

# Roads to Paradise

*Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*

VOLUME 1

Foundations and Formation of a Tradition  
*Reflections on the Hereafter*  
*in the Quran and Islamic Religious Thought*

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## A Philosopher's Itinerary for the Afterlife: Mullā Ṣadrā on Paths to Felicity\*

Mohammed Rustom

In Islamic thought, the eternal nature of hell and its pains has, for the most part, been a given. I say “for the most part” because we also encounter classical Muslim authors belonging to a variety of intellectual persuasions who believed in (1) the finite nature of hell itself,<sup>1</sup> and/or (2) some form of cessation of punishment in hell. Among the most prominent voices in the Islamic tradition who leaned toward hell’s finite nature were Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350).<sup>2</sup> The famous Spanish Sufi Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) was the strongest advocate for the actual cessation of punishment in hell, while also maintaining a belief in its eternal and even “pleasurable” nature.<sup>3</sup> This position seems to have influenced the first Ottoman *shaykh al-islām* and important interpreter of Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), Muḥammad b. Ḥamza al-Fanārī (d. 834/1431).<sup>4</sup>

Another thinker who closely followed Ibn ‘Arabī on the question of the nature of hell is the famous Safavid philosopher Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Shīrāzī (d. 1050/1640), commonly referred to as Mullā Ṣadrā.<sup>5</sup> Ṣadrā is best remem-

\* Thanks go to Mohammad Hassan Khalil and the present volume’s editors for their comments on the penultimate draft of this article. For an extended version of the ideas presented here, see Rustom, *The triumph of mercy*, chapters 6–7.

1 For treatments of hell’s temporal nature in early Islamic thought, see Abrahamov, *The creation and duration*; Hamza, *To hell and back*.

2 For Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim’s positions on hell’s finite nature, see Hoover, *Islamic universalism*; Khalil, *Islam and the fate of others*, chapter 3.

3 The most comprehensive treatment of this dimension of Ibn ‘Arabī’s soteriology is to be found in Chittick, *Ibn al-‘Arabī’s hermeneutics*. See also Khalil, *Islam and the fate of others*, chapter 2.

4 See Winter, *Ibn ‘Arabī’s hagiology* 157, n. 97.

5 For Ṣadrā’s life and work, see Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī*; Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī*. It should be noted here that the present article does not discuss Ṣadrā’s belief in hell’s pleasurable nature, since there are a number of textual problems which need to be dealt with before this point can be adequately addressed. For a full exposition of this aspect of Ṣadrā’s thought, see Rustom, *The triumph of mercy*, chapter 7.

bered as the philosopher most haunted by the question of being or existence (*wujūd*). For Ṣadrā (as for Ibn ‘Arabī), all things that exist are nothing but delimited modes of a single, unitary reality. The cosmos therefore is a conglomerate of various manifestations of the degrees of intensity and diminution of being. This principle, commonly referred to as “the fundamentality of being” (*aṣālat al-wujūd*), lies at the heart of all of Ṣadrā’s teachings.<sup>6</sup>

Ṣadrā’s thorough knowledge of the religious sciences allowed him to harmonize his philosophical teachings with Islam’s fundamental dogmas. Thus, when he approached the question of the afterlife,<sup>7</sup> he attempted to understand the statements in scripture concerning the nature of suffering in hell within his all-embracing ontology. Since for Ṣadrā all things come from the One (the Source of all being) and must return to the One, the theological concept of hell, which is a place of torment, anguish, suffering, and distance from the One, must be finite; for all creatures, regardless of their actions, must eventually return to their original Source. Yet, as we will see, for Ṣadrā the picture is far more complicated than this basic intuition may suggest.

## 1 The “Nearest” of Paths

Ṣadrā first tackles the question of the problem of eternal punishment in hell in his *al-Mabda’ wa-l-ma’ād* (The origin and the return). This text is his first full-length book, and was completed in 1015/1606,<sup>8</sup> when Ṣadrā was roughly thirty-six years old. Although this is Ṣadrā’s earliest book, it already represents his mature thinking, and like all his other books, is written from the perspective of the fundamentality of being. Indeed, the date of its completion coincides with the time he began writing his magnum opus, *al-Ḥikma al-muta’aliya fī l-asfār al-arba’a al-aqliyya* (The transcendent philosophy: On the four intellectual journeys), a project which was not completed until some twenty-two years later.

6 For recent discussions of Ṣadrā’s ontology, see Bonmariage, *Le réel et les réalités*; Kalin, *Knowledge in later Islamic philosophy* 86–102; Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and metaphysics*; Rustom, *The triumph of mercy*, chapters 1 and 4. For lucid explanations of Ṣadrā’s philosophy in general, see Chittick’s introduction in Ṣadrā’s *The elixir of the gnostics*; Jambet, *The act of being*, part 1; Nasr, *Islamic philosophy* 223–33.

