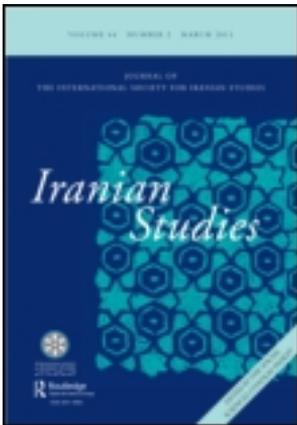


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Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mullā Ṣadrā on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition

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Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mullā Ṣadrā on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition, Ibrahim Kalin, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, ISBN 978-0-19-973524-2, xxii + 315 pp.

Ibrahim Kalin's *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy* is an investigation into the epistemology of the famous Safavid philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1640). Such a study is an event in itself, owing to the fact that although there are some twenty books on various aspects of Ṣadrā's thought in European languages, this wide-ranging dimension of his philosophy has not received the attention it rightly deserves. Kalin approaches Ṣadrā's theory of knowledge through a detailed analysis of his treatment of a particular issue in the history of philosophy, namely the problem dealing with the unification of the intellector and the intelligible (*ittiḥād al-ʿāqil wa-l-māʿqūl*). The significance of this question may seem unclear at first blush. Why would there be a problem with respect to the unification or unity between the knower and the known (or subject and object) in the first place?

What is essentially at stake is this: how do we know the things around us, that is, everything under the sun? As Aristotle states, and which has many profound cognates in other religious and philosophical traditions east of the Mediterranean, only the like can know the like. Yet what makes this possible? Do we come to know things simply by looking at them with the resultant effect that they then become stamped onto our "minds" such that we "have" them as mental objects? Or do we come to know them in some other fashion, seeing as it is that not all things that we can know function like stamps upon our minds? Knowledge of pain, for example, is a kind of knowing which is not limited to mental impressions only. There is an experience in this case from which a particular kind of knowledge ensues, and one which is different than just having an image in the mind or grasping some kind of concept.

Whichever side of the fence we fall on over this issue, what is clear is that there is a fundamental problem vis-à-vis the knowing subject and her object of knowledge—how can she know anything unless there is some kind of intimate relationship that already exists between the knower and the thing known? We cannot know, for example, things that stand outside of our scope of experience and frame of reference.

We thus lose our ignorance of particular things the more we become acquainted with them, which implies a process of familiarization.

Kalin begins his inquiry by drawing attention to the range of possible influences upon Ṣadrā's understanding of the unification problem. He rightly calls attention to some of Ṣadrā's likely but unacknowledged sources, amongst both the Sufis and Muslim philosophers. With respect to the latter, Kalin invokes the name of Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī (commonly known as Bābā Afḍal), who is still not as well-known to students of Islamic philosophy as he should be. It is indeed very likely that Bābā Afḍal influenced Ṣadrā on this question, especially since Bābā Afḍal explicitly treats the topic in a letter to one of his students, and Ṣadrā is known to have freely drawn upon his Persian work, *Jāwidān-nāma*, in writing his own Arabic treatise, *Iksīr al-ʿarīfīn*. With respect to Ṣadrā's unacknowledged Sufi sources, we have, as is well-known, two very likely candidates: Ibn ʿArabī and Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī. Kalin does not venture into these sources here, but instead leaves readers with some key references and passages in these authors' writings which may have influenced Ṣadrā's thinking in one way or another.

Kalin is wise to avoid venturing too far into this issue, since Ṣadrā's solution to the unification problem is formed in direct engagement with the Islamic philosophical tradition proper. At the same time, any possible direct Sufi influences upon Ṣadrā tend to become veiled in the language of philosophy, thus obscuring the point at hand even further. Where Ṣadrā explicitly engages his Sufi predecessors is on those questions which he felt were not dealt with adequately in Islamic philosophy and theology, particularly on issues pertaining to eschatology. Yet these important Sufi influences do resurface in the practical dimension of Ṣadrā's epistemology, as Kalin intimates and goes on to address in the book's third and final chapter.

Kalin devotes the remainder of the first chapter to charting the different forms that the unification problem has assumed in various historical, cultural, and philosophical/religious guises and contexts. This is a very useful exercise in historical scholarship since it gives us a window into the evolution and even distortions (often deliberate) of a major epistemological concept from antiquity into the medieval period. It also shows us how incredibly learned Ṣadrā is, and how he reads history to its detriment and his advantage.

