Sadr al-Dīn al-Shirāzī was one of the most intellectually independent philosophers of his time. Though influenced by many well-developed strands of thought in Islamic intellectual history—the Peripatetic and Illuminationist schools of philosophy, as well as a number of different mystical traditions, including those of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-ʿArabī—he was able to create a synthetic whole that did not merely reconcile these divergent perspectives, but rather used them as reference points for his own mystico-philosophical perspective. Mullā Śadrā, however, unlike most of the mystical and philosophical thinkers who influenced his thought, was an Imāmī Shīʿī. Despite the struggles he may have had with some of the Shīʿī authorities of his day, the nature of which continue to be a matter of scholarly debate,1 he embraced the principal doctrines of the Imāmī school of thought, and revered the Imāms as infallible sources of spiritual guidance. In this article, I explore the relationship between Mullā Śadrā’s metaphysics of knowledge and his own Shīʿī confessional views through an analysis of his commentary on a major work of Shīʿī canonical tradition—Kulaynī’s Uṣūl al-kāfī—with a particular emphasis on his commentary on the chapter entitled, “The Superiority of Knowledge” (Fadl al-ʿilm). Before turning to his commentary, however, it is useful to present some of the key questions about Sadrā’s life and thought that complicate our understanding of his adherence to the Imāmī Shīʿī school, and explain how our reading of his commentary on the Uṣūl al-kāfī might help us answer them.

Throughout his writing, Sadrā consciously strives to reconcile his own philosophical insights, and those of some of his predecessors, with the “scriptural” sources of Islam—the Qurʾān and, occasionally, the ḥadīth literature—the latter of which, for a Shīʿa, include the

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1 For an overview of the issues related to Sadrā’s relationship with the scholars of his time, see Sajjad Rizvi, Mullā Śadrā Shirāzī: His Life and Works and the Sources for Safavid Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ch. 1.
sayings of the Prophet and the Shi'i Imams. Yet while the centrality of the Qur'an to Sadra's mystical philosophy can hardly be denied, the influence of the Imams' teachings on his thought is a harder case to make. The Imams are mentioned somewhat rarely, relative to other important thinkers dealt with in Sadra's philosophical works. Even in Šadrā's many works of Qur'anic commentary, the teachings of the Imams are invoked much less than one might expect. When he does cite the traditions of the Imams, it is often as part of a concluding section to a metaphysical discussion in which he provides a set of transmitted or scriptural (samīḥ) proof texts to support his philosophical point. Even in such cases, however, Šadrā does not necessarily privilege Shi'i traditions over Sunni ones; and at times, this gives the impression that the Imams' teachings have been mentioned as a matter of expected formality, almost as an addendum to a philosophical point. Yet, near the end of his life, Šadrā wrote his lengthy commentary on Kulaynī's canonical collection of Imāmī Shi'a traditions. The devotion of time and effort to such an endeavor seems to indicate a reverence for the traditions of the Imams as a rich source of spiritual and religious knowledge. But if this is the case, then why do these traditions, unlike the Qur'an and the works of other Islamic thinkers, have relatively little place in his philosophical works?

Perhaps more problematic, however, is the degree to which Šadrā's gradated and fluid ontology and epistemology implicitly

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2 On Šadrā's relatively limited use of Shi'i hadith and tafsir literature as sources for his exegetical writing, see Mohammed Rustom, The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Šadrā (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming), ch. 2.

3 See, e.g., Mullā Šadrā, al-Ḥikma al-mutāţaliya fi l-asfār al-aqîlyya al-arkā'a, ed. Muḥammad Ridā Muẓaffar, et al., 9 vols. (Beirut, 1981), 8:303–324 (esp. 316–317, where several traditions from the Imāms are cited); Kitāb al-masha'ir, ed. with French translation, Henry Corbin (Tehran: Institut Français d'Iranologie de Téhéran, 1982), 58–63, where he quotes from the works of several Imāmī traditionists, including al-Ṣaffār al-Qummi's Bahṣar al-daraṣat and Kulaynī's Usul al-kaft, as well as from some prominent Imāmī theologians near the conclusion of this treatise. See also James Morris, Wisdom of the Throne (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 141, where he lists some traditions from the Imāms to support his views of the pre-existence of the soul; and Irfān va`ārif namayīn (Kasr asnam al-jahiliyya), trans. M. Bidārār (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Zahrā', 1992), 150–157, where this treatise concludes with a series of ahadith from the Prophet and the Imāms.
contradict Twelver Shi'ī hadith narratives on the status of the Imāms. For Twelver Shī'ī, the Imāms occupy an ontological category all their own; one that exists below that of the prophets, but transcends that of ordinary human beings. This hierarchy is clearly articulated in Shi'ī hadith literature, which also represents this spiritual hierarchy as fixed from pre-temporal times. In Shi'ī hadith literature, the Imām's biological connection to the Prophet was mythologized to mean that he was created from pure Muḥammadan light (nūr Muḥammadi), or in an alternative formulation, from a pure clay, superior to that from which other human beings were crafted. Thus, no matter how pious, learned, or spiritually pure an individual might be, he could never ascend to the level of the Imāms. Even if many Shi'ī scholars have rejected some of these mythological traditions as exaggerations, at least with regard to their literal meaning, the doctrine of the unique and superior knowledge of the Imām has continued to fund Shi'ī conceptions of their own unique claim to religious knowledge as the community of their followers. Imāmī hadith literature indicates that the Imāms surpassed all others in knowledge, even, perhaps, the pre-Muḥammadan prophets. For just as the Prophet had inherited the knowledge of all previous prophets, the Imāms were believed to have inherited the knowledge of the Prophet Muḥammad, and thus the knowledge of all pre-Islamic prophets as well. Moreover, the Imāms were considered to be in sole possession of the true interpretation of the Qurʾān, as recorded by Ḥabīb b. Abī Ṭālib from the Prophet himself, and as passed down from Imām to Imām. Beyond this, the Imāms were said to receive a form of divine knowledge and inspiration on a continuous basis.