7 A number of studies have been written on various aspects of Ṣadrā’s eschatology. See, in particular, Āshtiyānī, *Ma’ād-i jismānī*; Corbin, *En islam iranien* iv, 84–115; Jambet, *Mort et résurrection en islam*; Rustom, *The triumph of mercy*, chapters 6 and 7.

8 Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī* 64.

In the context of his discussion of common mistakes among people on the interpretation of eschatological realities, Ṣadrā introduces another mistaken belief to which most people adhere, namely the fact that (a) grave sinners (*ahl al-kabā'ir*) will reside in hell for eternity (*khulūd*), and (b) God's mercy will never reach them. In refuting this belief, Ṣadrā calls attention to the fact that such a perspective both engenders despair among those aspiring toward God and contradicts the primary purpose of revelation, which is to provide for human beings a path to salvation:

They do not know that God's mercy is all-encompassing, that His forgiveness takes precedence, and [that] the shortcoming is from us. They do not realize that this opinion is one of the things on account of which man despairs of God's mercy and thus diminishes in [both his] desire for the pleasures of the garden and in [his] awe of the chastisements of the fire. For those seeking God, heading toward Him, and longing to meet Him, having little desire and awe makes the path leading to God and His dominion distant.

Every belief and position that is inconsistent with God's mercy and guidance and makes the path leading to Him distant is undoubtedly false. For such a position is inconsistent with the establishment of revealed religions and contradicts the sending of messengers and the revealing of scriptures, since the purpose behind all of these is nothing but to lead creatures close to their Lord's mercy by way of the nearest of paths and the easiest of means.<sup>9</sup>

This passage is significant for a number of reasons. Not only does it give us a window into Ṣadrā's early thought on the question of eternal suffering, but it also provides us with a clear picture of his view of the goal of religion and revelation. As we will see below, it is not insignificant that Ṣadrā ends this passage by saying that the purpose behind revelation is to provide for human beings the "nearest of paths" and "easiest of means" to their Lord's mercy.

Ṣadrā's most extensive engagement with the problem of the eternal nature of suffering in hell can be found in the last *safr* of the *Aṣfār* (the section dealing with psychology and eschatology) under the subheading, *fī kayfiyyat khulūd ahl al-nār fī l-nār* ("On how the people of the fire abide in the fire eternally").<sup>10</sup>

9 Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Mabda' wa-l-ma'ād* 460–1. Cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* vii, 374. All translations from the Arabic (including Quranic verses) are my own.

10 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* [i.e., *al-Hikma al-muta'āliya fī l-asfār al-arba'a al-aqliyya*, henceforth *Aṣfār*], ix, 346–62. For an English translation of this section, see Mullā Ṣadrā, *Spiritual*

He begins this section by saying that the question of eternal chastisement is a theologically difficult problem, and one concerning which there are differences of opinion, both among the exoteric scholars (*'ulamā' al-rusūm*) and the people of unveiling (*ahl al-kashf*).<sup>11</sup> He summarizes the position of those who believe that God's chastisement is not eternal. They maintain that since all people are created with love (*'ishq*) for existence and longing for its perfection, their essential end is their source, which means that they all end up in goodness because all things seek God and yearn to meet Him as He is the source of love and longing. There are indeed obstacles on the way to Him, but they are not eternal, for if this were the case, then people would be unable to search for what is good.<sup>12</sup> With a well-known *ḥadīth* in mind, Ṣadrā then says that since love is essential and dislike is accidental, the people who love to meet God do so as a result of an intrinsic quality (*bi-l-dhāt*), whereas those who dislike meeting Him do so in an accidental manner (*bi-l-'arad*).<sup>13</sup>

As for those who uphold the view that hell and its chastisements are eternal, Ṣadrā explains their position, playing, it seems, the role of devil's advocate. He states that without sin, pain, and difficulties, the hierarchic order (*niẓām*) of the cosmos would become corrupted, and this would nullify God's wisdom. Thus, the order of things can only be upheld through the existence of lowly and base things. Since divine wisdom demands that people have different ranks, levels, and capacities, His decree requires that some of these people be felicitous or blessed and some wretched.<sup>14</sup>

Ṣadrā clearly does not favor this position. In fact, he says that since each party – whether felicitous or wretched – comes about by virtue of God's will and in accordance with a particular divine name, they will still return to their essential natures. Returning to one's essential nature itself entails delight and

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*psychology*. If we were to assume that the *Asfār*'s order reflects the manner of its chronological composition, then this would place Ṣadrā's treatment of this problem closer to 1037/1628, roughly two decades after he dealt with the issue in his *Mabda'*. It should further be noted that Ṣadrā also addresses the issue of hell's eternity in his *Tafsīr āyat al-kursī*, which was completed some seven years after the *Mabda'*. See Rustom, *The triumph of mercy*, chapter 6. In this section of the present article, I confine my discussion to the *Asfār*, since it presents, in a more developed form, the corresponding arguments that can be found in the *Tafsīr āyat al-kursī*.

