



MOLLĀ ṢADRĀ ŠIRĀZI

MOLLĀ ṢADRĀ ŠIRĀZI, Ṣadr-al-Din Moḥammad b. Ebrāhim b. Yaḥyā Qawāmi Širāzi, arguably the most significant Islamic philosopher after [Avicenna](#) (b. Shiraz, 979 /1571-72; d. Basra or Najaf, 1045/1635-36?). Best known as Mollā Ṣadrā, he was later given the title of *Ṣadr-al-Mota'allehin* (Master of those who would be divine). He became famous as the thinker who revolutionized the doctrine of existence in Islamic metaphysics and extended the shift from Aristotelian substance metaphysics to (Neoplatonic) process metaphysics of change. A keen thinker who wrote works in philosophy, theology, mysticism, and scriptural exegesis, he attempted a wide-ranging synthesis of approaches to Islamic thought and argued for the necessity of the method of understanding reality through a mixture of logical reasoning, spiritual inspiration, and a deep meditation upon the key scriptural sources of the Twelver Shi'ite tradition. A key figure of a group of thinkers whom Nasr and [Corbin](#) referred to as the “School of Isfahan,” he played a major role in intellectual life during the revitalization of philosophy under [Shah 'Abbās I](#) (r. 996-1038/1588-1629) and later on in life was the most important teacher at the Madrasa-ye Khan in his hometown of Shiraz.

Life. The standard biographical accounts tell us very little about his life; the more recent modern ‘biographies’ are on the whole equally unhelpful. The following sketch of his life is therefore based upon a close reading of the narratives within these works as well as on examination of some of the internal evidence in manuscripts of his work and other manuscript sources of the time. Mollā Ṣadrā was the sole child born into a courtly family in Shiraz in



around 979/1571-72. A bright young man, his interest in intellectual pursuits was indulged by his father, and he moved first to Qazvin in 1000/1591 and then to Isfahan in 1006/1597, successive capitals of the Safavid empire, to pursue his inquiry into philosophy, theology, Hadith, and hermeneutics with the two pre-eminent teachers of his age, Mir Mo ḥammad-Bāqer Dāmād Astarābādi (see [DĀMĀD](#), d. 1040/1630-31), the grandson of the powerful *mojtahed* ‘Ali Karaki, and Shaikh Bahā’-al-Din ‘Āmeli (q.v.) known as Shaikh Bahā’i (d. 1030/1620-21), who was *şayḫ al-eslām* in Isfahan during the reign of Shah ‘Abbās I. With the former, he studied philosophy and theology, in particular the Peripatetic works of Avicenna (d. 428/1037) and his student [Kiā Bahmanyār](#) (d. 458/1066), the pseudo-Aristotelian *Plotiniana Arabica* (in particular the so-called *Theology of Aristotle /Utulujiyā*), and the Illuminationist (see [ILLUMINATIONISM](#)) works of Sohrawardi (d. 586/1191). With Shaikh Bahā’i, as was the case with a number of other students, he studied the scriptural sciences of Qur’an exegesis and the Hadith of the Imams. Contrary to what Corbin and others have claimed (Corbin, *En Islam iranien* IV, p. 58; Nasr, *Sadr al-Din Shirazi*, p. 32), there seems to be no evidence that he studied with another intriguing scholar from [Astarabad](#) and associate of Mir Dāmād, [Mir Fendereski](#) (d. 1050/1640-41). Certainly the story recorded by some of the later biographical dictionaries that claims that Mollā Şadrā was advised by Mir Fendereski to study with Mir Dāmād is apocryphal (Kvānsāri, *Rawżāt al-jannāt* IV, p. 117; Tonekāboni, *Qeşaş al-‘olamā’*, p. 109). We do not have a formal license (*ejāza*) from his teachers that has survived, which could attest to his study with them and to the content of the curriculum; certainly, we know that both Mir Dāmād and Shaikh Bahā’i granted a number of these licenses and attestations of study to their students as compiled by Majlesi II (Mollā Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesi, known as ‘Allāma-ye Majlesi, 1036-1110/1627-99) in [Behār al-anwār](#). However, we have one very valuable source that records the intimate relationship of his study and even spiritual discipleship in a literary-poetic collection of the early 17th century from Qazvin known as the *Jong-e Qazvin*. This codex (which is in the National Library in Tehran) includes autograph notes of Mir Dāmād, Shaikh Bahā’i, and Mollā Şadrā. Among these notes are short *ejāza*-like statements for Mollā Şadrā. Shaikh Bahā’i quoted some narrations of the Imams and wrote that he did so at the bequest of his “illustrious and most excellent, intelligent and witty and pure son Şadrā” (*al-walad al-a‘azz al-afzal al-daki al-zaki al-şafi*) (Kāmene’i, *Mollā Şadrā* I, p. 59). Similarly, in a note Mir Dāmād referred to Şadrā as his spiritual son (*walad ruḥāni*) (Kāmene’i, *Mollā Şadrā* I, p. 556). The dual influence of his teachers can be gauged in his early notes (*yāddāsthā*) that reveal an interest in Sufism,



