



## ASFĀR AL-ARBA'Ā

AL-ASFĀR AL-ARBA'Ā (The four journeys), or, more completely, *al-Ḥekmat al-mota'ālīa fi'l-asfār al-'aqlīya al-arba'a* (The sublime wisdom in the four rational journeys), the title of the magnum opus of Moḥammad b. Ebrāhīm titled Ṣadr-al-dīn Šīrāzī, commonly known as **Mollā Ṣadrā** or simply Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1641). The work was written, according to the author's "confession" in the introduction, after a long retirement resulting from persecution at the hands of traditionalists, whom he accuses of shallow and vainglorious dilettantism in philosophical problems and indulging in superficial and hair-splitting commentatorial details rather than delving into basic philosophic issues concerning the nature of reality, life, and truth. It is undoubtedly true that, in the later medieval centuries of Islam, the level and quality of education in the *madrasas* suffered seriously from an excessive indulgence in writing and teaching commentaries and super-commentaries rather than grappling with the basic issues of a discipline, and original minds were to be found rarely. Since this highly exaggerated trend towards commentaries very often bolstered partisan and superficial "disputationism" (*ḡadal*) and encouraged purely formal logical reasoning at the cost of genuine insight into fundamental issues and their solution, more serious and creative minds naturally stressed real understanding and insight (called *dawq*, i.e., taste or insight) and disdained purely formal reasoning. This is exactly what Mollā Ṣadrā does, particularly while talking about his "method" of philosophizing in the introduction to his *Asfār*, where he lashes out at purely pedantic "disputationists" and emphasizes the method of insight and understanding which does not consist in purely logical constructions (*baḥṭ nazarī*), but which



affects the deeper being of man. But this fact does not change the nature of this pursuit into some kind of Sufi or mystic experience, as some scholars have tried to prove, not only with regard to Mollā Ṣadrā but many other medieval Muslim thinkers. This is a grave error, for Sufism or Islamic mysticism is a definite and distinct spiritual-moral discipline which has always spurned intellectualism, while Mollā Ṣadrā is strictly rational and defines his method as “rational observation” (*marṣad ‘aqlī, moṣāhada ‘aqlīya*) and even severely criticizes people of insight and experience (*ahl al-ḍawq*) who have no philosophic or logical training and hence cannot formulate their insights correctly (see Fazlur Rahman, *Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā*, New York, 1975, introd.).

The *Asfār* consists of four parts and Ṣadrā himself in his introduction to the work (ed., Moḥammad-Rezā Moṣaffar, 1387/1968, p. 13; this edition is, however, incomplete and consists of six volumes only instead of nine) states that they correspond to the four journeys of the rational spiritualists: The first journey is from the world to God, the second from God within God, the third—which corresponds to the first—is back to the world from God, but with God, while the fourth corresponds to the second to an extent, since it is within the creation or the world (instead of being within God) but it is with God. This has given a lot of trouble to his commentators, who try to fit the four actual parts of the work into this philosophical scheme. Ḥājj Mollā Hādī Sabzavārī (1212-89/1797-1872), the most illustrious commentator of the work, for example, has discussed the nature of these journeys in terms of Sufi spiritual development—ending up in the Prophet (Moḥammad)—but without reference to the actual content of the four parts of the *Asfār*. The problem remains unsolved since, on the one hand, the assertion of Mollā Ṣadrā himself that “I have arranged this work of mine in accordance with their (i.e., the Gnostics’ spiritual or rational) movements into four journeys” cannot be ignored, while on the other hand, it is apparently impossible to fit the traditional four parts of the book and certainly the actual title-description of the last three parts into the actual description of these journeys. The best way to bring out this difficulty is to give a brief account of the contents of the four books, which is, in any case, necessary to understand the nature and overall significance of the originality of this monumental work.

The first part is titled “general questions of metaphysics” (*al-omūr al-‘amma*), which term is explained in the traditional manner as “questions pertaining to the (general) nature of existence and its properties.” This is called “the journey



from man to God.” The following problems are treated:

1. The nature of existence. Here the most important and original thesis of Mollā Ṣadrā is announced and proved, i.e., that existence is the sole and original reality, while essences are nothing except concepts or notions produced in the mind by the impact of external contingent existents or “modes of existence” upon it—as opposed to pure and absolute existence of God. Hence existence, as such, cannot be captured by the conceptual mind but only through direct intuition, as opposed to essences which are “known” by the mind but which are subjective and have no real counterpart in the existential world.

