt that the second relation is surer than the first, and if the two are combined, then it is "light upon light," such as is the case with the well-known Imāms from the pure family (a.s.) And just as formal [material] charity is forbidden to his formal [bodily] offspring, likewise is spiritual charity forbidden to his spiritual children—that is to say, the blind imitation (*taqlīd*) of another in the sciences and in true knowledge.¹⁰³

Here the spiritual descendants of the Prophet are identified as those who "draw from [the Prophetic] lamp-niche," as well as those "firmly-rooted in knowledge"—a phrase that, as noted above, was usually understood as a reference to the Imāms in Imāmī *ḥadīth* literature. Thus these spiritual descendants of the Prophet, like the Imāms, have access to extraordinary sources of knowledge that place them in a category hierarchically above the ordinary believer. Ṣadrā then makes the apt analogy that just as the material (genealogical) descendants of the Prophet are forbidden from accepting material charity, so too are his spiritual descendants forbidden from accepting spiritual charity—that is, the blind acceptance of the doctrinal positions of others—since like the genealogical descendants of the Imāms, they are "fed" from a higher source.¹⁰⁴

Ṣadrā does not put all "spiritual descendants" of the Prophet on equal footing. The Imāms who can claim both genealogical and spiritual descent from the Prophet occupy a unique rank—they are "light upon light."¹⁰⁵ Elsewhere, Ṣadrā tells us that the "trustees" (*awṣiyā*), meaning the Imāms, are "the most exalted of the knowers, the best and the greatest of them [other than the prophets], while the knowers are the lords of the [ordinary] people (*nās*)."¹⁰⁶ On the

103 *Ibid.*, 41.

104 See also, *Sharḥ*, 49–50, where Ṣadrā notes that a follower of the Imāmī Shīʿī sect has a responsibility to be well-informed and have a deep understanding of the principles of religion and must not be a "commoner" who follows the doctrinal positions of others blindly.

105 A reference to Qurʾān 24:35.

106 *Sharḥ*, 48.

basis of this comment, Ṣadrā's conception of a spiritual hierarchy based on knowledge would place the prophets at the pinnacle, followed by the trustees (*awṣiyā*), then the saintly "knowers" outside the categories of the prophets and the *awṣiyā*, and finally, the ordinary people. This is similar to what one finds in Shīʿī tradition as well, which recognized a hierarchical relationship between learned Shīʿa¹⁰⁷ and the more purely devotional Shīʿī population, as well as non-Shīʿa. The learned Shīʿīs were the elite (*khāṣṣa*) as compared with the "commoners" (*ʿāmma* or simply *nās*). In places, Ṣadrā seems to embrace the idea that the learned Shīʿa occupy a spiritual and intellectual position above others,¹⁰⁸ although this is somewhat belited by the greater extent to which he relies on non-Shīʿī thinkers as influences for his own philosophical thought.

Having explicitly expanded the concepts of "true knowers," "those firmly rooted in knowledge" and even the "People of the House" (*ahl al-bayt*) beyond identification solely with the Imāms, and having identified them as the *awṣiyā* and the "spiritual descendants" of the Prophet, Ṣadrā goes on to make bold statements about the cosmological and spiritual role of this expanded group. In particular, Ṣadrā attributes to the "saints" the same, or similar, access to extraordinary sources of knowledge as enjoyed by the Imāms, and indeed, as we shall see, even the prophets. While Ṣadrā often groups the prophets and the saints together as those who have access to the highest form of knowledge—knowledge that comes directly from the divine, rather than through human transmission—he usually refers to the divine inspiration received by the saints as *ilhām*, a less direct form of inspiration than that designated by the terms *tanzīl* or *wahy*, usually associated with the prophets. In one passage, Ṣadrā comments on a *ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet through Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq which says, "For every harmful religious innovation (*bidʿa*) that will arise after me, and that threatens to undermine faith, there will be a *wahy* from the People of my House who will be charged with refuting it, speaking through inspiration (*ilhām*) from God,

107 Ṣadrā distinguishes between those who identify themselves as Shīʿī because of their love and devotion to the *ahl al-bayt*, and those who truly understand the esoteric sciences taught by the Imāms, and the true interpretation of the Qurʾān and the sayings of the Imāms (see *Sharḥ*, 66–67), a distinction also articulated in the Shīʿī *ḥadīth* tradition.