especially Sufi poetry and the law. These notes were probably written in Shiraz in 1016/1607/08. However, interest in Sufism does not entail affiliation to a Sufi order, a practice which, in any case, was highly controversial in this period: the claim of the 19th-century Ne‘mat-Allāhi Sufi Ma‘sum-‘Ali-Shah (*Ṭarā‘eq al-ḥaqā‘eq*, I, p. 183) that Mollā Şadrā was a Nurbakṣī Sufi cannot be substantiated.

Completing his training and possibly prompted by the death of his father in 1010/1601-02, he returned to Shiraz to work and teach; but, failing to find an adequate patron and facing the opposition and criticism of a city that had forgotten the value of the study of philosophy, he retreated to Kahak, a small village outside the holy city of Qom, to meditate upon his inquiries and initiate the composition of his main works, especially his philosophical and theological summa, *al-Ḥekmaal-mota‘ālia fi’l-asfār al-‘aqliya al-arba‘a* (Transcendent wisdom of the four journeys of the intellect), popularly known as *al-Asfār al-arba‘a* (The four journeys). His retreat (*kalwat*) lasted probably five years. He then began an itinerant life, teaching and writing in Qom, visiting and corresponding with Mir Dāmād in Isfahan until the latter’s death in 1040/1630-31, and spending time at his family estates in Shiraz. Manuscript evidence attests to his itinerant life until 1040/1630-31. His relationship with Mir Dāmād was particularly important: he began espousing his teacher’s ideas until he changed his views later in life, but Mir Dāmād remained his spiritual master (*moršed*). His devotion was expressed in the letters that they exchanged. In a letter dated 1018/1609-10 from Shiraz, Mollā Şadrā described Mir Dāmād as “the apportioner of grace to the hearts of the wise, the eleventh intellect, he who masters the theory and practice of the sciences, the lord (*sayyed*) of philosophers and the master of the jurists, the most noble of scholars, the civiliser of Islam” (Kāmene‘i, *Mollā Şadrā* I, p. 109). In another letter dated 1037/1627-28 probably from Qom, he complained of their separation and expressed concern for the health of Mir Dāmād describing him as “our master and lord (*sayyed*), may God preserve his shadow over his separated disciples by preserving his noble existence and his honour and the light of the illumination of his light that enlightens the hearts of spiritual wayfarers” (Kāmene‘i, *Mollā Şadrā* I, p. 113).

He trained a number of significant philosophers in the period in Qom, the most important of whom were [Moḥsen Fayż-e Kāšāni](#) (d. 1090/1680-81), who studied with him between 1030/1620-21 and 1038/1628-29, as attested in Fayż’s autobiographical treatise *Şarḥ-e Şadr*, and [‘Abd-al-Razzāq Lāhiji](#) (known as



Fayyāz-e Lāhijī, d. 1072/1661-62), both of whom became his sons-in-law. Other students included the philosophers Ḥosayn Tonekāboni (d. 1105/1693-94) and Moḥammad-Rezā Āqājāni (d. 1071/1660-61). After his retreat to Qom, Mollā Şadrā probably married in Shiraz. One modern source suggests that his wife was the daughter of Mirzā Žiā-al-Din Moḥammad Rāzi, which would mean that his wife and the mother of Fayz were sisters, suggesting a relationship that predates the teacher and student one. As an affluent man, Mollā Şadrā had five children who survived and a large household, including retainers and students. His first-born Omm Kolṭum was born in 1019/1610-11 and later married his student Fayyāz-e Lāhijī in Qom. Another daughter Zobayda was born in 1024/1615 in Qom and later married Fayz-e Kāšāni. His third daughter Ma’şuma was born in Qom in 1033/1623-24 and later married another student, Qoṭb-al-Din Moḥammad Nayrizi, about whom nothing is recorded. Mollā Şadrā also had three sons who became scholars in their own right: Ebrāhim, who was born in Qom in 1021/1612-13 and died in Isfahan in 1071/1660-61; Neẓām-al-Din Aḥmad, who was born in Kashan in 1031/1621-22 and died in Shiraz in 1074/1664; and his youngest son Moḥammad-Rezā, who was probably born in Qom but about whom we do not have any biographical information.