6 Kulaynī, al-Kaṭīb, 1:280–283; Qummi, Baṣāʾir, 1:246–250.

7 Kulaynī, al-Kaṭīb, 1:308–310; Qummi, Baṣāʾir, 2:118–120.
These traditions about the superior knowledge of the Imāms, many of which crossed the line into obvious exaggeration (ghuluww), nonetheless made it clear that the epistemological stature of the Imāms was as eternally unreachable as their ontological status. Even if we were to put aside the more exaggerated claims of the Shi‘ī hadith literature, the epistemological superiority of the Imāms is sufficiently established in the Imāmī doctrine of the Imāms’ inerrancy (īṣma) in matters of religious knowledge, a quality otherwise attributed only to the prophets. The hierarchical categories of knowledge in Shi‘ī thought continued below the level of the Imām, with those scholars well-versed in the teachings of the Imāms holding the highest status, followed by other devoted Shi‘īs, non-Shi‘ī Muslims, and everyone else. Moreover, Shi‘ī tradition developed these hierarchical categories of knowledge in the context of an early Shi‘ī electionist perspective—well-attested in the Shi‘ī hadith literature—according to which one’s status as a Shi‘ī or a non-Shi‘ī was considered to have been determined by God, or at least to have been established from pre-temporal times, indicating the futility of changing one’s status in this life.8

Mulla Ṣadrā’s ontology and epistemology is also clearly hierarchical in nature, but it differs from the Imāmī Shi‘ī perspective, particularly as found in canonical books of Shi‘ī hadith, in two fundamental and interrelated ways. First, the establishment of a hierarchy among men takes place in the course of earthly life, not prior to it. From Ṣadrā’s point of view, all human beings begin in the same place, originated in the common human mold, or fitra, and as a single “species,” and are only differentiated ontologically and epistemologically through their actions and acquired knowledge in earthly life. They undergo a second “origination” after death, whereby the inner hierarchy of spiritual states acquired in this life becomes a manifest hierarchy of corresponding psychic bodies of different species.9 Second, Ṣadrā’s conception of a human epistemological and

8 For a discussion of this, see Maria Dakake, The Charismatic Community: Shi‘īte Identity in Early Islam (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 212–218.
9 Asfār, 9:19–22, where Ṣadrā claims to have obtained knowledge of these different origins through inspiration, but also considers this to be the esoteric meaning of Qur‘ān 10:19: Mankind was but one community, then they differed and 59:14: . . . You suppose that they are together, yet their hearts are divided. See also, Wisdom of the Throne, 144–145; Ṣadrā, Ta‘līqaṭ’ala Ḥikmat al-ishraq
ontological hierarchy is predicated upon the gradated and constantly changing nature of both existence (wujūd) and spiritual knowledge, allowing for innumerable ontological levels; and unlike traditional Shi‘ī conceptions of spiritual hierarchy as static and fixed, Ṣadrā’s system assumes the possibility of a fluid and continuous movement from lower to higher states.

Given the questions discussed above, Ṣadrā’s commentary on the earliest and most comprehensive canonical collection of Shi‘ī hadith, Kulaynī’s Uṣūl al-kāfī, would seem an obvious place to look for answers. While this commentary is not complete in its extant form, what does remain offers a window onto the way in which Ṣadrā attempted to understand his lifelong religious affiliation with the Shi‘ī school and his devotion to the Imāms in the context of his now fully developed philosophical perspective. Ṣadrā’s commentary on the first chapter of Kulaynī’s collection, entitled Kitāb al-‘aql wa-l-jahl (The book of intellect and ignorance), contains an extensive philosophical and mystical discussion of the intellect which, of course, is foundational to his own metaphysics, as well as to that of his philosophical predecessors, and, some would argue, to the spiritual worldview of Twelver Shi‘ism as a whole.