2. Two divisions of being, i.e., the Necessary Being, i.e., God, and the contingent being, i.e., the world, and, thirdly, that which is impossible (*al-momtane*). It should be pointed out that this last category has been discussed extensively only in Islamic philosophy, while in Greek philosophy it was only accidentally discussed. It must also be pointed out that the proofs Mollā Ṣadrā advances here for God being pure existence without real attributes, i.e., essence, are more or less traditional philosophical proofs emanating from al-Fārābī and Ebn Sīnā and subsequent elaborators, but in the third part of the *Asfār*, devoted to God and His attributes, these very proofs are criticized and rejected as inadequate, and Mollā Ṣadrā solves this problem there on the basis of his own doctrine of existence.

3. The important problem of “mental existence” (*al-wojūd al-dehnī*) and its nature; 4. and extensive discussion of the “non-existent” and the logical status of existence and non-existence; 5. essence and related questions, where “differentia,” which is the only concrete part of essence, is squarely identified with existence and real identity of an object. The related questions of real unity and plurality are discussed in the succeeding section, together with the logical nature of affirmation, negation, contradiction, etc. 6. an exhaustive and highly original discussion of causation, its nature, purposiveness and otherwise of voluntary actions, and the nature of God’s causation of the world.

7. The remainder of Part 1 is devoted to two grand themes, i.e., the problem of movement and, more particularly, motion-in-substance (*ḥaraka jawhariya*), which is the second most original doctrine of Mollā Ṣadrā, and that of knowledge and its nature. The putting together of these two themes, which seem at first sight very different, is to be explained by the fact that motion-in-substance, i.e., movement whereby change occurs not only in the qualities of a



thing but in its very substance, so that nothing is the same any two successive moments—applies primarily to existence which is eternally in a uni-directional evolutionary change (this is called the principle of “*taškīk*” or systematic ambiguity of existence, whereby existence is always evolving and every existent is therefore unique and different and yet all existence, in its simplicity, is the same). Now, knowledge is a new, emergent level of existence, thanks to this movement: A material object, when it becomes an object of proper knowledge, has to be transformed into an altogether new level of being, i.e., being-for-knowledge.

Here ends the movement of the Gnostic “from the world to God.” But when we look at the second part, it does not appear to justify the description “journey from God within God,” since this part is devoted to a discussion of the ten categories, i.e., nine categories of accidents (*a‘rāḏ*) and one that of substance. This part contains some very interesting points, particularly the proof for the existence of the *‘Ālam al-Me‘āl* or the World of Images (first propounded by Shaikh Šehāb-al-dīn Sohrawardī [d. 587/1191], the founder of the Illuminationist school) as a “world of pure extension (*meqdār*), but without matter and hence without space

and spatial dimensions.” This world is situated “between” (but without implying space) the world of material bodies and the Realm of Divine Intelligences. The author does state at the outset that he will first discuss the accidental categories and then substance because “a knowledge of substance [as such] is very apt to fall into the field of metaphysics and of Separate Substances, i.e., Transcendental Intelligences and attributes of God, etc.” (*Asfār* II, 1875 ed., p. 1). Therefore, although towards the end of this part Mollā Ṣadrā discusses the heavenly bodies and their nature, the first half (devoted to the categories of accidents) belong to the “realm of nature,” although, of course, in almost any discussion, Mollā Ṣadrā is apt to bring in metaphysical considerations. This highlights the difficulty of “the four journeys” as described at the beginning of the work by himself.

The third part of the *Asfār* deals with God—proofs for His existence, the nature of His attributes both at the level of his absolute and simple existence and the second level (of Godhead—*olūhiya*), where His attributes are conceptually differentiated. The treatment of certain attributes like knowledge and will is highly sophisticated and, like all major problems of philosophy, the problem of attributes is also solved on the basis of Mollā Ṣadrā’s principle of the originality and systematic ambiguity (*taškīk*) of existence. The treatment of the



human will is highly fresh and original in that Mollā Ṣadrā asserts that in man's case his freedom and determinism are the same thing, thus declaring the whole problem to be totally artificial. The last half of the third part deals with the "emanation" of the world from God (as it is also treated to some extent in the final chapters of his treatment of causation and movement and elsewhere). The third part may, therefore, be conceivably described as treating of "the journey from God within God and from God, with God, to the world." But this again does not fit Mollā Ṣadrā's own description of these later journeys as tallying with the four parts of the *Asfār*.