11 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* ix, 346–7.

12 Ibid., ix, 347. Cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, *The wisdom of the throne* 235–6.

13 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* ix, 347. The *ḥadīth* in question reads, "Whoever loves to meet (*liqā'*) God, God loves to meet him; and whoever detests to meet God, God detests to meet him." See Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb al-Riqāq*, no. 41.

14 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* ix, 348. Cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, *The wisdom of the throne* 236–8.

bliss. Yet the contrary qualities of the divine names must still obtain. Be they God's attributes of beauty (*jamāl*) (which are manifested through such divine names as "the gentle," "the kind," and "the loving"), or His attributes of majesty (*jalāl*) (which are manifested through such divine names as "the overpowering," "the vengeful," and "the wrathful"), God's names must always have their respective loci which manifest His infinite self-disclosures.<sup>15</sup>

Ṣadrā cites a passage from Ibn 'Arabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Revelations*) which states that people will enter either heaven or hell on account of their actions, and will remain in their respective abodes by virtue of their intentions. Although this means that there will be people in hell who are eternally tormented, Ibn 'Arabī says that this torment will be agreeable to their natures, meaning their "torment" will actually be pleasure. This is primarily because, as the *ḥadīth qudsī* or sacred saying says, "My mercy triumphs over My wrath" (*inna raḥmatī taḡlibu ghaḍabī*),<sup>16</sup> which means that God will not simply punish His servants without allowing mercy to predominate. In fact, Ibn 'Arabī asserts, were the people of hell to enter heaven, they would feel pain because its "pleasures" would not be agreeable to their natures.<sup>17</sup>

Ṣadrā also cites a passage from the famous commentary upon Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*) by Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350). The text in question states that God's chastisement is not eternal. Rather, it is there to purify people, just as gold and silver are placed in fire in order to separate base metals from pure substances.<sup>18</sup> Thus, chastisement in hell is there insofar as humans need to be purged of the base characteristics that they acquired on earth and which prevent them from being in God's company.

There is clearly a contradiction in the reports cited by Ṣadrā. Ibn 'Arabī says that the chastisement is eternal, but that it is somehow pleasurable for those subjected to it because it is agreeable to their natures. Qayṣarī, on the other

15 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 348–9.

16 In another version, God says, "My mercy outstrips (*sabaqat*) My wrath." For both traditions, see Graham, *Divine word* 184–5.

17 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 349, citing Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Beirut edition iii, 648. Cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, *The wisdom of the throne* 239; Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Beirut edition ii, 207; Cairo edition xiv, 214 (cited in Chittick, *Ibn al-'Arabī's hermeneutics* 165). See also Ibn 'Arabī, *De la mort* 217–8.

18 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 349–50. The idea that punishment is a form of cleansing is not unique to Qayṣarī. For similar points made by other Muslim thinkers, see Khalil, *Islam and the fate of others*, passim. It is interesting to note that the other well-known *Fuṣūṣ* commentator, 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 736/1335), also upholds a position on the non-eternality of hell, although perhaps not as explicitly as Ibn 'Arabī and Qayṣarī. See Lory, *Les commentaires ésotériques* 129–32.

hand, says that punishment in hell is simply there to purge people of their sins. Thus, once they are purified, they will no longer be chastised. Şadrā assures us that there is actually no contradiction between these two accounts:

If you say that these statements which indicate that the cessation (*inqiṭā'*) of chastisement for the people of the fire is inconsistent with what I have just said concerning the lastingness of pain for them, I say [the following]: I do not agree that these are inconsistent with one another (*munāfāt*), for there is no inconsistency between the non-cessation (*'adam inqīṭā'*) of eternal chastisement for the people of the fire, and its cessation for each of them at one [particular] moment.<sup>19</sup>

What Şadrā means by this statement is not altogether clear. We know that he is defending a position which reconciles the idea of some form of abiding punishment in hell with God's all-encompassing mercy. Several pages later, he clarifies his point. He says that the statements of the "people of unveiling" regarding the cessation of punishment in hell are not inconsistent with those Quranic verses which speak of chastisement in hell. Here, Şadrā again draws on Qayṣarī's statement that something can be both chastisement and mercy at one and the same time: "the existence of something as chastisement in one respect does not negate its being mercy in another respect."<sup>20</sup>

How, then, can something be punishment and mercy at one and the same time? Although he alluded to a solution earlier when he spoke of the intrinsic and accidental qualities with respect to those loving/disliking to meet God in the afterlife, Şadrā returns to this question later in the text. He cites Ibn 'Arabī's meditation on the fact that since God created people for the sole purpose of worshiping Him, their innate disposition (*fiṭra*) is to only worship Him.<sup>21</sup> As Ibn 'Arabī argues elsewhere, one of the verses upon which this argument is based is Q 17:23, "And your Lord has decreed (*qaḍā'*) that you worship none but Him." For Ibn 'Arabī, the "decree" in this verse is not merely prescriptive (*taklīfī*), but engendering (*takwīnī*), meaning that it is in the very nature of things, based on the divine decree, that God is the only object of worship in the

19 Mullā Şadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 350. Cf. Mullā Şadrā, *The wisdom of the throne* 237, n. 238; Nasr, *Islamic intellectual tradition* 292, 301, n. 71.