In this article, however, I have chosen to focus on Ṣadrā’s commentary on Kulaynī’s chapter on the Kitāb faḍl al-‘ilm (Superiority of knowledge). Ṣadrā’s commentary on this section is complete, in that he treats every hadīth found in Kulaynī’s chapter, and it comprises nearly 400 pages of the extant Sharḥ. Ṣadrā’s commentary on this chapter is particularly relevant because, for Ṣadrā, knowledge represents the purpose and ultimate end of all human creation; it is the source and the consequence of all worthwhile human endeavor and virtue, and it alone saves. Thus Kulaynī’s chapter offers Ṣadrā a platform from which he can address some of the epistemological issues he wrestles with in his philosophical works, as they relate to the teachings of the Shi‘ī Imāms. Moreover, because the chapter is concerned with “knowledge” in general, rather than with the more

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abstract, philosophical concept of the intellect (‘aql), it provides Şadrā an opportunity to comment on some of the more mundane aspects of the role of knowledge in Islamic social life, and to offer, at times, stinging criticism of the ways in which religious knowledge was defined, measured, valued and peddled in the Safavid Shī‘i society of his time.

In what follows, I begin with an overview of the key aspects of Şadrā’s philosophy of knowledge as they are represented in this commentary, including the ontological and eschatological function of knowledge in Şadrā’s thought. From there, I discuss the implications of this theory of knowledge for the recognition of an ontological and epistemological hierarchy among human beings—a “hierarchy of knowers.” In this second section I begin with an examination of Şadrā’s views on various approaches to religious knowledge and his criticism of the common understanding and assessment of religious knowledge among the scholars of his own time. His criticism of these scholars is well embedded in his commentary on this chapter, and they serve as an important foil for his own philosophical claims about the significance of knowledge in religious life and in human eschatology, and for his conception of an epistemological hierarchy among human beings. From there I discuss Şadrā’s conception of spiritual knowledge among the upper echelons of the epistemological hierarchy, a conception that embraces some elements of the traditional Shī‘ī view of spiritual hierarchy, but also departs from it in subtle, but ultimately radical, ways.

Şadrā’s Philosophy of Knowledge in the Sharh kitab fadl al-‘ilm

Şadrā’s epistemology as systematically formulated in his philosophical writing clearly undergirds his commentary on the Kitab faḍl al-‘ilm. As with most aspects of his thought, Mullâ Şadrā presents his perspective on knowledge and its significance for the human state as rooted in the Qur‘ān and his own mystico-philosophical interpretation of the sacred text. While the Qur‘ān sets out an egalitarian principle—all human beings are created according to the same primordial norm (fitra)12 and all human actions are weighed on the same scale and entail the same recompense13—it also establishes a hierarchical principle. If all human beings begin in the same

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12 Qur‘ān 30:30.
13 Qur‘ān 7:8–9; 21:47.
place, they do not all end in the same place, and the twin bases of this teleological differentiation, as expressed in the Qur'ān, are the qualities of reverential piety (taqwā) and knowledge.\footnote{See Qur'ān 49:13: \textit{Truly the most noble of you before God is the most reverent.}}\footnote{See \textit{Sharḥ}, 61, where Ṣadrā says that “the provision (zād) of the Hereafter is knowledge and piety (taqwā),” perhaps invoking Qur'ān 2:197, where it says that the best provision (zād) is taqwa.} Are those who know and those who do not know equal? (39:9)\footnote{See also Qur'ān 6:50; 11:24; 13:16, 19; 35:19; 40:58.} the Qur'ān asks rhetorically. The answer is meant to be clear, as the Qur'ān directly links faith with knowledge and intellect,\footnote{See, e.g., Qur'ān 3:7, 190; 13:19; 38:29.} while connecting unbelief to ignorance and short-sightedness.\footnote{See, e.g., Qur'ān 7:179; 10:7; 16:107–108.} The believers are those who reflect on and contemplate God’s revelation in scripture and in the world around them, those who use their intellects and seek to understand.\footnote{See, e.g., Qur'ān 3:190–191; 10:24; 13:3; 16:11; 25:61–62.} The unbelievers are those who refuse to see and to reflect, those who are heedless—willfully ignorant—of what is before them and what is to come.\footnote{See, e.g., Qur'ān 7:146; 211.}

The role that Ṣadrā assigns to knowledge in the human spiritual vocation and spiritual destiny goes somewhat beyond the Qur'ān’s explicit teachings on this matter. While the Qur'ān establishes a relationship between faith and knowledge, it is nonetheless faith and good works that are specifically associated with salvation in the scriptural text, although in Islamic doctrinal formulations, true faith had to be based upon knowledge (marifā). For Ṣadrā, however, both faith and good works are only “good” (and thus spiritually efficacious) because they are forms of knowledge.\footnote{Sharḥ, 74; a similar point is made on 53. See also 127, where Ṣadrā comments, “knowledge is the root of every righteous act, whether it is an act of commission, such as worship, or an act of omission, such as renunciation (zuhd).”} It is knowledge alone that is spiritually transformative and that ultimately saves. As Ṣadrā writes in his commentary:

\begin{quote}
You know from what has come before, that religious acts, such as prayer, fasting and so on, are only for the purpose of [attaining] states, [by which] I mean, the cleansing and purification of the heart from evils, earthly desires, and attachments. The purpose of states is the [acquisition]\footnote{\textit{Sharḥ}, 74; a similar point is made on 53. See also 127, where Ṣadrā comments, “knowledge is the root of every righteous act, whether it is an act of commission, such as worship, or an act of omission, such as renunciation (zuhd).”}
\end{quote}
of the sciences (‘ulūm), and this is the meaning of [the Imam’s] words (a.s.): “the perfection of religion is the seeking of knowledge.” That is, the ultimate objective of religious acts and the obligations of the shari‘a is the seeking of knowledge.