Finally, the last and fourth part of this great work deals with man, his functions and his destiny, i.e., survival after death either as pure intelligence—if the intellectual—spiritual powers have been fully developed in this life—or as an image—body (after the famous analogy of a dream-object—which is real in dream—cited by Ġazālī, quoted in Shah Walīallāh Dehlavī, *Ḥojjat Allāh al-bāleġa* I, Cairo, 1952, p. 30), which will be the projection of and will arise from the Soul's inner state in the hereafter in contrast to the soul in this world, which arises from the material body and then slowly recedes from that body as it matures. Thus, the soul is either in the Realm of Intelligence, i.e., the Divine Realm, if it is perfect, or in the World of Images, if it is still imperfect. But it may become perfected into an Intelligence under certain conditions and join the Divine Realm, even though Mollā Ṣadrā assures us that in the after-life there is no development as such since there are no potentialities there to be actualized as they are here where a soul born in matter can rise to pure spirituality. This last part, then, does justify the description: "journey within the world with God—and, of course, towards God."

Having given this brief description of the march of ideas in the work, certain general observations may be in order. First, it must be emphasized that an unusual degree of original thought is to be found in this work. Mollā Ṣadrā discovered two grand ideas or master principles, and he proclaims his originality recurrently in the *Asfār*, i.e., that existence is the sole and original reality (*aṣālat al-wojūd*) and that existence is in constant and ceaseless upward flow at the end of which results the Perfect Man (or the Prophet) who, taking his rise from the humble realm of matter, can reach the level of Intelligences which he regards as parts or attributes of the Godhead. All the major problems of philosophy—movement, temporal origin of the world, time, nature of knowledge, eschatology, God's being, etc.—are solved under the impact of



these twin principles, existence and its evolution (*taškīk al-wojūd*). This is surely the hallmark of a great and original thinker, i.e., that he discovers and expounds a master principle in the light of which he gains a new perspective to solve those perennial problems which have troubled human minds.

This does not, of course, mean that the system is without its share of weaknesses—no system of human thought ever is. The most serious flaws in Mollā Ṣadrā’s thought are probably, first, that his principle of *taškīk* or systematic ambiguity of existence obviously demands that all existents are unique and irreducible, while, at the same time he emphasizes God as pure existence to a point where he disallows any reality at all to contingent existents: Everything vanishes into nothingness under the Titanic shadow of the Absolute and we are told that “in the abode of existence there is only one inhabitant, i.e., God.” It is certain that this has happened because of the tension in Mollā Ṣadrā’s mind between philosophic demands, on the one hand, and the mystical impulse, on the other.

A second major inconsistency arises from Mollā Ṣadrā’s desire to synthesize all the thought currents of Islam existing up to his time—philosophy, theology, illuminationsim (*ešrāq*), and Sufism. The basic material for all discussion is, of course, provided by Ebn Sīnā, who must remain the “fundament.” The next main influence comes from Sohrevardī, the founder of the Ešrāqī school. From him Mollā Ṣadrā takes the principle of a single continuum of reality differentiated by the category of “more or less” or “more and less perfect;” for Sohrevardī’s Light, Mollā Ṣadrā substitutes existence and sharply criticizes the former for making existence into a mere notion and declaring essence to be the reality. However, Mollā Ṣadrā puts this continuum of Sohrevardī into perpetual movement, which, he says, only existence is capable of and not essence. The third great and paramount influence on Mollā Ṣadrā is that of Ebn al-‘Arabī (560-638/1165-1240). It was most probably certain statements of Ebn al-‘Arabī like the famous one: “Essences, i.e., in God’s Mind, have not even smacked of existence” that inspired Mollā Ṣadrā with the idea of the sole reality of existence and utter inanity of essences, and he even criticizes Ebn al-‘Arabī for assigning even some reality to essences. But the most important change Mollā Ṣadrā has wrought into the traditional Peripatetic philosophy under Ebn al-‘Arabī’s influence is to assign attributes to God: Philosophers had held God to be “pure existence” without essence or attributes, since in their view these latter would create dualism or multiplicity in Him. But Mollā Ṣadrā, although he makes these attributes “notional” only, nevertheless claims that



God is characterized really by these notional attributes and accuses those who reject such attributes as “having a perverted intelligence.” He knows that he will be charged with assigning essence to God, which he does not assign even to contingent beings in their concrete existence (since essences only arise in the mind); but answers that God’s attributes cannot be called essences since essences are closed and finite, while God’s attributes are all infinite.

Despite these drawbacks, however, the *Asfār* must remain one of the most original products of human thought and, of course, the most complex and sophisticated work, due to its effort to combine all the thought currents in the world of Islam existing at the time. But leaving ideas aside, Mollā Ṣadrā’s method of argumentation and analysis of philosophic ideas and doctrines is extraordinarily lucid, incisive, and indeed engrossing to the reader—so much so that often the argument becomes more fascinating than the solution itself and, as Max Horten—the first and as yet the last Western scholar to write an overall work on Mollā Ṣadrā’s philosophy—put it, “One cannot put this work down from one’s hand without admiration” (*Das philosophische System* [see below], p. 1). Philosophy in Mollā Ṣadrā’s hand is, then, not just a dry pursuit but an art—and he mentions this explicitly in his introduction to the *Asfār*.