108 See, e.g., *Sharḥ*, 49–50, 66–67.

publicly proclaiming and illuminating the truth. . . .¹⁰⁹ For Ṣadrā, this *ḥadīth*, which employs the terms “people of the house” and “*walī*” in connection with *ilhām*, indicates that the *awliyāʾ*, along with the prophets and the Imāms, have an important role to play in bringing corrective divine guidance to the human community. In his commentary on this *ḥadīth*, he presents the officially accepted distinction between the prophets and the *awliyāʾ*, indicating that the prophets are aided by *walīy* and evidentiary miracles (*muʿjizāt*), while the *awliyāʾ* are aided by *ilhām* and lesser miracles (*karāmāt*). Nevertheless, he indicates that both types of divine “aid” are the result of the overflowing of divine light upon the hearts of the prophets and the *awliyāʾ*,¹¹⁰ thus locating the origin of the epistemological and ontological status of both groups in their direct relationship with the divine.

Ṣadrā argues that true knowledge comes not from books or scholarly transmission, but only from divine inspiration that falls upon a heart spiritually prepared to receive it.¹¹¹ Shīʿī tradition, however, maintains that one of the primary sources of the Imāms’ knowledge is a unique series of books and written texts in their possession, whereby the special knowledge of the Prophet, or even previous prophets, was conveyed to them. Ṣadrā does not refute this belief directly, but suggests that such references might be meant as metaphors for inward states of knowledge.¹¹² Commenting on a *ḥadīth* that states that the answers the Imāms give their disciples come directly from the Messenger of God, Ṣadrā writes:

Know that the meaning of what [the Imām] said: “I do not give you a response to anything except that it comes from the Messenger of God (s.a.w.a.s.)” is not what the exoterists (*zāhirīyyūn*) among the people understand, namely that it is [the Imām’s] vocation to memorize sayings from one generation to the next such that their superiority in relation to the rest of the people is the strength of their memorization of transmitted things, or the great number of things they have memorized.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 290.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 290–291.

¹¹¹ See, e.g., Ibid., 322–323.

¹¹² Ibid., 310.

Rather, the intended meaning is that their holy souls are filled with the light of knowledge and the strength of gnosis because of following the Messenger (s.a.w.a.s.) in spiritual striving (*mujāhidā*), and spiritual exercises (*riyāda*), along with their inherent state of spiritual preparation (*istīdād aṣlī*) and clarity (*saḥā*) and purity (*tahāra*) of mind, such that they become like a polished mirror turned in the direction of the truth through the intermediary of another mirror, or without intermediary. Do you not see that the mirror prepared for reflection and the reflection of the other mirror are turned in the direction of the sun and reflect the radiance of the sun to all? Thus the state of one who follows the Messenger (s.a.w.a.s.) with a true following becomes the beloved of the Real, the All-High, and in His words, the All-High: “If you love God, then follow me and God will love you” (3:3). And whomever God loves, He makes divine lights overflow upon him (*afāda ʿalayhi*), as He makes them overflow upon His beloved [Muhammad] (s.a.w.a.s.), although the difference is firmly established between the followed and the follower.

And in general, one should know that the knowledge of the Imāms (a.s.) is not based on *ijtihād*, or on hearing transmitted reports through the senses. Rather their knowledge is unveiled (*kasbīyya*), presential (*ladunīyya*), the lights of knowledge and gnosis having overflowed upon their hearts from God, glory be to Him, not through the intermediary of something based on sensible hearing or writing or upon a report, or anything of this sort.