20 Mullā Şadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 353, citing Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ* i, 436.

21 Mullā Şadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 350–51, citing Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Beirut edition iii, 24 (translated in Chittick, Ibn al-'Arabī's hermeneutics 162). Cf. Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Beirut edition iii, 465 (translated in Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge* 338). For the concept of *fiṭra* in Islam, see Gobillot, *La conception originelle*.



cosmos.<sup>22</sup> Thus, when people worship gods other than God, they do so because of their belief that their worship will bring them closer to God, which explains Q 39:3, “We only worship them to draw us closer to God.”<sup>23</sup>

Since God’s creatures ultimately worship none but Him, albeit in different forms, they are all faithful to the divine injunction in Q 17:23. Ṣadrā notes that behind all forms of worship lies essential worship, and that that which is accidental, namely what comes about by virtue of the choices man makes during his life, will be accounted for. Thus, the human constitution (*nash’a*), which is accidental and animal-like, will face torment, whereas the substance related to man’s soul (*jawhar naḥsānī*) will not endure corruption.<sup>24</sup> This means that the lowly qualities which a person acquires during his stay on earth will eventually be effaced through torment and chastisement in the afterlife. After this period of torment, he will return to his innate disposition (*fiṭra*). As for the one who had incorrect and false beliefs concerning God, his suffering will also come to an end, but he will be unable to return to his innate disposition and will thus be “transferred to another innate disposition.”<sup>25</sup>

Yet by virtue of the economy of the divine names, there are some who must indeed reside in the fire, that is, who have been destined to come under the purview of God’s names of majesty and wrath. Ibn ‘Arabī takes his lead from two important texts, one a verse from the Quran and the other a *ḥadīth*. Q 7:36 refers to the “people of the fire” (*aṣḥāb al-nār*) as residing in it eternally (*hum fihā khālidūn*). And the Prophet says, “none will remain in the fire except for those who are its folk (*alladhīna hum ahlukā*).” These passages give Ibn ‘Arabī cause to explain his position on why punishment in hell is a good thing for its inhabitants: since hell was always meant to be their home and is therefore suitable to their natures, were they to leave it, they would suffer immensely on account of departing from their homeland (*mawṭin*).<sup>26</sup> This means that were the “people” or “folk” of the fire to be taken out of hell and led into the garden, they would actually suffer pain because their constitutions would not be suited to the joys of the garden. The reason their constitutions are not suited to

22 For Ibn ‘Arabī’s argument as laid out in the *Futūḥāt*, see Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge* 342–3, 381.

23 Cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 353, where he cites Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Beirut edition ii, 225; Cairo edition xiv, 361. See also Chittick, *The self-disclosure of God* 86–7.

24 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 351.

25 Ibid. This, Ṣadrā explains, is the sense in which they will have “eternal” punishment, since they will suffer from “the punishment of compound ignorance” (*adhāb al-jahl al-murakkab*). Cf. Chittick, *Imaginal worlds* 101–2.

26 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 352, citing Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Beirut edition iii, 24 (translated in Chittick, *The self-disclosure of God* 188).



other than the fire, Ibn 'Arabī tells us, is because God has given them a constitution which is only suitable for residence in hell.<sup>27</sup>

Mullā Ṣadrā stands in complete agreement with Ibn 'Arabī concerning the pleasurable nature of residence in hell for those who are meant to abide there forever. At the same time, he notes that he considers Ibn 'Arabī's understanding of the terms *aṣḥāb* and *ahl* used in the aforementioned Quranic verse and *ḥadīth* to be weak. Ṣadrā understands the terms *aṣḥāb* and *ahl* to have relational meanings, which means they do not indicate "residence."<sup>28</sup> He then seems to disagree with Ibn 'Arabī again, noting that the only way the people of the fire's departure from their homeland could be an intense chastisement would be, if by "departure," the "natural homeland (*al-mawṭin al-ṭabī'ī*) is meant."<sup>29</sup> Although Ibn 'Arabī speaks of a constitution being given to the people of the fire so that they can bear and derive pleasure from its torments, it is unclear whether there is any real disagreement here between Ṣadrā and Ibn 'Arabī's positions. This is because they both indicate that hell will, in one manner or another, be a necessary permanent abode for some people whose natures are/will be suited to it. Ibn 'Arabī refers to this nature as a "constitution," while Ṣadrā refers to it as a "natural homeland."