Kalin moves from Plato (where the unification question is arguably addressed) to Aristotle, where he shows how the unification problem relates to Aristotle's understanding of the active intellect, a doctrine posited by Aristotle to account for the gap in his epistemology introduced by his rejection of the objective, intelligible existence of the Platonic Forms (and hence the introduction of the language of abstraction in Aristotelian epistemology, which was so influential on Islamic philosophy's Peripatetic and Illuminationist traditions) (pp. 14–15).

Kalin's discussion of the views of the important commentator upon Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, who is explicitly discussed by Ṣadrā with respect to the unification question (p. 17), is cogent and to the point. The treatment of Plotinus which follows is particularly helpful, since it sets the stage for the mainstream Islamic philosophical engagement with the unification problem, as it was largely through the so-

called *Theology of Aristotle* that these discussions were broached in Islamic philosophical circles. Since Kalin's concern is to focus on the issue as articulated by Ṣadrā, he limits his presentation of this aspect of the *Theology* as it appears in Ṣadrā's own works (pp. 26–7). Along the way, Kalin observes how Ṣadrā avoids two issues in Plotinus on account of the fact that they had no role to play in his own thought in particular, and the later Islamic philosophical tradition in general—emanation and the composite nature of the divine intellect (p. 27).

Kalin then turns to al-Kindī, as he was the first Muslim philosopher to write a treatise on the intellect. Kindī introduces a kind of perspectivalism here: the soul as intelligible substance is one with the “first intellect” (the sum total of all things that are intelligible) from its own perspective, but not from the perspective of the first intellect, since nothing can unite with it. Kalin then demonstrates how Ṣadrā manages to manipulate some of Fārābī's statements about the nature of the intellect and intellection, having his predecessor say that the human intellect is also potentially a simple active intellect (*‘aql basīṭ fa‘āl*) (p. 45), meaning that it can unite with the divine intellect, here understood as God (although Fārābī is somewhat vague on this idea) (p. 46).

Next, Kalin moves to the refutation of the unification argument in Ibn Sīnā, who is its strongest opponent in Islamic philosophy. Ibn Sīnā refutes the problem on logical grounds, stating that two separate things cannot be united by the act of intellection since their own individual substances cannot fundamentally change, owing to the fact that they are two different entities. Also, he argues that if two substances conjoin, then a third thing would come about as a result of their union (p. 48). As Kalin observes, Ṣadrā's major problem with Ibn Sīnā's rejection of unification between knower and known was the result of his “univocal ontology,” since it does not permit any kind of graded nature to existence in terms of its intensification or diminution in existence (p. 51).

Kalin dedicates the remainder of the book's first chapter to Suhrawardī, the one figure whose metaphysics and epistemology would seem to lend themselves to a unificationist reading, but who, surprisingly, and no doubt frustratingly for Ṣadrā, sides with the mainline of Peripatetic thinkers in their rejection of the unification argument. At best, Suhrawardī says that we can speak of conjunction, admixture, and unitive composition, but not unification as such. Ṣadrā is astonished by the lack of concern his eminent predecessor has for the problem, and again notes that the problem here is one of an imperfect ontology (p. 65).

How, then, does Ṣadrā recommend his view over and against the denial of his illustrious predecessors? He does this by arguing for the fluid nature of the physical world, which is the consequence of his ontology. His fundamental ontological stance, discussed in detail by Kalin in chapter 2 (pp. 96–102), is that although existence is one, its reality is graded and multi-level through its varying degrees of intensity and diminution. Like all things, knowledge, knowing, and intellection are bound up in existence and are the result of its graded nature. Knowledge therefore is a mode of existence. It is indeed clear what Ṣadrā would have said to his contemporary, Descartes. It is not “I think, therefore I am.” Rather, it is “I am, therefore I think.” If knowing is an accident of ontology, then the very act of knowing is predicated upon the reality of existence, of which knowledge is a mode.

At the same time, Ṣadrā also demonstrates how knowledge is mysteriously linked with existence in a way quite unlike any of its other modes: both existence and knowledge pervade all things, and both are, in themselves, indefinable since they form the basis for any definitions put forth which attempt to encompass them (pp. 103–4). An existent person, in other words, cannot define existence, much less encompass it in its entirety, precisely because he is himself an instantiation of existence, and his very existence itself assumes existence. Thus the part cannot define the whole of which it is a part. Knowledge, likewise, “behaves” in the same way. A person cannot define knowledge, since whatever definition he puts forward for knowledge will itself be part of a much larger whole, of which the knowing subject is himself a part. Knowledge therefore is evasive, like existence. Yet since existence is the ground of all reality, even knowledge falls under its purview.