Knowledge, then, is of two types: the knowledge of unveiling (‘ilm mukāshafa), that is: knowledge of the Essence of God and of His Attributes and Actions; and knowledge of daily actions, that is: knowledge that pertains to the manner in which one should accomplish the acts of obedience and refrain from disobedient and evil actions. The objective of the first type is knowledge for its own sake, and the objective of the second is [so that one may] act in accordance with it. But the objective of action is also knowledge. Knowledge is the first and the last, the origin and the end.

Thus one kind of knowledge is a means and the other is an end; [the latter] being the more noble and lofty. Action is only a means, since it belongs to this world, and this world is only a means to the next, and likewise all that belongs to it. There is no benefit in obedience that is not a means to knowledge, and likewise, [there is no benefit] in knowledge that pertains to [obedience], if it is not a means to action which leads to the state, which leads to pure knowledge (‘ilm) and sincere knowledge (ma‘rifah) of the Face of God.

While some knowledge can be a means to other knowledge, knowledge is the true end in itself. Even knowledge whose immediate benefit is a proper understanding of religious practice and obedience to divine law is ultimately a means of acquiring more knowledge, since religious practice has no meaningful purpose other than to grant increased spiritual knowledge. If “the objective of action is knowledge,” the objective of knowledge is not merely proper action. Rather knowledge must be sought for its own sake.

22 Quoting the hadith he is commenting upon here, which is found on 14–15 of the Sharh.
23 Sharh, 15–16.
24 Ibid., 22–23.
The Analogous Nature of Being (*wujūd*) and Knowledge

When examining Šadrā’s views on knowledge, it should be noted that while knowledge is, ultimately, the only means by which a person may advance along the spiritual and ontological ladder, and thus is part and parcel of Šadrā’s ontological theory, knowledge and being (*wujūd*) are also construed, independently, in analogous ways. Šadrā’s theory of *tashkhīk al-wujūd* (ambiguity or gradation of being) posits Being (*wujūd*) as a single, unified reality that underlies and is the source of all existent things, not as something divided and apportioned among them. Rather existent things are differentiated by their varying degrees of participation in *wujūd* as such, resulting in differing levels of “intensity” of being (*wujūd*). An individual’s “intensity” of being can increase, raising that individual to higher, nobler and more intellectual levels of existence, without the occurrence of ontological disjuncture—every lower level of being is subsumed within the higher, as all being is essentially one,25 with God (the “Necessary Being,” *wājib al-wujūd*) alone possessing *wujūd* as such.26 Mullā Šadrā understands knowledge in precisely the same way:

... the word “knowledge” (ʿilm) like the word “being” (*wujūd*) is one of those ambiguous (mushakkak) words that has a single common meaning, but differs in the degree of perfection or imperfection, intensity or weakness, with which it obtains. ...27

Despite its “single common meaning,” Šadrā explains elsewhere that the word “knowledge” may refer to three different, but related things: 1) “a connection between the knower and that which is known” (*idāfā bayna al-ʿālim wa-l-malām*), which is similar to the principle of the union of the intellectong subject and the object of his intellection (*ittihat al-ʿaqil wa-l-maqāl*), a fundamental theme in all of Šadrā’s writing; 2) “the image that obtains in the soul” of a concrete reality that it knows, be it knowledge of a universal reality or a particular one; and 3) the faculty rooted in the human soul (*al-malaka al-rasikha*) through which things come to be known

25 Asfār, 8:134.
27 Sharh, 5.
and truths are manifested. For Şadrā, knowledge exists in itself and for its own sake, while it also denotes that faculty by which all things come to be known and a mode of relation between knower and known. Analogously, “being” (wujūd) exists in and of itself, and is also that by which all other existent things have their being, just as light exists and can be seen in itself, but is also that by which all other things are seen.

If knowledge is analogous to being in its gradated existence, it is also, from another perspective, a reality possessing being or wujūd—and indeed, possessing being in the highest degree. This is because, for Şadrā, the highest echelons of being are occupied by those existents that are immaterial in nature. Knowledge—both as a faculty and as the final end of this faculty—represents purely immaterial reality: “Knowledge, for the intellect, is a conveyor of the presence of immaterial form to the exclusion of materials and bodies, and there is no doubt that the noblest of possible existents and the highest and the most radiant of them is that existent that is not attached to bodily things.” Being immaterial in its own nature, the acquisition and possession of knowledge advances an individual toward increasingly intellectual and immaterial modes of his own existence. For Şadrā, knowledge plays the most important role in the final entelechy of every human being, given that it represents the faculty and the means by which an individual proceeds from one ontological level to the next. Knowledge nourishes the intellectual faculty, whose increasing maturation and intensification in turn yields the possibility of acquiring higher levels of spiritual—indeed salvific—knowledge. Both pure knowledge itself and the faculty for acquiring that knowledge, the intellect (aql), are immaterial realities. The more one strengthens the faculty of intellect, the more one grasps the true knowledge of things—that is, in their immaterial reality—for the like can only know the like.