An indication of what we have just explained and its clarification is [found in] the saying of the Commander of the Faithful, [ʿAlī] (a.s.), “The Messenger of God taught me one thousand doors of knowledge, each door opening upon a thousand doors. . . .

And the meaning of the Messenger’s teaching (s.a.w.a.s.) was the preparation of [ʿAlī’s] noble soul, receptive to the lights of guidance, over the course of his companionship [with the Messenger] and constantly being by his side,

through his teaching him and guiding him as to how to travel on the path to God by taming the animal soul and strengthening it for what it has been commanded, and making it subservient to the divine, intellectual spirit; and [through] his teaching him by allusion the means of taming [it] and spiritual exercises [‘Alī] (a.s.) was prepared for the extraction of hidden things, and to be informed about the unseen things.¹¹³

Thus the most important spiritual bequest from the Prophet to ‘Alī was not specific religious teachings that could then be transmitted verbatim to other Imāms and their disciples; rather it was knowledge of the spiritual exercises—similar to those practiced by other mystics in Islam—which prepared the heart to receive the overflow of divine knowledge, and to be a clear mirror for the reflection of divine truth. Rather than “horizontal” knowledge that becomes attenuated as it is transmitted from generation to generation, the Prophet gave ‘Alī the key to the door of “vertical” knowledge, coming straight from its eternal source. The implicit but provocative aspect of Ṣadrā’s commentary here is his suggestion that other human souls, perhaps all human souls, have the potential to acquire those same “keys” to vertical knowledge if they, like ‘Alī, engage in the spiritual practices necessary to purify their own hearts and souls.

For those who succeed and thus reach the level of the *awliyā’* and the true “People of the House,” Ṣadrā indicates that their degree of knowledge approximates, not only that of the Imāms, but even that of the prophets themselves. He writes:

Thus the People of the House (a.s.) are those firmly rooted in knowledge, and they possess the interpretation of the traditions. The people of the outward husk are distanced from true knowledge of the inner meanings of the Qur’ān, and the interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of traditions; since the husk can only know the husk, while the kernel (*luḥb*) is only known to the possessors of understanding (*ūlū l-albāb*).¹¹⁴ They are those whose spirits have

¹¹³ Ibid., 319–320.

¹¹⁴ For a similar comparison between the people of the husk and the people of the “kernel” (*ūlū l-albāb*) as it relates to knowledge of the Qur’ān in particular, see *Aṣṭar*, 7:39–40.

been conveyed from the world of form and sense to the world of spirit and intellect, for they acquire their knowledge from God through the light of [spiritual] states, while others acquire their knowledge from men, whose method is but the collection of words.

Know that the difference between the People of the House (a.s.)—that is, the perfected saints—and other learned men with regard to the inheritance from the Prophet (s.a.w.a.s.) is that the saint, protected against error (*maṣūm min al-khaṭā’*), does not acquire that knowledge, which is the inheritance of the prophets and the messengers, until God inherits it from [the prophets] and sends it to [the saint]. And as for other men, learned in written documents, they acquire knowledge transmitted from generation to generation . . . while the relation [to the initial source] becomes increasingly remote. As for the saints (a.s.), they acquire the inheritance of the prophets (s.a.w.a.s.) from God, insofar as it is His inheritance and He gives it freely to them, for they are heirs to the messengers and the transmitters of their traditions, through something like the exalted and preserved authority that does not allow falsehood to enter into it from in front or from behind—a revelation (*tanzīl*) from the Wise, the Praiseworthy.¹¹⁵