In 1040/1630-31, he moved permanently to his hometown at the request of (possibly his former student) [Emāmqoli Khan](#) (d. 1042/1633), the extremely powerful governor-general (*beglerbegi*) of Şadrā’s home province Fārs and son of the celebrated Georgian *gōlām* [Allāhverdi Khan](#). The Madrasa-ye Khan, founded by Emāmqoli’s father and completed in 1024/1615, had been established with an express purpose of teaching philosophy and science. Mollā Şadrā was the clear choice for teaching there, and it is possible that he had begun his association from the inception of the institution. He completed his major work, the *Four Journeys (al-Asfār al-arba’a)* in Shiraz in 1038/1628 and in the same year the English traveller [Sir Thomas Herbert](#) described the Madrasa: “and [indeed] Shyras has a colledge wherein is read Philosophy, Astrology, Physick, Chemistry and the Mathematicks; so as ‘tis the more famoused through Persia” (Herbert, *Some Years Travel*, p. 129). This late period of his life was productive, and he was much respected as a teacher in his hometown. After an illustrious and prolific career, he died in Basra on his way to his seventh pilgrimage to Mecca. The traditional date given for his death is 1050/1640-41. However, there is no clear evidence in support of this date. His grandson Moḥammed ‘Alam-al-Hodā, the son of Fayz-e Kāšāni, reported that his grandfather died in Basra in 1045/1635-36 and was buried in Najaf in the



precinct of the shrine of [Imam 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb](#) (Kāmene'i, *Mollā Ṣadrā*, I, p. 414). This seems to be corroborated by the fact that the date of completion for his last works, including those left incomplete, is 1044/1635.

Works. Mollā Ṣadrā wrote over forty-five works. His *magnum opus*, *al-Ḥekma al-mota'ālia fi'l-asfār al-'aqliya al-arba'a*, known as *al-Asfār al-arba'a*, is a large compendium of philosophy and theology that, instead of following the traditional divisions of logic, physics, and metaphysics, maps intellectual inquiry upon a mystical metaphor of the soul's journey in this world. Hence it is popularly known as the *Four Journeys*. He began writing it in 1015/1606 in Kahak and completed it in Shiraz in 1038/1638. The first journey from this world to God provides the seeker with the intellectual principles for understanding philosophy such as the basic definition of philosophy and metaphysics, the significance of metaphysics and the question of being for this study. In this journey, the seeker moves away from multiplicity and phenomenal deception towards unity and an awareness of the underlying nature of reality. The second journey in God with God is a discourse on the nature of God, the divine attributes and significantly including his famous proof for the existence of God. It is the stage of the mystic's absorption in the divine essence and his effacement of the self. The third journey from God to this world explains the God-world relationship, nature, time and creation and ontological categories in this world. For the mystic, this is the return to sobriety and a realisation of the duties of moral agency in this world. The final journey in this world with God is a description of human psychology focusing on soteriology and eschatology and reveals most clearly the significance of Twelver Shi'ism to his thought. This is the final stage of the mystic's journey, a recognition that everything as a unified whole reflects the ontological unity of the divine and that the realised human recognises a desire to return to the principle, the one who is the source of being, God. The *Four Journeys* is a major source for the history of Islamic philosophical traditions: it reveals the strong influence of an Avicennan structure with major contributions from the critiques of Avicennism by Sohrawardi and the Sufi metaphysics of [Ebn al-'Arabi](#). But it is not just the arguments of thinkers, well known in academic and scholarly circles, who are considered. He also addressed the positions of some major philosophers of Shiraz such as [Mir Ġiāt-al-Din Maṣṣur Daštaki](#) (d. 948/1541) and Šams-al-Din Mohammad Kaḫari (d. ca. 957/1550).

His other works mainly deal with philosophical theology, such as *al-Ḥekma al-'aršiya* (Wisdom of the throne) and *al-Šawāhed al-robubiya* (Divine witnesses).