Where Ṣadrā stands in clear agreement with Ibn 'Arabī is on how hell will become agreeable:

There is no doubt that the entry [into hell of] the creature whose end is that he should enter hell – in accordance with the divine lordly decree – will be agreeable (*muwāfiq*) to his nature and will be a perfection of his existence. For the end, as has been stated, is the perfection of existents. The perfection of something which one finds agreeable to his nature (*al-muwāfiq lahu*) is not chastisement with respect to him. It is only chastisement with respect to others who have been created in higher ranks.<sup>30</sup>

Since Ṣadrā understands the fire to be the natural homestead for some people, it is a form of perfection for them in accordance with the principle of substantial motion (*al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*), namely that all things are constantly moving toward their substantial perfection as they ascend the scale of being.<sup>31</sup>

27 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 352. See also Chittick, Ibn al-'Arabī's hermeneutics 165.

28 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 352.

29 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 352. Cf. Hatem, Pure love in Mulla Sadra 298.

30 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* ix, 352.

31 For helpful treatments of substantial motion in Mullā Ṣadrā, see Corbin, *En Islam iranien* iv, 84–95; Dehbashi, *Transubstantial motion and the natural world*; Kalin, *Between physics and metaphysics*.

The most important point which emerges from this discussion is that Ṣadrā sets forth an argument for how punishment in hell can be eternal while not compromising the fundamentality of God's mercy.

## 2 Being and Mercy

The foregoing discussion naturally leads to one important question: what, exactly, does Ṣadrā mean when he speaks of “the creature whose end is that he should enter hell?” The reason hell comes about, Ṣadrā tells us in the same discussion in the *Asfār*, is because of the configuration of the cosmos itself. The cosmos is nothing but differentiated modes of God's creative and engendering word (*kalām*).<sup>32</sup> Hence, the duality which emerges in the cosmos is a natural and necessary result of the dispersion of God's word which becomes fragmented the further it falls away from its source. The two “rivers” which proceed from the ocean of oneness, therefore, account for the ontological roots of both good and evil.<sup>33</sup>

Because hell exists by virtue of the “left” side of the river, and insofar as the “left” represents God's names of wrath and majesty, it must necessarily manifest God's qualities of wrath. Although the river branches off into two, it comes from the same source of water. This source of water is nothing other than God's mercy, which for Ṣadrā is a synonym for being (*wujūd*), as is the case for Ibn ‘Arabī.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the very nature of being itself necessitates mercy, since revelation is nothing but the deployment of being. This explains why, as Ṣadrā says in no uncertain terms in the previously-cited passage from the *Mabda’*, that any position which goes against the basic teaching of God's mercy is false, for such a position would have to negate being itself, which is impossible.

In one of his last and certainly most profound works, *Tafsīr sūrat al-fātiḥa* (a philosophical and mystical commentary upon the Quran's opening chapter),<sup>35</sup> Ṣadrā drives this point home. He says that being and mercy are the

32 For the role played by God's word in Islamic cosmology in general and Ṣadrā's thought in particular, see Rustom, *The triumph of mercy*, chapters 1 and 5.

33 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* ix, 355–6.

34 For the identification of *wujūd* with *rahma*, see Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 70. See also the pertinent remarks in Qūnawī, *Ijāz* 319; Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 48. Cf. Lawson, Divine wrath and divine mercy in Islam 250.

35 For Ṣadrā's Quranic works in general, see Rustom, *Approaching Mullā Ṣadrā*; Rustom, *The nature and significance*. For a study of the *Tafsīr sūrat al-fātiḥa*, see Rustom, *The triumph of mercy*, chapters 2–7.

same reality, and that mercy is essential whereas wrath is accidental.<sup>36</sup> In other words, since all things arise from being and return to being, they are nothing in and of themselves, which means that their qualities are at best incidental to their true natures. Things which seem to be “evil,” such as sickness or pain, spring up therefore within being, but by virtue of being’s diminution and not its perfection. Yet since they are modes of being, their source is good, even if they bring along with them some temporary harm. This temporary harm and perceived evil is a necessary part of the structure of reality, which, by its nature, is graded and multi-level. The multi-level nature of the stratification of being entails that those modes of being which come about at the lower end of the scale of being be more dense, dark, tenebrous, material, and hence “evil.” Thus, sicknesses and tribulations are simply the deprivation of existence. Stated another way, they are “non-existence.”<sup>37</sup>