Mollā Ṣadrā’s thought is most comprehensively and exhaustively expressed in the *Asfār* where, on each question, he states, analyzes, and criticizes all views held in the history of Islamic thought with their pros and cons and then reaches his own conclusion. Indeed, it is a work that displays the working of a philosophizing mind in its fullness. In general, the work is critical and sometimes even hypercritical; certain authors, Faḳr-al-dīn Rāzī (543-606/1149-1209) and Jalāl-al-dīn Davānī (830-908/1427-1503) in particular, are made targets of persistent criticism, presumably because these writers are not considered by Mollā Ṣadrā as genuine and serious philosophers but as extrinsically motivated. Although Mollā Ṣadrā wrote many other works on philosophy and religion (his religious writings also seem to be interpretive works written under the impact of his own philosophical doctrines), the *Asfār* must remain the pivotal one for all of them. Some of these other works, for example *al-Mabda’ wa’l-ma’ād* and *al-Šawāhed al-robūbiya* (which is generally considered to be his last philosophical work) give his theses with brief argument but without detailed discussion and analysis, while many other smaller treatises like *Resāla fī’l-ḥodūt* appear to be “wayside” compositions written during the composition of the *Asfār*.

The *Asfār* does not appear to have found many followers in Mollā Ṣadrā’s own



lifetime and even Mollā ‘Abd-al-Razzāq Lāhījī, his most important student, does not appear to have accepted some of his cardinal doctrines. The first major commentator of the *Asfār* was Mollā ‘Alī Nūrī (d. 1246/1830). But the most outstanding commentator and, indeed, often the enricher of Mollā Ṣadrā’s ideas (he did not, however, comment upon the second part of the *Asfār* devoted to the Categories) is undoubtedly Ḥājj Mollā Hādī Sabzavārī (d. 1289/1872), while the most recent commentary on the work is by Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, who is sometimes both acute and illuminating (he also appears to be somewhat acquainted with modern Western philosophy), but a large body of whose comments is concerned with mental phenomena versus or in relation to the existential reality. The only work to date by a Western scholar is *Das philosophische System von Schīrāzī* (Strasbourg, 1913) by Max Horten, based on the *Asfār*. As an overall introduction, this work still has some value, although it seems to have been written in some haste without fully ingesting the whole complex of Mollā Ṣadrā’s philosophy. For example, Horten believes that, for Mollā Ṣadrā, essences are “necessary,” which seems absolutely strange in view of Mollā Ṣadrā’s patent stand that essences are the sources of all contingency and evil and that even when they are said to be contingent, they are invested with some being by the mind; otherwise, in themselves, they are nothing and are pure negations of being.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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On the *Asfār* the only two major treatments in Western languages are the works of Max Horten and myself mentioned in the body of this article; in Iran, besides the three commentaries already mentioned, the following are also to be noted:

1. The commentary of ‘Alī Modarres (d. 1310/1893). This is said to be an excellent work but I have not seen it.
2. Esmā‘īl b. Samī‘ Eṣfahānī, a pupil of ‘Alī Nūrī (d. 1277/1860).
3. M. R. Qomšā‘ī, *Šarḥ Al-asfār*, Tehran, 1378/1958-59.



4. ‘Alī Haydaǧī (who also commented on the *Šarḥ manẓūma* of Sabzavārī; d. 1349/1931); see also *al-Darī‘a* VI, pp. 19-20.

It is also reported that the *Asfār* was translated into Urdu under the auspices of the Translation Academy (Dār al-Tarǧama) of Hyderabad (Deccan, India), but the present writer has no evidence that it was actually published (see A. Rāhī, *Taḍkera-ye mošannefīn-e dars-e neẓāmī*, Muslim Academy, Lahore, 1975, p. 216).

See also *ET*<sup>1</sup> IV, p. 51.

S. H. Nasr, “The Metaphysics of Sadr al-Dīn Shīrazī and Islamic Philosophy in Qajar Iran,” in E. Bosworth and C. Hillenbrand, eds. *Qajar Iran: Studies Presented to Professor L. P. Elwell-Sutton*, Edinburgh, 1983, pp. 177-98, esp. pp. 179ff (with further references). Šāfā, *Adabīyāt* V, Tehran, 1362 Š./1983, pp. 319-25.

*Search terms:*

اسفار الاربعه asfar al arbaeh