28 Ibid., 72.
29 For Şadrā, both knowledge and being (wujūd) are analogous to light. For references to knowledge as light, see, e.g., Sharh, 96. It is, however, an “intellectual” light, not a “sensible” light, in that unlike sensible light, it is “radiant by its own essence” (96). For the analogy between being and light, see, e.g., Asfar, 1:63–64.
30 Sharh, 4.
31 Ibid. See also 28.
The more one knows the reality of things, and is able to extract their immaterial reality from their bodily and imaginal manifestations, the more one extracts one’s own spiritual reality from its bodily form, thereby making “epistemology an exercise in ontology.”

Ṣadrā writes:

. . . the intellect (aql) is a form (ṣūra) which is separate from matter, change, deficiency, nothingness, and evil. [It is] the closest of all created things to Him, the All-High, and the noblest of all existentiated things in His sight. Man, in his first mode of being, is potential in intellect (aql bi-l-quwwa) and actual in corporeality (jismâni bi-l-fiJ) and it is part of his vocation to move from potentiality to actuality and from darkness to light, and thus to become actual intellect after having been potential intellect and actual soul. And it is only through knowledge that one becomes an illuminated substance (jawhar nurâni), that is to say, through that faculty which is established and obtained in the human soul subsequent to repeated intellectual perceptions and insights and through prolonged, intelligent thought and contemplation. . .

And this intellectual faculty is the source of all happiness and goodness and the repulsion of all misery and evil, and it is the goal of all effort and movement and the end of all right action and obedience. And what virtue or good quality is better and nobler than that through which the human animal is transformed into an angel drawn nigh, and the dark substance into an intellectual light, and blindness into vision and the one who was in error into one who is rightly guided and rightly guiding, and the lowest into the highest and the one who had been imprisoned in the lowest depths (sijJin) into one who soars to the the most exalted heights (illiyân).33

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33 This is a reference to the Qur’anic dyad, “sijJin” and “illiyân” (Qur’ân 83:7–8, 18–19), which some interpret as referring to the lowest level of Hell and the highest realm of Paradise, respectively.
Thus knowledge is the great elixir, since through it the black and stagnant heart becomes valuable currency in the market of the hereafter and hard and rigid iron becomes a white pearl, indeed a luminous star which gives light to the inhabitants of heaven and earth. And it is the antidote through which one discerns truth from falsehood and through which one is able to distinguish wickedness from goodness, and it is the light which brings the dead back to life and which advances before and to the right of the believers on the Day on which good and evil deeds are recompensed, and it is the capability through which one is able to ascend to the realm of the Throne.

Knowledge is the sole means through which human beings can fulfill their ultimate, and indeed, only vocation. Therefore, the continuous acquisition of knowledge is incumbent upon all people, regardless of the level of knowledge they may have already attained.

If the concepts of being and knowledge are parallel in their unified and gradated natures, and linked in their teleological orientation toward immateriality, Šadrā also posits the unfolding of knowledge from one level to the next in a way that parallels his conception of ontological movement, which he refers to as “substantial motion” (al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya). According to Šadrā, human ontological development occurs initially through a divine overflowing or effusion (ifāda) of being until it reaches the level of the human form. Once having reached this form, a human being becomes responsible for using his own faculty of intellect to move upward toward greater degrees of ontological perfection. This view approximates the Avicennan emanationist scheme in a general way, but as Ibrahim Kalin has recently argued, Šadrā’s formulation places much less emphasis than Ibn Sīnā does on the role of the “active intellect” (al-aql al-fa’āl), and union therewith, as a means of intellectual advancement and realization, seeing the process as one that is primarily driven by the individual’s own effort, and his

34 An allusion to Qurʾān 24:35, the “Light Verse.”
35 A reference to Qurʾān 57:12.
36 Sharḥ, 51–52.
37 Sharḥ, 8–9; see also 76, where he says that the acquisition of knowledge is obligatory on the basis of ṣunna, consensus, and intellectual proof.
own internal, if potential, intellectual faculties. For example, in a commentary on a hadith attributed to 'Ali b. Abi Ṭalib which states that seeking knowledge is more incumbent on men than the seeking of wealth, Šadrā contrasts wealth, which is divided and apportioned by divine decree, with knowledge, which is acquired only through an individual’s concerted effort to acquire it.

While Šadrā may not assign a central role to the active intellect in a human being’s movement from one level of existence to another, he does acknowledge the role that human “knowers,” or teachers, play in assisting the downward flow of knowledge from the divine principle of all knowledge to its human seekers. These advanced knowers absorb divine knowledge into their own being, such that they are transformed into the very “coffers of God,” that is, the storehouses of His knowledge in the earthly realm:

. . . verily knowledge is stored in the coffers of God, hidden from both lofty and base minds, and [these coffers] are the people of knowledge. Mankind, in his primordial state, is empty of [this knowledge] by virtue of his being far removed from [any] relationship to the lofty world of the malakūt, and it is only possible for him to become one of the people of knowledge and to accumulate [it] if he seeks [it] and exercises contemplation and effort and devotes himself to the purification of the heart and its refinement until he comes to resemble the mines of knowledge and the coffers of true knowledge (ma‘rifā), like a piece of hot iron resembles fire through its proximity to it, and thus becomes like it in its properties of illumination and burning. Likewise, individual men, if they contemplate the malakūt and seek knowledge with perseverance in acquiring it, come to resemble an intellectual coffer and become like it.