In theological language, we can say that since things arise out of mercy and return to mercy, whatever negative qualities become attached to them must naturally peel away. Creatures who return to God with negative qualities call upon His wrath. And, just as negative qualities are accidental, so, too, is the inherent quality of wrath which they engender. Wrath only arises out of mercy, which means that God’s wrath is nothing but mercy. But because God’s mercy outstrips His wrath,<sup>38</sup> and because Q 7:156 says that God’s mercy encompasses all things, the essentiality of mercy will necessarily outstrip the accidentality of wrath.<sup>39</sup> This is why Ṣadrā goes on to exclaim in his *Tafsīr sūrat al-fātiḥa*, following Ibn ‘Arabī, that “the end for all is mercy.”<sup>40</sup> Yet despite the fact that the end for all is mercy, Ṣadrā also insists that the routes individuals take to return to their source of mercy are radically divergent.

36 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 70–1. Cf. Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 151–2; Mullā Ṣadrā, *The wisdom of the throne* 217. For the essential nature of mercy and the accidental nature of wrath, see Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ* 177–80. Helpful discussions can also be found in Chittick, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s hermeneutics 158ff.; Chittick, *Imaginal worlds* 113; Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* 99ff.

37 See Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 71.

38 See n. 16 above for this *ḥadīth qudsī*.

39 Mullā Ṣadrā makes this point explicitly at *Tafsīr* i, 70–1.

40 *Ibid.*, i, 71. For the statement in Ibn ‘Arabī, see Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge* 120, 130, 226, 338.

### 3 Divergent Paths

Q 1:6 contains a prayer – part and parcel of Muslim daily praxis – to be guided upon the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*). Meditating upon this verse, and closely following a related discussion in the *Asfār*,<sup>41</sup> Ṣadrā says that each individual has a path that he or she must traverse, and which ultimately leads to God:

Know that the path (*ṣirāṭ*) is not a path except by virtue of one's traversing it. An allusion has been made to the fact that every creature is heading toward the direction of the Real, heading toward the Causer of causes (*musabbib al-asbāb*) in an innate manner of turning (*tawajjuh gharīzī*) and a motion of natural disposition (*ḥaraka jibilliyā*). In this motion of natural disposition, diversion and fleeing from what God has fixed for each of them cannot be conceived with respect to them.<sup>42</sup>

This path that an individual traverses belongs to that person in an “innate manner of turning” and in a “motion of natural disposition.” But it would seem that, despite the fact that everyone is heading to God in an innate manner of turning, there are nevertheless differences among them in the routes of their return, and, ultimately, their final fate.

We can only understand the different routes people take to their destination (which is in accordance with their innate disposition) once we have understood the nature of the path itself. The path, according to Ṣadrā, is nothing other than the human soul:

The path is spread out for you as a sensory bridge (*jisr maḥsūs*) extended over the surface of hell, its start being in [this] place, and its end being at the door of heaven. Whoever witnesses it will know that it is of your [own] design and construction, and that it was an extended bridge in this world over the surface of your [own] hell in the fire of your nature within which was the shadow of your reality.<sup>43</sup>

41 The relevant section in the *Tafsīr sūrat al-fātiḥa* is in *Tafsīr* i, 111–23, which is based on *Asfār* ix, 284–90. The latter also serves as the basis for a similar discussion in Mullā Ṣadrā, *The wisdom of the throne* 191–7.

42 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 111, based on *Asfār* ix, 284. Cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, *Maḥfūṭ* 732–4. Ṭūsī, *Āghāz wa-anjām* 7, may be an indirect source for this passage.

43 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 122, based on Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* ix, 289. Cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, *The wisdom of the throne* 196. See also Dakake, *The soul as Barzakh*.

Şadrā's doctrine of substantial motion posits that change can occur within the category of substance itself, this being an important departure from traditional Aristotelian substance metaphysics. Şadrā also tells us that the soul is "corporeal in temporal origination, spiritual in subsistence (*jismāniyyat al-ḥudūth wa-rūḥāniyyat al-baqā*)."<sup>44</sup> Since the very substance or essence of the soul partakes in motion or change, the distance it traverses is nothing other than itself.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the higher the soul ascends the scale of being, the more real it becomes, meaning the more it strips itself of its materiality and returns to its true nature.

