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INTELLECT AND THE INTELLIGIBLE IN UNITY

Cécile Bonmariage

Introduction

What is it to know, how do we acquire knowledge, and more precisely, how do we obtain the kind of knowledge that reaches that which is not determined by the limitations of the material world, the kind of knowledge that is beyond conditions of time and place, allowing for universal judgments? And, in a system of thought where a higher level of reality than this material world is conceived, what kind of knowledge reaches this higher realm?

Arabic philosophy inherited the conceptual framework for its understanding of such questions and other epistemological issues from Greek philosophy. The opinions defended as well as the point of the debates are not always as clear as one would like in Greek and Hellenistic philosophy and, more often than not, the same holds for their Arabic version and further developments in the Arabo-Islamic cultural area. One of the points Arabic reading thinkers had to come to grips with is Aristotle's statement in his treatise *On the Soul* that in immaterial things, the knower and the known (or what "intelligizes" and what is "intelligized") are identical (*On the Soul* 430a3–5). This observation—seen through the lenses of its various understandings by later commentators and of its further developments in Neoplatonic texts such as those of Plotinus or Proclus (all of these known through more or less faithful translations and paraphrases, making the theories sometimes quite different from their Greek counterpart)—brought about many discussions in later Arabic philosophy, even if its ultimately Aristotelian origin was not always recognized as such.

This chapter focuses on the unity of intelligible and intellect as theorised by one of the major thinkers of post-classical Islamic philosophy, Mullā Ṣadrā (Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, d. ca 1640), who, unlike some of his most eminent predecessors such as Ibn Sīnā, thought it appropriate to conceive the relationship between the knower and the known, the subject and the object of intellection, as a unification. What did he mean by this? What are the questions he aims at solving? And what problems does his position create? These are the questions we will explore in what follows.

Intellection as Unity

Unity as Identification

To understand Šadrā's thought it is necessary to grasp what he means by "unity" or "identification" (*ittiḥād*) when he maintains that in the act of intellection, the subject of intellectual knowledge and the object of intellectual knowledge come to unite or become one. How unity is here understood as identity seems clear from the following definition of the term: "Unification/being one, that is identity" (*al-ittiḥād ayy al-ḥuḥūdiyya*; Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 67). Šadrā follows here Ibn Sīnā's understanding of the word in this context, as it appears in the *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā'* in a passage about God's knowledge: intellect "unites with its (object), so as to become in a way identical to that which it intellects" (Avicenna 1960: VIII.7, 369.12).

Thus for Šadrā to say that there is "unification/unity of the knower and the known" means that in the act of intellection, knower and known are one and the same. Why he holds this view and precisely what its sense is requires careful explanation. It is so because, Šadrā maintains, it is only as being actually known that what is known is an object of knowledge. The act of being of an intelligible form in act (that is, a form which is totally devoid of matter, location and position) and its being for that which intellects it are one and the same thing, and nothing else, since it has no other being than this very being; otherwise it would not be what it is, an actually intelligible form (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 313–15).

Every act of intellection is a unification insofar as, for Šadrā, that which is intellected, while remaining the same in its essential meaning, exists in this act by the very existence (or act of being) of the knower. The simile Šadrā gives for what is happening here is the relationship between act of being and quiddity in particular beings as he understands it. Šadrā conceives all that is as sharing one fundamental reality: being. Everything that is, is primarily an act of being, one of the modes that manifest the highest degree of being in ever more multiplicity and deficiency as one gets farther from the source of all being. Several distinctions are made in order to preserve the transcendence of the First and the existence of the different levels of reality. But, what is of interest to us here is rather that Šadrā, in his position on the act of being as the only founded reality, considers the quiddities (understood in its strict meaning of that which answers the question "what is it?", "quid est?") as merely a way of expressing the specific aspect of perfection that each lower being is, its deficiency making it "this" and not "that" in the language of quiddities. What is real is the act of being, and quiddity is derived from it. The quiddities are not through another act of being but they are simply another point of view on things: when the mind considers reality. Quiddities are thus nothing but this particular act of being, with no other ground for their reality than this very act, and still they are "something" when looked at in their own level of reality.