Here Šadrā’s transformative view of knowledge is poetically conveyed as he compares the individual seeking knowledge to a piece of iron moving ever closer to the fire. When close enough to the fire, the iron

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38 Kalin, Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy, 148.
39 Sharḥ, 16–17.
40 Ibid., 96, 115.
41 Ibid., 17.
becomes red hot, and so acquires not only light and heat, but also properties of illumination and burning that originally belong to the fire itself. While remaining iron, it has nonetheless been transformed so that it possesses in a virtual but efficacious way the ontological qualities of fire, and is capable of actively transmitting those qualities to something other than itself. Having sought out the coffers of divine knowledge, the seekers have become coffers themselves. The knowing human soul, enlightened by divine knowledge, comes to possess perfection and luminosity in such fullness that it overflows and becomes, not only a passive recipient of knowledge and “light,” but also an active illuminator of others.42

Thus the transformation of the learner into a teacher is not achieved by the mere quantitative accumulation of knowledge, but via a process of substantial transformation that makes him resemble the very divine source of knowledge he had been seeking. The teacher exists on a higher ontological level43—a level of greater intensity of being (wujūd)—able not merely to disseminate his acquired knowledge, but to assist others in their own ontological transformation. The ontologically transformative process of teaching and learning is discussed throughout his commentary on the Kitab faḍl al-‘ilm, and in one passage, Ṣadrā makes this point through an interesting reference to the Qur’anic license to use hunting dogs. Although dogs are generally considered unclean in Islamic tradition, the Qur’ān allows people to consume the meat of animals caught by trained hunting dogs. The relevant verse reads, in part, Say, “Lawful unto you are all good things.” And as for the hunting dogs you have taught, teaching them from that which God has taught you, eat of that which they catch for you (5:4). Ṣadrā does not quote the verse, but is clearly alluding to it when he says, “Indeed the prey of a ‘taught’ (mu’allam) dog is pure, purified by the blessing of knowledge, even though he was originally impure.”44 The implication is that because the dog has been “taught” some of the knowledge that God had “taught” its master, the dog’s original ontological state of impurity (najas) has been transformed.

42 Ibid., 84.
43 See Sharḥ, 3–4 where Ṣadrā cites several ahadīth on the status of the “men of knowledge” in the next world on account of their having taught others.
44 Ibid., 88.
Given the importance of human teachers in the acquisition of knowledge, and thus in human ontological transformation, Şadrā stresses the importance of seeking knowledge from qualified teachers and through interaction with learned men:

Verily, many religious as well as earthly aims cannot be obtained except by seeking the assistance of another and the greatest of all of these is the acquisition of knowledge and understanding in religion, for this is the greatest and most important of all acts of worship and obedience and this is impossible except through interacting (mukhālaṭa) and conversing with teachers and learned men. . .

Thus the one who is in need of learning, inasmuch as it is a religious duty upon him, which he cannot fail to accomplish, for such a person, seclusion is forbidden. And he would be in disobedience to God were he to seclude himself in his home, unless it was the case that he was not capable of the discussion and examination of the sciences (ʿulām), and he would prefer to occupy himself with worship and content himself with following what he has heard, and with what he has believed from the outset. It is thus not unreasonable that seclusion in the case of such a man should be preferable. . . though in the worship of an ignorant man there is little good.

As for one who is capable of acquiring distinction in the sciences of religion and the principles of certitude, in his case, secluding himself before he acquires learning and understanding is clear profligacy. For this reason, someone said: “Acquire understanding, and then practice seclusion.”45

Although Şadrā himself retired from public life for lengthy periods of time at least twice in his life, he insists that the practice of seclusion is only legitimate for one who is truly incapable of learning and thus of benefitting from learned company, or for one who has already acquired sufficient learning from others.46

45 Ibid., 34.
46 Şadrā elsewhere describes the true “friends of God” (dustdārān-i khudāvand, likely a direct Perisan translation of the Arabic, awliya’ Allah) as those who prefer solitude to engaging too much in the world and the company of others;
Knowledge and Eschatology

For Ṣadrā, salvation is dependent upon the progressive and inexhaustible seeking of knowledge, and upon the sincerity and faithfulness of the seeking. But knowledge is not only the path to a blissful life in the hereafter, it is also the essential content and ontological reality of that life, for “the hereafter is none other than the capacity for knowledge and perception (ṭālak).” The Garden is pure knowledge, for verily the perfection of pleasure is in the perception of the Beloved and the perfection of pain is in remoteness from the Beloved. . . the deeper and more intense the perception, and the nobler, more perfect, more permanent and purer that which is perceived, the nobler and more intense will be the pleasure.