One of the implications of the identification of the soul with the path is that, because all of one's actions in this world are imprinted upon the soul, the nature of the human soul itself determines the route one will take in its journey back to God. The state of the soul, in other words, will become imaginalized in the next world (that is, it will take on a corporeal and spiritual form, much like the contents of our dreams),<sup>46</sup> thus creating a pathway for it to its ultimate place of residency. The soul extends from hell to heaven by virtue of the fact that hell for Şadrā is, from one perspective, nothing other than the corporeal world in which the soul is pinned down by matter.<sup>47</sup> If the soul cannot rise beyond the prison of corporeality, it will reside in hell, that is, it will remain in its fallen state. Souls which have become fully actualized will, on the other hand, enter heaven, which was their original home.<sup>48</sup>

God's pre-eternal decree is what determines a soul's starting point, and, because of the limitations imposed upon the human soul by virtue of its inborn capacity, its end as well. This explains why Şadrā is adamant about the fact that each soul has its own mode of return back to God which is specific to it alone. As he puts it, every soul comes from "a specified point of origin among the spirits' points of origin"<sup>49</sup> which necessitates that each soul comes from a point of origin unique unto itself and unsuitable for other souls. Since for Şadrā the point of one's origin is also the point of one's return, the place to which one returns is also specific for each individual. If the point of origin and place of return for each soul is different, then surely the path that each

44 See Mullā Şadrā, *Aşfār* viii, 333–4, 350.

45 Mullā Şadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 112. Cf. Mullā Şadrā, *The wisdom of the throne* 193.

46 For the Şadrian teaching on the imaginalized nature of the soul in its posthumous states, see Rustom, *Psychology, eschatology, and imagination*.

47 See Mullā Şadrā, *Aşfār* ix, 356.

48 Mullā Şadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 175.

49 *Ibid.*, i, 108.

soul treads along (namely what it “becomes,” for the soul is the path itself) will be different.

When humans ask God to guide them upon the straight path in Q 1:6, they therefore ask for nothing but guidance upon their own path, which will lead to their own personal and individually unique state of felicity. This is why Ṣadrā goes on to make a subtle distinction between the different paths available to a person and the path appropriate to him:

It is just as God says, “And do not follow the paths (*al-subul*), for they will divert you from God’s path (*sabilihi*)” [Q 6:153], that is, the path which is for you contains felicity and salvation, for if this were not the case, then all paths would lead to God, since God is the end point of every purpose and the final goal of every endeavor. However, not everyone who returns to God will attain felicity and salvation from dispersion and chastisement. For the path to felicity is one: “Say: ‘This is my path (*sabīlī*). Upon insight I call to God myself and those who follow me” [Q 12:108].<sup>50</sup>

Ṣadrā surprises us here. He says that the path that is particular to an individual brings about his felicity and salvation. Had this not been the case, then all paths would lead to God. But by virtue of the nature of being, we know that all paths do in fact lead to God. What Ṣadrā seems to have in mind here is that since each individual has a path to God specific to him, the other paths which are available to him are not actual options in terms of his return to God. A person has the option to tread upon them, but the truth is, in accordance with his innate disposition, there is only one path that is open to his soul, and it is that path that must be followed. Ṣadrā then says that not everyone who returns to God will attain felicity. This is because, in accordance with the divine decree, there are some who must end up in misery and wretchedness, and some who must end up in felicity. Thus, while all souls return to God, some meet the aforementioned divine attributes of beauty, whereas others meet the divine attributes of majesty.

Yet there is a further complication: Ṣadrā clearly does not have in mind a cut-and-dried presentation of the nature of the afterlife where some end up in bliss and others suffer eternally. He upholds a belief that people will be purged of sins, and hence the necessity for some form of suffering in the next life. Yet he maintains that the different grades of individuals, whether felicitous or damned, will become differentiated through their encounter with God in terms of His names of beauty and majesty. According to a *ḥadīth qudsī*, on the day

<sup>50</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 42, citing *Tafsīr* iv, 51–2.

of judgment, after the angels, prophets, and believers have all interceded for those in hell, for them to be taken out of it and placed in heaven, only the intercession of God's name "the Most Merciful of the merciful" (*arḥam al-rāḥimīn*) will remain.<sup>51</sup> Since "the Most Merciful of the merciful" or "the All-Merciful" (*al-raḥmān*) is the only name that will intercede on behalf of all people, Ṣadrā tells us, those who meet God's names of majesty in the next life will eventually come face-to-face with God as the All-Merciful, a name which will subsist among God's servants for all eternity:

As for the other paths, all of their goals are first toward God [in terms of His names of beauty and majesty]. Then, at the end, the All-Merciful will take over for God [in terms of His names of beauty and majesty], and the property of the All-Merciful will subsist amongst them for eternity, whose subsistence has no end. This is a strange affair! I have not found anyone upon the face of the earth who knows it as it truly should be known!<sup>52</sup>

Ṣadrā also discusses this phenomenon in symbolic terms. Employing the imagery and language of Ibn 'Arabī and his followers, he speaks of the structure of the cosmos in terms of God's "two hands." As the Prophet tells us, God has two hands and they are both blessed and "right."<sup>53</sup> But each hand does not manifest the same attributes. One hand gives preponderance to God's attributes of mercy and the other to God's attributes of wrath.<sup>54</sup> From this perspective, we can speak of God's "left" and "right" hands, or the divine qualities which manifest leftness and rightness. Just as two human hands are in opposition to each other, so, too, are the qualities denoted by God's two hands. Each of God's hands is nothing other than a corollary of the different types of souls which have come about through the downward flow of the river of existence. Thus, the hands' properties manifest themselves in accordance with the attributes of the people who fall under their sway.