What happens in intellection understood as unification is thus not, as detractors would have it, that by intellecting a cow, I would become ontologically identical with a cow, but rather, that the intelligible form I intellect in act exists, in the act of intellection, by my own act of being, meaning that "both beings are through one and the same act of being" (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 326). It is thus not the case that

one thing would become another or that both things would disappear and become a third one, but in the knower both are by one act of being.

The Identification Paradigm

The unification or identification paradigm goes even beyond intellection to encompass perception as such: "Every act of perception," says Šadrā, "is through unification/identification of the perceiver and that which is perceived" (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1984: 585). What he means by this is simply that every form of perception is only a form for that which perceives it: "What is sensed in act is united in its being with the substance that perceives it in act" (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 315). Or in other words, "the being of what is sensed insofar as it is sensed, is in itself its being for that which senses it, just as the being of the intelligible as intelligible is the fact that it is actualized for that which intellects it" (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 299, 3: 313). This is to be understood in the following way: the very reality of a perceived form is to be that form, meaning, to be a form for that which perceives it. Thus, for example, the form that is perceived in the sensation one can have of a concrete thing in the material world outside of our mind is this sensible form that exists for us as opposed to the form of the material thing in itself, which cannot be sensed as such.

For sensation and imagination (that is, the perception of those forms that are disengaged from matter but whose perception is subject to conditions pertaining to the corporeal world, such as location and position) this is relatively easy to understand, since for Šadrā, between these forms and that which perceives them, the relationship is more one of creation than of reception: "With respect to what it perceives in imagination and sensation (*mudākātū-hā al-khayālīyya wa-l-hissiyā*) the soul is more similar to an agent and an originator than it is to a depository that would receive (them)" (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 287). This is for Šadrā one of the signs that man is created in God's image: the soul, like God, creates its own world. These forms that exist by virtue of the soul are "shadows of the beings of the outside world, which emanate from the Creator" (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 266). If this is the way perception is conceived, to think that what is perceived is by the act of being of the perceiver does not seem to be problematic in any way.

But for intellection, the matter is not quite the same, since Šadrā, like most philosophers in his tradition, holds that the principles of intellectual thought are not present and actual in the soul as soul, and cannot be attained by experience: something else is needed to obtain universal knowledge. This distinction between the various kinds of perception is expressed in what follows the passage just quoted: "As for the soul's state with respect to the intellectual forms among the founded species, it is through a pure illuminative connection (*iḍfāʿ*) that occurs for the soul with the intellectual and luminous essences that are in the World of Origination." (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 288). At this point there enters another crucial tenet of Šadrā's thought indispensable in order to grasp how he understands intellection: the affirmation of the existence of a world of Intelligible Forms, something like self-subsisting Platonic Forms. It is by connecting with this world that intellection is possible for human beings.

Intellection as Unity

Šadrā finds it better to think intellection (and perception) as unity for several reasons. First, were it otherwise, acquisition of knowledge would not bring about any change in the knower, but remain external to what the knower is. This would be the case if the acquisition of knowledge were conceived as the fact that an intelligible form occurs to the human intellect without any change in the intellect as such, something like the occurrence of something to something distinct from it or "the attainment by something of something distinct from it" (*huṣūl amr mubāyin li-amr mubāyin*; Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1984: 584). But acquiring knowledge is not like acquiring "a house, goods, or children" (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 319). Acquisition thus understood can at most increase the number of relations something has with what is distinct from it, but not bring any change in the thing itself. But this is not what knowledge does to the knower: to acquire knowledge is for the knower to become more perfect. A person who knows something is not the same as when that person did not know that thing, since now a mode of perfection belongs to the knower that did not before, or more precisely, exists through the knower.