A number of extraordinary claims are put forth here. Ṣadrā ascribes to this expanded group of “spiritual descendants,” whom he here refers to as the “perfected saints” (*awliyā’*), immunity from error (*iṣma*) and a form of divine inspiration (*tanzīl*) that is usually said to be the preserve of the prophets and the Imāms. These two distinctions are directly related. Ordinary knowers receive knowledge by way of human transmission from one generation to the next. As the transmission becomes more remote from its initial source, it becomes increasingly attenuated and sometimes corrupted. The “perfected saints,” however, acquire prophetic knowledge directly from God—who bequeaths it to the prophets, and takes it back upon their deaths, and then transmits it in pure, unadulterated form directly to the *awliyā’*. Ṣadrā refers to this transmission of prophetic

knowledge through the intermediary of divine inheritance and bequest as a kind of *tanziil*—a remarkable statement, considering the nearly exclusive association of this term with historical prophecy, rather than with some form of inspiration (*ilhām*).

While Ṣadrā keeps the categories of prophet and *walī* nominally distinct, he elsewhere describes the nature of *walāya* in a manner that brings it very close to the status of prophethood. For example, Ṣadrā describes the saintly knowers as “following a clear proof from their Lord” (*alā bayyina min rabbihim*),¹¹⁶ a phrase used repeatedly by the prophets in the Qurʾān to assert the divine provenance of their missions.¹¹⁷ In one passage that occurs in Ṣadrā’s commentary on a *ḥadīth* found in Kulaynī’s chapter, *Kitāb al-ḥujja* [The book of divine proof], he equates *walāya* with the lowest degree of prophethood, which is occupied by a prophet who receives a divine message in his own soul, perhaps through *ilhām*, but is not required to convey that message beyond himself. Here Ṣadrā adds:

... this is the degree of the *awliyyāʾ*. . . except that the title, *walī*, was not applied to any of the *awliyyāʾ* (a.s.) before the sending of our Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.a.s.); rather they were called “prophets” (*anbiyāʾ*). For there is no difference between prophethood that does not bring with it a scriptural message (*risāla*) or a divine law (*tashrīʿ*), and *walāya*, except in name rather than meaning. Thus before the sending [of Muḥammad], every *walī* was a prophet (*nabi*) in name.¹¹⁸

Ṣadrā is not alone in defining *walāya* in such a way that it approximates the level of prophethood, at least the level of the non-lawgiving prophets before the time of Muḥammad. Ghazālī, for example, suggested that one can attain to the properties of prophethood through the “frutitional experience” that some acquire by following “the way of Sufism.”¹¹⁹ Rūzbihān Baqlī, in his *Unveiling*

116 *Ibid.*, 57.

117 See Qurʾān 6:57, 157; 7:73, 85, 105; 11:28, 63, 88; and also Naṣr b. Muḥāzim, *Waḡʿat Siffīn*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Ḥārūn (Beirut, 1990), 484, where one of ʿAlī’s followers describes him in a similar manner.

118 *Sharḥ*, 423.

119 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1980), 85; for the fuller discussion, 84–86.

of *Secrets* (*Kashf al-asrār*) asserts that God chose him for *walāya*,¹²⁰ but also recalls that when he was a young boy, he heard a voice that identified him as a prophet.¹²¹ And Ibn al-ʿArabī claimed to have reached a state of sanctity such that he became receptive to direct divine inspiration, reporting in his massive work, *The Meccan Openings* (*Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya*), that all the words that would follow had been “dictated” to him by God.¹²²