One work, *al-Mašā'ir* (Inspired recognitions) stands out as a dense epitome of his doctrine of being as expressed in the first part of the *Four Journeys*. As a religious thinker, Mollā Şadrā was also keen to come to terms with his scriptural heritage, and he wrote three works on the hermeneutics of the Qur'an as a preparation for his own incomplete mystical and philosophical commentary on the text: *Mafātiḥ al-ġayb* (Keys to the unseen), *Asrār al-āyāt* (Secrets of the verses/signs), and *Motašābehāt al-Qor'ān* (Allegories of the Qur'an). As a Shi'ite thinker, he also wrote an incomplete commentary on the main doctrinal collection of tradition, *Oṣul al-kāfi* of Kolayni (d. 329/941), as an attempt to grapple with the question of what it means to be an intuitive philosopher in the Shi'ite tradition. He also wrote a number of other treatises on particular issues, such as *creatio ex nihilo*, the resurrection, the nature of knowledge, logic, and the relationship between existence and essence.

Ideas. Mollā Şadrā is often described as a metaphysical revolutionary because of his uniquely posited doctrine of existence. Existence is ontologically prior, a unified reality graded in degrees of intensity and an elusive reality that cannot be fully grasped. Any attempt to conceptualise existence falsifies it through reification. A reified, fixed concept cannot capture the nature of existence, which is dynamic and in flux. Unpacking this metaphysical package, one can discern three distinct doctrines of existence that draw upon his intellectual influences, which include Avicennan philosophy, the intuitive philosophy of the *eşrāqi* school associated with Sohrawardi, and the Sufi metaphysics of being of Ebn al-'Arabi. The first doctrine is the ontological primacy of existence (*aşālat al-wojud*), a doctrine that is located within the debate on the Avicennan distinction between existence and essence in contingent beings as seen through the prism of the Sufi metaphysics of ontological monism (*waḥdat al-wojud*). If contingents are composites, then one element of the composition is active and ontologically prior. Is it the case that there are essences in some of being, such as humanity, that wait for a divine agent to actualize and individuate them through the bestowal of existence, an essentialist doctrine that posit a rather paradoxical existence of an essence before it comes to exist? Or as Mollā Şadrā suggests, the divine agent produces existences in this world that take on the “garb” of some particular essence. Existence must be ontologically prior not only because of the absurdity of an existence before existence, but also because God is devoid of essence, and his causal link to the world can only be existential if one wishes to avoid the contamination of the divine nature with essences that are composites of different and multiple properties and features. Mollā Şadrā uses this doctrine as part of his own



ontological proof for the existence of God known as the Proof of the Veracious (*borhān al-ṣeddiqin*). The monism of the doctrine is expressed in the phrase *baṣiṭ al-ḥaqīqa koll al-ašyā* (The simple is all things): God, the One is simple and pure Being and thus as such is all existence.

The second doctrine is the modulation and gradation of existence (*taškik al-wojud*). Existence is a singular reality, as the phenomenal experience of existence as multiple is illusory. But multiplicity in this world still needs to be explained. Different existents in this world are thus different, intense degrees of a single whole. Thus there is a horizontal and a vertical hierarchy of existence that is connected and involved in a whole chain of existence. The particular degrees of existence are not stable substances in the Aristotelian sense, and thus neither is Sadrian ontology concerned with a multiplicity of substances or the problem that would be raised by the objection: how can all things be one substance? Gradation addresses one of the key problematics of metaphysics that arise from Aristotelianism: “being is predicated in many ways” (Aristotle, *Met.* 1028a10). Being is a common term that is applied to a number of contexts and expressions: the mental context (mental being, conceptual being), the spoken context (being in speech), the written context (inscribed being), and the real context (concrete, extra-mental being). In all these contexts, being is a shared notion and reality expressed in different ways. But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the doctrine is the claim that, not only is being the source of commonality, the focal meaning of the instances of being as the Aristotelian tradition would have it, it is also the source of metaphysical variance or distinction, because the hierarchy of being is differentiated through degrees of intensification and debilitation of being (*eštedād wa taẓaʿof*). Thus the old metaphysical debate about the One and the many is settled in favor of both: being or existence is both singular and multiple. The doctrine of the gradation thus provides an explanation for the nature of spiritual hierarchies and the different abilities and dispositions of people but also insists upon the ultimate singularity of human existence. Thus the ethical implications of the doctrine are a thorough social and ontological equality of existents (including humanity, animals, and so forth) coupled with an intellectual and spiritual hierarchy, order, and inequality.