But, more essentially, what Šadrā maintains here is linked with his metaphysics. We said earlier that Šadrā conceives all that is as sharing one fundamental reality: being. From the First principle of all that is, the Real, come to be a variety of beings at different levels of perfection, which are so many realms of manifestation of the perfections of being. Three main levels or planes of reality are defined: an intellectual realm, an imaginative realm, and the physical realm of the beings of this material world.

The passage from sensible perception to intellection is not to be understood as a process whereby the knower remains the same while what is known becomes increasingly disengaged from material conditions. It is rather a journey through modes of being:

In its perception of the universal intelligibles, the soul witnesses intellectual essences that are disengaged [from matter] not [because] soul would have disengaged them or abstracted the intelligible from the sensible, as is commonly held by philosophers, but through the transfer of the soul from that which is sensed to the imaginative, then to the intelligible, a departure from this world to the other world, then to what is beyond them, and a journey from the world of bodies to the world of images, then to the world of intellects.

(Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 289)

Epistemological perfection goes along with, or corresponds to, ontological perfection: one knows what is at our level of being, one can reach what is in our plane of reality. This explains one of the aspects of Šadrā's statement that knowledge is being or being is knowledge (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 291). The perfection of a human being in the journey through different levels of reality is an intensification by which one becomes more fully or more intensively what one is: from a rational animal, able potentially to perceive universal intelligibles, the human being becomes one of the separate substances. This is for Šadrā one of the key examples of his theory of substantial movement and explains how human beings can be said to be corporeal in their coming to be, immaterial in their subsistence.

To reach the level of intellection is thus to reach a mode of being free from the limitations due to matter or place. At this point, the human soul comes to participate in the intelligible realm and unites with the world of Intellect, that is, for Šadrā, the Platonic Forms. "There is a luminous and intellectual form in the World of the Intellect (i.e., the Platonic Forms) for the things (in the world of) generation," says Šadrā. And it is this form "that a human being meets when perceiving the universal intelligibles" (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 2, 68).

What should be understood by this seems to be that this contemplation of the Intellective Forms allows one to recognize in what one encounters in our world expressions of the same realities, albeit in another, lower, mode of existence defined by multiplicity and deficiency. The very principle of the intelligibility of this world is assured by the existence of the Immaterial and Intellective Forms of the World of the Intellect, which this world manifests at a lower level. Our reaching out to this World of Forms gives us the key of the intelligibility of this lower world.

But some texts seem to point to a slightly different understanding. These are texts where it is stated that because we reach the Intelligible World from our position in this lower world, the realities that comprise that World, while in themselves intellectual individuals, appear to us as universal concepts susceptible of being said of several things (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 289; 2, 68-9). This seems to imply that our conceptualization of the world, which is one aspect of intellectual knowledge, is due to the fact that our reaching out to the Intelligible World is not as successful as it might be and that there might thus be a higher kind of intellectual knowledge. But before embarking on an explanation of what this might imply, we first have to consider another aspect of intellection as unity, the unification that takes place in intellection between the knower and the Active Intellect, conceived as a unique entity pertaining to the Intelligible World.

Unification of the Knower and the Active Intellect

This aspect of intellection as unity, unlike that just explained, appears more as an extra piece, added to the picture because it is usually linked to the unity of the knower and the known. When Šadrā deals with this question, he generally introduces it as being said by the Ancients, and as such in need of a proper meaning (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 335, 1999: 96). Some have raised doubts about the necessity of such a theory in Šadrā's understanding of intellection and think that his discussion of the topic shows an unresolved (and even unproblematic) tension between unification with the world of intelligible entities or the World of the Intellect on the one hand, and unification with the Active Intellect on the other (Kālin 2010: 30). What Šadrā says here seems thus more of a way to give a correct interpretation of the Ancients' claim than a deliberate endorsement of the theory.