Pleasure in the hereafter is not material in nature, nor can it be measured in physical terms; rather pleasure and pain in this context are measured by one’s ability to perceive the divine realities of the hereafter. To the extent that one has cultivated the faculty for such perception in this life, one will be joyful in the next; to the extent that one has allowed this faculty to atrophy, one will be tortured by the eternal obscuration of these blessed realities. Most people, according to Ṣadrā, never reach the level of pure intellect, and remain at the level of the imaginal soul. Even these may be resurrected, however, since they have managed to reach an ontological degree that has some separation from pure matter. But because their capacity to perceive intellectual realities has not been fully developed, they are unable to fully enjoy the intellectual pleasures of Paradise.

Those who reach the highest levels of spiritual knowledge and being are most removed from their physical nature, and have

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47 Sharh, 50; see also 51, where Ṣadrā says, “. . . the life of the Hereafter is life through knowledge.”

48 Ibid., 69–70. For the role of perception in the experience of the hereafter, see Asfār, 9:121–125.

49 Sharh, 297; 315–316.

50 Ibid., 211–212; see also 145, where he states, “But as for the supreme triumph in salvation, none attains it save the gnostics (ʿarifān).”
thus virtually attained or approximated “immateriality.” They are not only more capable of perceiving intellectual realities, but also more capable of being intellectually perceived themselves since they are more “intelligible.” Thus when commenting upon the controversial issue of God’s “gazing upon” the righteous in the next life as mentioned in the context of a hadīth attributed to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, Šadrā indicates that God, being perfectly immaterial, can only know, or “gaze upon,” immaterial realities, that is, the inner, non-material aspect of things. Thus only those who possess an inner “heart illuminated by knowledge” will enjoy the otherworldly blessing of God’s gaze.51

All acquisition of knowledge leads to ontological transformation, but it does not always lead to spiritual advancement or salvation. Knowledge must be sought out and acquired from human teachers, but one must use this knowledge in conjunction with various religious and spiritual practices to bring about a positive spiritual transformation. Šadrā often speaks of intellectual advancement in conjunction with the purification of the soul, tazkiyyat or tasfiyyat al-nafs,52 while also warning of the danger of seeking mystical insights without the intellectual preparation that sufficient knowledge provides. In his commentary on the Kitāb al-ḥujja [The book of proof] in Kulaynī’s Uṣūl al-kāfī, Šadrā states that the true path to God is found at the juncture (barzakh) of intellectual contemplation (tafakkur) and spiritual purification (taṣfiyya). This, he tells us, was the way of both al-Ghazālī and the Illuminationists (Ishrāqīyyīn).53 Thus there are those who acquire knowledge in this life, but perish in the next for lack of spiritual practice and sincerity. In fact, Šadrā asserts that their punishment will be even more intense than that of ordinary sinners, because of their heightened faculties of perception:

... for the changes brought about by the practice of the speculative sciences and educational exercises move

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51 Ibid., 25.
52 See, for example, 47, where he states that God has favored mankind with two potential capabilities—one for knowledge and the other for patience and suppressing passions and vain desires; and when both are brought to fruition, they yield spiritual advancement. Šadrā frequently connects the acquisition of knowledge with the purification of the soul; see, e.g., Sharḥ, 17, 20, 46, 59, 83.
53 Ibid., 423.
souls intensely, and bring whatever characteristics or actions were hidden in their essences from potentiality to actuality, regardless of whether these are good or evil in nature. And the soul, when it strengthens and intensifies and moves from potentiality to actuality, its experience of pain and loss... is stronger, and its experience of torture derived from its perception of torturous things and its attaining to hateful things is more intense, in contrast to more deficient souls who remain in potentiality regarding both evil and good [characteristics], such as the mentally deficient (bulh), children and others who are weak of soul, and the rest of the common people who are not capable of saving themselves (la yastaṭīʿūna hila) and are not guided to any way (la yaḥtadūna sabīl). For these, because of the limitedness of their substances and the deficiency of their minds, when they are punished, their punishment is not intense, but likewise, when they are rewarded, their reward is not great.

Here, as elsewhere, Şadrā indicates that acquiring knowledge hardly lets one off the hook, so to speak, in terms of the next world. In fact, he asserts that “the danger of knowledge is greater than the danger of ignorance, and God’s argument against the people of knowledge is more certain, and He will tolerate from the ignorant that which He would not tolerate a tenth thereof from the knower.” The corruption of the best is the worst.


55 Sharḥ, 211–212.

56 Ibid., 119–120; see also 214, where Şadrā states that one of the exquisite torments of the false or worldly knower in the hereafter is witnessing his former students who, unlike himself, took his teachings sincerely and used them to spiritually transform and advance themselves, in the bliss of paradise, while he is in hell; indicating that the power of knowledge exists independent of its conduit.
The Hierarchy of True Knowers

It is clear that knowledge forms the basis of Šadrā’s conception of ontological and spiritual hierarchy in this world and the next. However, this hierarchy is not based on the pure accumulation or quantity of knowledge, but rather on the quality of that knowledge, the purity and perfection of its source, and the reality and profundity of its transformative effect on the soul. One must begin the ontological journey by seeking knowledge from human teachers, as Šadrā makes clear, but which knowledge and which teachers? Are there certain religious sciences that should be preferred to others as a means of acquiring, or preparing oneself to receive, higher forms of knowledge, and who holds the keys to these sciences? These questions lead us to examine Šadrā’s views on the nature of religious learning and the religious sciences of his time, which take up considerable space in his commentary on the Kitāb fadl al-‘ilm.