In fact, Ṣadrā’s assimilation of the state of *walāya* with certain kinds of prophethood seems, in places, to have a strong Akbarian flavor. For example, in Ṣadrā’s commentary on a *ḥadīth* in Kulaynī’s *Kitāb al-ḥujja*, he presents a metaphorical image of the Prophet Muḥammad as the center point of a necklace, with the pre-Islamic prophets who came before him ranged on one side, and the saints (*awliyyāʾ*) who come after him ranged on the other. Each saint is positioned opposite a pre-Islamic prophet whom he resembles in some way. Ṣadrā says that ʿAlī, the closest of the *awliyyāʾ* to Muḥammad, faces Jesus, who is correspondingly the closest of the prophets to him, and notes that ʿAlī and Jesus resemble each other insofar as their spiritual stations were exaggerated by certain of their followers.¹²³ The conceptual relationship between the *awliyyāʾ* and the prophets suggested in this passage is highly similar to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s discussion of saints who take on the spiritual characteristics of various Islamic prophets.¹²⁴ Ṣadrā is not the first thinker to try to reconcile Twelver Shīʿī belief with an Akbarian conception of *walāya*; Ḥaydar al-ʿĀmulī is known for doing the same. But by comparison, al-ʿĀmulī’s formulation was more firmly wedded to Twelver Shīʿī imāmology. For example, he accommodates the doctrine of the occultation of the Twelfth Imām in this discussion of sainthood by identifying him as

120 Rūzbihān Baqlī, *The Unveiling of Secrets*, trans. C. Ernst (Chapel Hill: Parvardigar Press, 1997), 13.

121 Baqlī, *Unveiling of Secrets*, 10.

122 See Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya*, ed. O. Yahia, 14 vols. (Cairo: al-Ḥayʾah al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1972), 1:10 and 2:246. See also Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 45–46, where he claims this book was given to him by the Prophet to share with others, making him not prophet in his own right, but an “heir” to the Prophet’s knowledge.

123 See *Sharḥ*, 433.

124 See, e.g., Ibn al-ʿArabī’s discussion of the affinity between the spiritual natures of certain saints and the various Islamic prophets in *Futūḥāt*, 3:372.

the "seal of sainthood" (*khātam al-awliyā'*), just as Muḥammad was the seal of the prophets.¹²⁵ Ṣadrā does not show similar concern for such doctrinal matters. His conception of *walāya* and the spiritual position and characteristics of the *awliyā'*, as he describes them, are more closely aligned with Sufi formulations of the term, and have a lesser, and at times almost nominal, connection to Twelver Shī'ī imāmology.

Like the Sufi thinkers who influenced his thought, Ṣadrā is aware of the hesitation and even repulsion with which ordinary people and "conventional" religious scholars viewed claims of divine inspiration outside the category of prophethood. Such a response would have to be expected, even from a metaphysical point of view— for how can the lower grasp the higher, how can the limited know that which is free of those same limits? As he says above, those who receive their knowledge in this extraordinary way are "those whose spirits have been conveyed from the world of form and sense to the world of spirit and intellect." By virtue of the purification of their souls, they have acquired a form of prophetic knowledge through a divine conduit that has transformed their ontological state. Those who remain at a lower level of being—in the realm of sense and form—deny the existence of what transcends them:

... understanding the stages of *walāya* and prophecy are difficult [for those] at the stage of intellect the majority of people have reached. As it is the nature of common people to deny what they have not grasped, so it is also their nature to deny the state of *walāya* and its wonders, and the state of prophecy and its unique qualities. In fact, it is their nature to deny the next level of being and the life of the hereafter, which is the life of knowledge and of witnessing the angelic realm, because the ontological levels of *walāya* and prophecy are also among the manifestations of authority in the hereafter, and whoever denies the reality of the hereafter inevitably denies these two states. He does not recognize the prophet as a prophet, nor the *walī* as a *walī*.¹²⁶

125 Haydar Amuli, *Inner Secrets of the Path*, trans. Assadullah al-Dhaakir Yate, with notes by M. Khwājavi (Longmead, Shaftesbury, Dorset: Zahra Publications, 1989), 121.

126 *Sharh*, 60. For a similar argument, see Baqlī, *Unveiling of Secrets*, 7.