More often than not, this does not appear to be such a significant problem, since the Active Intellect, considered as having in itself all intelligibles, is often said to be the Intellective World seen as one single reality. When Šadrā deals with the question more precisely, this is what he says: soul in its act of intellection can be said to unite with the agent Intellect insofar as it unites with it with respect to the intelligible that is intellect, since the form that is intellect by the soul cannot be other than the

form that is in the Active Intellect (or in any other knower), as intelligible forms can only be one and the same. The distinction Šadrā draws between intellective unity (where a multiplicity of meaning does not impair the unity of being) and numerical unity allows him to sweep away the traditional question of a multiplication of the concept when several knowers know the same thing. Šadrā's answer to another famous question—namely, if soul unites with the Active Intellect, would it know everything, since in it are all intelligible forms?—is that it is only with respect to the intelligible it is intellecting that the soul unites with the Active Intellect.

Nowhere does Šadrā seem to consider this unification as implying or likely to imply a loss of individuality for the human soul that unites with the Active Intellect. Nor does he make any strong statement about a possible strict distinction between unification and conjunction. In the *Mafāhīh*, Šadrā states that the ultimate perfection of the human soul is to have in itself the forms of everything, and to “unite with the universal Intellect” (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1984: 586). Since unification does not mean a loss of individuality, and since it is understood as identification, one way of understanding what is said here is that what Šadrā means when he speaks about unification with the Active Intellect or the universal Intellect is the same as what he says when he speaks about the soul as becoming itself an intellective world or an Active Intellect (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1984: 587, 1981: 1, 20).

However, one also finds a different discourse regarding the role of the Active Intellect in human intellection in texts where the Active Intellect is described as illuminating the human soul and the imaginative forms so as to make them intellect in act and intelligible in act respectively (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 9, 143); in yet other texts, the Active Intellect is said to be that which gives the principles of universal knowledge rather than the content of thought. That is, the Active Intellect would give *a priori* truths necessary for universal knowledge (such as “the whole is greater than its parts”) and not actual content of thought. As Kalin showed, this last interpretation of the role of the Active Intellect is left hardly explained by Šadrā, and how to understand these statements is not yet quite resolved (Kalin 2010: 149, 158). In fact, what Šadrā says about intellection, and more broadly about epistemological issues, is often not as clear and straightforward as one would hope. There are clearly implicit distinctions behind the various and not always entirely compatible (at least at first sight) explanations Šadrā gives about what actually happens here.

Knowledge of Concepts vs. Knowledge of Things as They Are

This is one of several distinctions not always explicitly stated by Šadrā. It comes near but does not entirely coincide with the distinction between knowledge having to do with the present world and knowledge having to do with the higher realm of reality, each having a separate criterion of truth: the correspondence of concepts with the external world for the first and mystical experience for the second (Rezāee & Hashemi 2009). It has also to do with propositional knowledge in a predicative and logical environment and knowledge of things as they are, in a direct witnessing of their very reality.

It is stated as such in a passage where Ibn Sīnā is said to err whenever he has to go beyond the first kind of knowledge to reach the second: there is a difference between

knowing “what is general and universal,” i.e. concepts, and understanding “what existential ipseities (*ḥuwwiyat*) really are” (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 9, 109). The same distinction is explained as that between knowing through definitions and knowing reality itself. The example par excellence is that of being itself, when considered as a concept, which is predicated of quiddities in the mind, and when being is considered in what it really is, the basic foundation of what is real outside of the mind. Realities are not instantiations of the concept of being but acts of being in their own right, concrete entities with distinct effects, although these vary in the different levels of reality.