Because God's two hands are "right," they are both naturally good. This idea again accords with a point Ṣadrā makes in the *Asfār*, namely that despite the outward appearance of a thing as wrath and punishment, inwardly it is mercy.<sup>55</sup>

51 See Mullā Ṣadrā's use of this tradition at *Tafsīr* i, 72, 157–8; iii, 338. Cf. Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge* 396, n. 24. For the text of the *ḥadīth*, see Graham, *Divine word* 190.

52 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 42.

53 Mullā Ṣadrā refers to this tradition at *Tafsīr* i, 49. For the two hands of God in Islamic thought, see Murata, *The Tao of Islam* 81–114.

54 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 149.

55 Cf. *ibid.*, i, 157. Cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 159–61, which closely follows Qūnawī, *I'jāz* 475–8.



This does not mean that both of God's hands are equal. Insofar as His hands are distinct from one another and differences are to be found among God's creatures, those who corrupted their souls will be taken to task. With this point in mind, Ṣadrā offers a reading of Q 39:67. The verse states that the entire earth will be in God's grip (*qabḍa*) on the day of resurrection and the heavens will be folded in His right hand. Ṣadrā understands this to mean that all things will be enfolded back into God's mercy, despite the disparity among creatures with respect to their place of return.<sup>56</sup> That is to say, the scroll upon which the entire cosmic drama was written will simply be rolled up and returned to its original author.

As regards Ṣadrā's use of myth to explain his soteriology, he devotes much more time to God's feet than to His hands. This is partly because any talk of God's "feet" in Islamic thought automatically calls to mind two other important Quranic symbols – the divine throne (*'arsh*) and footstool (*kursi*). The image of God's two feet as sources for the diversity in the cosmos allows Ṣadrā to explain how multiplicity and opposition result from harmony, and how wrath and mercy become fragmented from mercy itself. The throne is the seat or locus of mercy in accordance with the divine command "Be!" According to Q 20:5, God's name the All-Merciful is seated upon the throne.<sup>57</sup> And while the All-Merciful sits on the throne, His feet are placed upon the footstool.<sup>58</sup> Taking his lead from Ibn 'Arabī and his followers, Ṣadrā makes the following observation:

In His establishing Himself upon the throne, He also has two feet which were placed upon the footstool. The one which designates the foot of firmness [cf. Q 10:2] gives fixity (*thubūt*) to the people of the gardens in their gardens, while the other one, which designates the foot of domination (*jabarūt*), gives fixity to the people of hell in hell.<sup>59</sup>

The footstool ontologically stands at a level lower than the throne and also acts as the locus through which the polarity of God's divine names – symbolized by the two feet – become operative in the cosmos. Although the two feet existed before they came to rest upon the footstool, the latter allows the properties of the feet to become actualized, that is, materialized. It is clear from Ṣadrā's discussion concerning the path of the soul that the place unto which

56 Cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 151.

57 Cf. Jambet, *The act of being* 414.

58 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 154–5. Cf. Chittick, *Imaginal worlds* 110–2; Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge* 359–61.

59 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 149. Cf. Murata, *The Tao of Islam* 85–8.



each foot alights is the heaven and hell of the soul respectively, since the path traversed by the individual will ultimately lead him back to his own reality, that is, heaven or hell.

Since the cosmos and all that it contains came about by virtue of the All-Merciful extending His two feet and allowing their properties to take on corporeal form, how will the cosmos cease to exist? Quite naturally, this will happen when the All-Merciful's feet are folded up, thus allowing all properties in the cosmos – whether they manifest God's wrath or mercy – to return to their source of mercy. Drawing on Ibn 'Arabī's *Futūḥāt*, Ṣadrā drives home the point that, in the end, the "staff" which supported God's two feet will be cast aside, and both heaven and hell will be filled with repose and tranquility:

The feet will not be contracted except from the root from which they became manifest, namely the All-Merciful. So they only give mercy, for by virtue of wisdom, the end returns to the beginning, except that between the beginning and end there is a path . . . The journey is where one can expect to find fatigue (*mazīnna*), misfortune, and toil . . . At the end of the sojourn, God's walking staff (*'aṣā al-tasāyur*) will be cast aside, and repose (*rāḥa*) in the abodes of permanence and perdition will reign.<sup>60</sup>

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60 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr* i, 155, paraphrasing Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Beirut edition iii, 462 (for a partial translation of the original passage, see Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge* 360–1); also cited by Mullā Ṣadrā, but worded slightly differently, at *Asfār* ix, 357.

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