For Ṣadrā, who viewed all of reality as a gradated continuum of being, the existence of the state of *walāya* between prophethood and ordinary humanity was a logical necessity. Sharp ontological distinctions made no sense within the logic of this system, and ordinary humanity made no sense within the logic of this system, and so the exalted stage of prophecy and the pitiful state of ordinary humanity, there had to be grades of closeness to the light of prophecy itself, and the movement upward through these grades of nearness and perfection was ontologically transformative. Not only should ordinary people not deny or begrudge the *awliyā'* their ontological station, they should seek to reach it themselves through, in part, a humble obedience to these same perfected saints.¹²⁷

Conclusion

Ṣadrā's commentary on Kulaynī's *Uṣūl al-kāfi* is naturally assumed to be an exercise in reconciling his philosophy of knowledge and being with the transmitted sayings and doctrinal positions of the Twelver Shī'ī community to which he unambiguously belonged. Yet what we find in this commentary is a faithful presentation of the fluid, gradated, and hierarchal epistemology and ontology he expounds in his systematic, philosophical works. There is little evidence that Ṣadrā tailors his views to accord with the *al-hādith* on which he comments. Knowledge is intimately connected to being, it is the ultimate purpose of all human activity and the vocation of all human life, it is the path to salvation and the very essence of life in the hereafter. It is the light that leads the soul on its journey through higher ontological levels and degrees of spiritual perfection in this world, and that guides it across the *ṣirāt* in the next.

This journey is powered by the soul's own effort, but initially requires the guidance of true teachers and knowers, who not only possess higher levels of knowledge, but who also occupy a higher ontological level, although among them there is a hierarchy as well. There are the worldly knowers whose "light" is like that of a lamp, emanating from earthly, not celestial, sources; they provide limited guidance, but are saved by their knowledge if their teaching and learning are sincere. Then there are the true knowers, whose knowledge is taken directly from the prophets and the saints (*awliyā'*), and as such are like the moon, illuminated by the light of the sun and transmitting it to those below them. And finally there are the

prophets and the *awliyā'* themselves, radiant by their own essence like the sun, with knowledge bequeathed to them directly by God. These categories are not fixed: Every learner, in the right company, with proper intention and effort, may become a true knower. Every true knower has, in principle, the potential to reach the level of the *awliyā'*, occupied by the Imāms but not exclusive to them—like the iron rod that moves ever closer to the fire, and eventually becomes like the fire itself. The category of prophethood is exclusive to the prophets, although the status of the *awliyā'* approximates it in ways many might find controversial.

The hierarchical nature of Ṣadrā's ontology, its close correlation with degrees of knowledge, and its positing of an intermediate spiritual level between the Prophet and the ordinary believer are all consistent with the Shī'ī religious perspective. But the lack of fixed ontological categories below the level of the Prophet, and Ṣadrā's concomitant broadening of the category of the *awliyā'* beyond the Imāms—even if he maintains a certain privilege for them within this category—challenged more traditional conceptions of the Imāms' uniqueness. Moreover, Ṣadrā's inclusive definition of the category of *awliyā'* puts the Imāms in the company, not of the exoteric Shī'ī religious scholars who claimed to be heirs to the knowledge and authority of the Imāms, but of the saints and gnostics who in Ṣadrā's description look far more like Sufi mystics than Shī'ī devotees. The challenge to exoteric Shī'ī tradition that this represents is largely smoothed over throughout the commentary by Ṣadrā's use of multivalent terms—*walī*, *ʿālim*, *ʿarif*, even *imām*—and the continual grounding of his spiritual hierarchy in the terminology of the Qurʾān—*ulū l-ʿalbāb*, *rāsikhūna fī l-ʿilm*—terms used by Shī'īs and Sufis alike as Qurʾānic proof texts for their own conceptions of spiritual hierarchy. But his view of the highest form of knowledge (the knowledge of unveiling), and of the penultimate rung on the human ontological ladder (*walāya*), are recognizably Sufi rather than Shī'ī in orientation. Given his reported and repeated demonstrations of reverence for the Imāms, Ṣadrā's commentary is not likely meant to undermine their position, but rather to demonstrate the way in which the teachings of the Imāms, if read correctly, open onto an esoteric dimension missed by the majority of his scholarly contemporaries.