What was said earlier about the source of universal concepts as coming from the weakness of our reaching out to the World of the Intellect shows how this conceptual knowledge is viewed by Šadrā as unsatisfactory and linked to our present state in this world. But in fact, the ultimate source of both understanding of what is seems to be the same. To reach the second higher kind of knowledge means to witness the Intelligible Forms of the World of the Intellect in their being and ipseity, as acts of being and not as a content of sense. And to reach intelligible concepts is to reach these same Intelligible Forms in their own meaning and as universal concepts (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 386; see also 1, 291, where it is said that Intellective Forms are singular/individual in themselves, universal in consideration of their quiddities, which are concepts taken absolutely, predicable to all the individuals of a species; and 9, 144 where natural universals are said to be names for intellective ipseities). In other passages, however, the distinction could be interpreted as one between the work of the mind in its apprehension of the external world and proper intellection (some texts like the distinction between the work of the *mens* and that of *intellectus*). These are texts where concepts in the mind (used in universal propositions) are said to derive from experience ultimately going back to sense data, something that does not seem to entirely fit with what Šadrā says elsewhere employing the language of abstraction: “The human soul has the power to abstract (*intāḥaḍ*) the universal intelligibles from the concrete (things) in the external (world) and from the imaginative forms” (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 324):

We can take from the various individuals ... one single meaning that corresponds to each of the individuals, insofar as this abstract universal meaning can be said of each of them; for instance, you can abstract from various human individuals ... one single meaning that they all share, that is “human being” (taken) absolutely.

(Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 272)

The conceptual knowledge thus attained through these mental forms is labeled “intellective knowledge” (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 6, 155), since it fulfills the conditions of being free from matter, space, and position.

Whatever the interpretation one may give of such passages, the other side of the distinction is clear: it consists of witnessing intellective realities in a face-to-face or presential mode of knowledge, a direct cognitive intuition of the reality faced, in an experience similar to that of self-knowledge. Here again, Šadrā returns to the difference between concept and reality, and distinguishes this experience of self-knowledge (where one knows oneself as unique and not subject to any participation of others),

from the conceptual knowledge we can have of ourselves as a human being, with what this universal concept entails of sharing with other individuals of the human species (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 6, 155–6).

Conceptual knowledge does however provide an understanding of reality, and corresponds to what things really are: the truthfulness of the concept and its correspondence with the outside world is grounded in its source, which is the Intelligible realities of the World of Intellect. This is so at least for those intelligible forms other than our own mental constructions, that is, for “founded species” as was said in the passage of the *Asfār* quoted earlier (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 288) as opposed to intelligible forms created by the mind without any reference to reality (like “associate of the Creator” or “non-being”) but considered as intelligible and subject to correct universal judgments (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 1, 263–326 on mental existence). But this conceptual knowledge is not the highest way of grasping the reality of things.

To reach a direct intellectual knowledge or intuitive intellection that goes beyond concepts is “the most perfect part of knowledge” (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 6, 164). It is this kind of knowledge that reaches the fundamentals of a genuine understanding of what really is, the basic tenets of a correct metaphysical comprehension of reality. This does not mean that we have to get rid of demonstrative knowledge. What it means rather—in a way Suhrawardī and Ishrāqī illuminationists after him would recognize as properly *ishrāqī* (see Suhrawardī 1999: §5 at the end and §279)—is that the primary premises of demonstration, if founded, can only be attained through direct contemplation of the realities of things, as they are in the higher level of reality, that of the World of the Intellect. It is only when built on such bases that knowledge can reach an understanding of what is that is not subject to doubt, even when considering a conceptual understanding of things. For Šadrā,

to attain this is only possible through the power of unveiling (or, revelation, *mukāshafa*), associated with a strong power of rational study (*balṭh*) for the one who studies without having a perfect taste and a correct unveiling cannot reach the contemplation of the existential realities. The study and investigations of these people turn for the most part around universal concepts, and these are the subjects of their sciences, and not the existential entities. This is why whenever the course of their study gets them to such questions, they show only deficiency, stammering and scribble.

(Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 6, 239)

Šadrā uses not only the language of vision, contemplation, and presence, but also that of inspiration (*ilhām*), of opening or unveiling (*fath*), and of bestowals (*mauḏhib*). He often presents himself as having been granted such bestowals: it is by inspiration that he discovered the major points of his metaphysics such as the primacy of being as act (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 5, 181); it is by an “opening” bestowed to him from God that he figured out how to understand the unification of knower and known (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 313).

There are thus two types of apprehension of reality, one better than the other, even though in a few texts, the lower one seems to be described as a way towards the second. This is evident in the following passage, about the most perfect soul,

that endowed with a “sacred power” (*quwwa qudsiyya*) says Šadrā, following here Ibn Sīnā:

It perceives the pure intellectual (entities) as such, in their being and what they are in themselves, not from the point of view of their meaning and their universal quiddity. For to attain the realities of these intelligibles, and not universal knowledge [i.e., conceptual knowledge], is that which matters in (this) perception, even if the latter is also a way to reach this attainment, when the inner meaning of these (realities) is deeply rooted in the soul. This is why it is said that knowledge is the seed of vision.

(Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 386)

To reach the realities of the World of Intellect in their meaning, as concepts, is one step; to see them in their being is one step further: “When knowledge attains the species and their statutes, rational enquiry (*al-naẓar al-balṭhi*) stops, and after it there is only presentational contemplation of the intellectual natures and of the separate forms” (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 5, 266).

Very few reach such a level of knowledge (and even the level of intellectual knowledge as such). Most human beings live at the level of the sensible and imaginative worlds, and since existence and perception go side by side, most human beings perceive only what is in these levels of reality and have no other mode of knowledge than that pertaining to this sensible and imaginative realm. And even those who do reach intellectual knowledge only rarely do so without any trace of or mixing with imagination, since human beings while in this world can only rarely reach a pure intellectual knowledge (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 460; 378–80). More often than not, even the most perfect human beings remain at the level of the “science that pertains to the soul” (*‘ilm nafṣānī*), something between the imaginative grasp of things (*khayāl*) and simple intellect (*‘aql baṣīf*) (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 378).

But the goal of human perfection is nevertheless

to perceive all of the existential realities and unite with them ... It is also in the nature of the human soul to become a simple intellect and an intellectual knower, in whom resides the form of every intellectual existent and the meaning of every physical being in a way higher than their mode of physical existence.

(Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1999: 38–9; Kalin 2010: 282 and 1981: 3, 338–9; note the implicit distinction between the knowledge pertaining to this world and that of the world of the intellect expressed by the change in terms: “meaning” and “form”)

It is this ability to know things as they are that differentiates human nature from all the realities of this world (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 9, 139). Another important peculiarity of human nature is that only human beings can exist in the different levels or modes of being while keeping their individuality, their “individual ipseity” as Šadrā has it, thus remaining individuals at each level of reality (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 9, 96–9, 194).

To reach intellectual knowledge, and thus to unite with the Intelligible World, is not something that can be done only after death, except as Šadrā says, if by "death" the soul's departure from the world of nature is meant, since this is indispensable for every intellection (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 5, 303–4). While living in this world, and while partly still living in the physical realm and having to take care of one's body for instance, one can already access higher modes of knowledge and of realization of oneself. Such a human being, while still in this physical world, is yet already free from its limitations.

Being in This World

What is the role, if any, of sense data and of the mental work on what we get from our encounter with things in this world in the acquisition of knowledge in such a theory? It could well be assumed to be very little. This is not however the case. Šadrā insists on the necessity to start from the grasp of sensible forms and thus from sense data gathered in this world as a first step towards higher levels of knowledge. Against those who think that the best way to prepare oneself to obtain knowledge from a higher realm is to refrain from any confrontation with the world and to abstain from sensation as much as possible, Šadrā declares that this is wrong. The first step of acquisition of knowledge for human beings is by way of sensible perception: by seeing "what is common to things and by what they differ, knowledge and definitions arise, then arguments and demonstrations." These perceptions are like "wings for the human intellect by which it flies to the Higher Realm and the Lofty World" (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 2004: 1, 393–4). Šadrā warns his readers to be diligent in their quest for self-sufficiency through this body and its instruments lest they would be taken by surprise by death and remain eternally deficient (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 2, 81).