This leads us to the third doctrine that all individuals in existence undergo motion and flux (*ḥaraka jawhariya*). An existing entity is not a stable substance constant in time to which change occurs as an accident, such as a young Zayd becoming old and greying; rather, it is a structure of unfolding,



dynamic events of existence. The young Zayd is thus literally not the same existent as the old Zayd, since the change in him is substantial and existential. One implication of this doctrine is that at every instance each existent is renewed and thus provides a solution to the old problem of time and creation by asserting that the world is created in time, because at each instant all existence is new in time. As such consistent with other Safavid philosophers and in distinction from the earlier Avicennan tradition, he upholds a philosophical account of the theological doctrine of God's creation of the world from nothing in time.

He applies his metaphysics to problems in psychology and eschatology as well. Just as the totality of existence is singular with degrees of intensity, similarly intellect and the soul are singular realities with grades of intensity, since there is an intimate connection among existence, the intellect, and the soul as the concrete, intellectual, and psychic aspects of being. This entails a thoroughgoing pan-psychism in which for Mollā Ṣadrā all existents are sentient beings that aspire to be “more intense” than they are, to a higher ontological level. Everything that exists thus possesses consciousness. Since all levels of intellect are connected, knowledge is an existential relationship of identity and the cognition of certainty in which the intellecting subject becomes identified with the intellected object (*etteḥād al-āqel wa'l-ma'qul*). Further, he uses his doctrine of modulation to explain physical resurrection, a theological doctrine that traditionally could not be philosophically demonstrated. He distinguishes two levels of resurrection that involve two “types” of body, a purely physical one and an “imaginal” body that is as real as the physical. The imaginal body is at first resurrected and can be demonstrated. This is predicated upon the existence of an ontological state of being known as the imaginal (*meṭāli*) that mediates between an intelligible world of concepts and the sensible world of things. It is used to explain those traditions that discuss abstract concepts such as fear and desire as having physical or corporeal features in resurrection. Concepts from the intelligible world can mimic the physicality of this world through the mediation of the imaginary realm of being.

Legacy. Mollā Ṣadrā has become the dominant philosopher of the Islamic East and his approach to the nature of philosophy has been exceptionally influential. His real achievement apart from his doctrinal propositions was to effect a culmination of a tendency within the philosophical schools of the post-Avicennan period, namely to synthesize and reconcile reason and intuition,



philosophy and mysticism within a largely late Neoplatonic paradigm of doing philosophy. Philosophy is thus a practice and a way of life in which reflection, reading, and learning are always complemented by spiritual practices and exercises. One cannot become a sage purely on the basis on one's own intellectual efforts, nor can one truly understand the nature of reality as an illiterate ascetic reliant solely on mystical intuition. In this way, Mollā Şadrā, in a manner representative of a number of Muslim thinkers insistent upon the median way of their faith, represents a mean between excessive rationalism and the unfettered claims of Sufis.

His influence on philosophical practice and learning is evident. His commentary on the peripatetic work *al-Hedāya* (The Guidance) of [Aṭir-al-Din Abhari](#) (d. 662/1264) became the cornerstone of the rationalist curriculum of the Indian *madrassa* from the 18th century. In Iran, the study of Islamic philosophy takes its cue from the study and commentary on his major works at least from the nineteenth century. The revival of Islamic philosophy in Isfahan ushered in by 'Ali Nuri (d. 1251/1836) and later Hādi Sabzavāri (d. 1289/1873), described as the “last great Islamic philosopher,” established Mollā Şadrā as the ultimate philosopher, whose thought and arguments ‘transcended’ discursive Peripatetic philosophy and also intuitive and allusive mystical arguments and discourse, in favor of a higher synthesis that combined ratiocinative arguments with mystical insight, complete syllogistic demonstrations with narrative, allusion, and allegory. In more recent times, some of the key thinkers involved in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, such as Ayatollah Khomeini and Mortazā Moṭāhhari, were profoundly influenced by the thought of Mollā Şadrā, and some have even attempted to appropriate Mollā Şadrā as the ‘philosopher of the Revolution’ despite the distinct lack of an engagement with political philosophy in his work.

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