To truly know a thing, the unification argument tells us, at the very moment of knowing, in the act itself, there is a kind of dissolving of barriers between the object of knowledge and the knower, making knowledge possible. It is to the extent that there is a unity between subject and object that knowledge of the object is greater or lesser. This is indeed a far cry from what we know as “epistemology” today, and this is because of the lack of an ontology which undergirds our notions of knowledge, the self, and the world about us (cf. pp. 195–7). Yet for Ṣadrā any act of knowing itself entails, first and foremost, a thorough metaphysics in which the question of existence occupies centre-stage. Existence and knowledge therefore meet in the act of unification between subject and object.

As Kalin demonstrates in chapter 3, knowledge ultimately is not a kind of representation for Ṣadrā, but in fact an experience, and at its highest reaches leads to nothing other than finding, witnessing, and being present with God (pp. 227–45)—it is important to recall here the two-fold meaning of *wujūd* as “existence” and “finding.” Ṣadrā’s understanding of the unification argument leads him to exposit a kind of participatory way of knowing between subject and object, but one which tends to blur the distinction between the act of knowing and the act of existence, and, by extension, the knower and the known. This, for Ṣadrā, lies at the heart of the very problem of knowledge, which is the problem of existence: to be is to know, and to know is to be.

Kalin points out that a key aspect of Ṣadrā’s epistemology is his modification of Suhrawardī’s famous thesis of “knowledge by presence” against the backdrop of his own dynamic metaphysics. Since God’s existence and knowledge are the same reality, all things, Ṣadrā says, are “present” with Him. And this presence of things is nothing other than their existence. Kalin reminds us that one of the significant similarities between Plotinus and Ṣadrā is “the notion that Divine intellection implies ontological production” (p. 33). This is why, for Ṣadrā, God’s knowing something itself entails the existentionation of that particular thing. Thus, the things that exist are known to God by virtue of His presence with them, which means that they are nothing other than God’s knowledge of them.

On the human side of the equation, the act of knowing is intimately tied to the existential state of the knowing subject who, by virtue of knowing, is first and foremost characterized by existence. So the more intense our knowledge, the more intense is our

existence. The act of knowing, in other words, becomes a process in becoming more real. And since God's knowledge of us is our very existence, the more we come to know ourselves, the more we come to know our reality, as our realities are nothing other than God's presence with us. This is tantamount to saying that to know ourselves is to know ourselves as God knows us. Knowing subjects, by virtue of where they stand on the scale of existence, are less ignorant or more ignorant. But since the possibility exists for them to unite with the active intellect and ultimately God as the object of intellection, their attempt to know is intimately connected to their everyday lives, which are grounded in existence. Hence living, existing, and carrying out the spiritual life to its logical end become means of gaining knowledge and becoming more real and less ignorant and unreal, with the net effect that the fruit of knowledge is nothing other than knowing the nature of things. This is why things like uncertainty, doubt, and ignorance no longer apply to the realized knower. For such a person, the nature of things is grasped, which is to see things as God sees them, or, in more philosophical language, to be a "simple intellect in act" which perceives all things, and which "is" all things.

Appended to the book (pp. 256–91) is a thorough, annotated translation of Ṣadrā's main text on the unification argument, the "Treatise on the Unification of the Intellector and the Intelligible" (*al-Risāla fī ittihād al-ʿāqil wa-l-maʿqūl*). The translation is smooth-flowing and accurate, both in terms of its rendering of technical terms and its interpretation of the Arabic text. Here Ṣadrā's arguments in support of the unification position are presented without the detailed historical and interpretive apparatus that we find in the book's preceding chapters. This allows the argument as Ṣadrā presents it to unfold in seamless fashion, which is best made sense of when consulting Kalin's meticulous notes to the translation (where many other relevant passages from Ṣadrā's oeuvre are translated in order to shed light on the issues raised in the translated text).

There is no doubt that this is a remarkably learned book. Not only is Kalin's writing clear, but he is also able to convey what is at stake in Ṣadrā's epistemology without sacrificing textual accuracy on the one hand, and philosophical depth on the other. At the same time, the book also attempts to bring Ṣadrā's insights into conversation with some of the more significant philosophers of modern Western philosophy, ranging from Descartes and Kant to Heidegger and Taylor. Suffice it to say, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy* is an excellent contribution to the rapidly-growing field of Ṣadrā studies, and is sure to set the bar very high for the kind of historical range, philosophical rigour, and even mystical sensitivity demanded by any serious engagement with Mullā Ṣadrā's thought.

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