Šadrā and His Sources

In his defense of a conception of knowledge as unity, Šadrā presents his own views as a rediscovery of the true meaning of the theory held by the Ancients. On the various meanings of "intellect" (*ʿaql*), in a reading that sees them as pointing to the identification paradigm he himself supports, Šadrā quotes extensively al-Fārābī speaking about the Ancients (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 421–7) or Alexander of Aphrodisias about Aristotle's distinction of three kinds of intellect, material, in *habitu*, and agent (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 428–33, quoting without naming as his source the *De Intellectu*). But the number of quotations from the *Uthūlūgiyya* (the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*) points to Šadrā's main source here. One example should suffice to show this: "When the intellectual man casts his gaze on the intelligible things, he does not reach them until he and they become one and the same thing" (*Uthūlūgiyya*, VIII, §163, G. Lewis tr., 1959: 403, quoted in Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 317; on epistemology in the *Theology*, see d'Ancona 1997).

But there are other sources for what Šadrā maintains: Suhrawardī and Ishrāqī, but also Akbarī thought, are all likely inspirations for Šadrā in the development of his

epistemological views. This aspect is not however stressed here (as it is in his metaphysics for instance), even though one can find in Šadrā's texts a discussion of Suhrawardī's own understanding of knowledge by presence or of imagination.

It is against the background of Ibn Sīnā's epistemological positions that Šadrā states his own view. His claim that in the act of intellection, subject and object become one breaks with Ibn Sīnā's outright rejection of identity of knower and known in human knowing (as distinct from God's knowledge of things). Ibn Sīnā considers it utterly inconceivable to claim that the knower "becomes the intelligible form it intellects." In his discussion of the matter, he offers several arguments, all of them going back to the basic principle that, for him, it is not possible for one thing to become another while still remaining itself (Avicenna 1892: 178–9; see also 1959: 239; see McGinnis 2010: 139–42).

Šadrā gives a point-by-point answer to Ibn Sīnā's arguments against identification of knower and known and of knower and Active Intellect in the texts where he discusses intellection (Šadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī 1981: 3, 321–40, 1999: 80–92, 96–100). But his answer would not have convinced Ibn Sīnā and those who follow his views: the discrepancy between the two thinkers runs deeper and their divergence regarding intellection is but a symptom of a radically different conception of the basic principles of metaphysics (Bonmarrage 2002).

Conclusion

Šadrā's epistemology is often complex and challenging. In his major opus, the *Asfār*, the texts where these questions are discussed are disseminated in several parts centered on very different questions, and often Šadrā's own views are presented in a dialogue with his predecessors and as a response to previous debates. His doctrine on the unity of intellect and intelligible requires subtle awareness and attention on the part of the reader, with the danger of constructing an overly harmonizing account of the complex theory here presented by Šadrā. Still, it seems fair to say in conclusion that, like his metaphysics, Šadrā's epistemology is concerned primarily with individual, singular, realities. But as the most ontologically founded realities are those pertaining to the Intelligible World, the highest level of knowledge is to reach the intelligible singular, the Intelligible Form, through something like an intuitive intellection. This enables the soul to grasp the intelligibility of the lower levels of reality and to recognize in each lower level the actualization of the intelligible.

The questions and ideas here discussed are not unfamiliar to philosophers versed in Western thought: the debates may not exactly be the same, but they still try to tackle similar problems.

Further Reading

Hāriti Yazdī, M. (1992) *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy, Knowledge by Presence*, Albany: SUNY Press.

Part VI

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