Šadrā on the Religious Scholarship of His Time

Šadrā lived within the intellectually vibrant and contentious social context of the Safavid empire at its political peak. Both Sufi and Shi‘i approaches to Islam flourished concurrently, and often competed with each other for political and social influence. Within Safavid Shi‘ism and Sufism, the intellectual approaches of the scholarly elite co-existed, sometimes uneasily, with popular and purely devotional manifestations. Šadrā stood, no doubt, with the scholarly elite, but the Shi‘i scholars were themselves divided into two approaches to religious knowledge: the Akhbārīs, who viewed the Qur’ān and the traditions of the Prophet and the Imāms as the most reliable sources of religious knowledge and religious law, and collectively as a sufficient source; and the Uṣūlīs, who felt that religious law had to be arrived at through an arduous process of ijtihād which included a careful weighing of the Qur’ān and traditions of the Prophet and the Imāms within a system of jurisprudential and rational principles (uṣūl). While the Akbārī/Uṣūlī debate principally concerned Islamic law, it came to have implications for other fields as well. For example, since the Akhbārīs relied primarily upon “transmitted” (naqīl), rather than “intellectual” (aqlī) sources of religious knowledge, they tended not to look favorably on the more aqlī sciences of philosophy and
certain forms of mysticism.\textsuperscript{57} Lying at the heart of the Akhbari/Uṣūlī debate was the fundamental issue of what should be considered the true source of religious knowledge and, by extension, who could claim religious authority on the basis of such knowledge. Șadră has much to say about the provenance of true religious knowledge in his commentary, and is highly critical of those who claim status and authority on the basis of what he considers to be the mere pretense of scholarly attainment. So where do we locate Șadră with regard to these two approaches to religious knowledge?

The very fact, noted above, that Șadră devoted precious time during what is believed to be the last years of his life to this commentary on the transmitted traditions of the Imāms would suggest some sympathy for the Akhbari view. This was the view ascendant in his own time, which held that such traditions represented an essential and reliable source of religious knowledge. Moreover, Șadră devotes extensive space in this work to discussing the 	extit{isnāds} attached to the traditions he comments upon, providing sometimes voluminous notes on the transmitters as found in the 	extit{rijāl} literature. He thus gives the appearance of taking the transmitted (\textit{naqll}) science of hadith quite seriously, and he is careful to attend to the methodological concerns of this science before launching into his metaphysical commentary on the traditions.

At the same time, throughout the commentary, Șadră is critical of those who limit themselves purely to the acquisition of the transmitted (\textit{naqll}) sciences. He derides and belittles those who memorize the words of dead men,\textsuperscript{58} and who collect reports, traditions, and scholarly opinions like trinkets, rather than concerning themselves with the divine sciences and the transcendent knowledge they need to transform themselves from lower ontological and epistemological states to higher ones. For example, he describes those who falsely claim knowledge, while being spiritually “ignorant”:

[This is] the one who is ignorant of heart, deceived and deluded, claiming to possess knowledge because he has memorized opinions (\textit{aqwāl}), and undertaken journeys, and because he is seated in the company of 	extit{shaykhs}


\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Sharḥ}, 44.
and learned men (rijāl), when his true state is that he is ignorant and possesses no knowledge, and his heart is blind, without insight (baṣira), self-satisfied with what he possesses of the outward aspects of opinions, and the forms of ahadīth, and theological disputations, and philosophical sophistries, or supposedly Sufi fantasies and distortions, or poetic orations through which he attracts common souls and the rest of the “worldly scholars” (ulamā’ al-dunya) who are fooled by him, and [who is] drawn to money and high position and prestige and fame, and he is one whom the life of the world has deceived away from the hereafter.59

... Know that most of those in delusion and conceit are a group who are limited to the knowledge of fatwās and rules, and the memorization of issues of halāl and harām, and who claim that this is knowledge of religion and knowledge of the Book of God and knowledge of the sunna of the Lord of the Messengers [Muḥammad], and who abandon knowledge of the path to the hereafter, and struggling against the soul, and purifying one’s inner state of blameworthy qualities, and forbidding the soul from passions, and purifying the heart through ascetic practice... and who reject entirely the path of gnosis and religious understanding...60

One might be tempted to read Ṣadrā’s contempt for those who marked religious and intellectual status on the basis of an ability to reproduce the words of others as a stance against the Akhbārī school, which advocated reliance on transmitted teachings in the attainment of religious knowledge. Reading this and other passages carefully, however, we see that Ṣadrā’s critique is not directed at any one school of thought, but is rather an attack on intellectual pretension,61 on worldly approaches to religious learning,62 and on small-mindedness in all its forms.

59 Ibid., 57
60 Ibid., 58–59; for similar criticism, see 50, 126–127.
61 For a lengthy hadith on intellectual pretension with Ṣadrā’s commentary, see Sharḥ, 297–301.
62 For criticism of those who use knowledge primarily for worldly gain, see Sharḥ, 57, 135, 139, 211. For similar criticism of worldly ‘ulama’, see, e.g., Ṣadrā, Seh...
In the passages quoted above, Ṣadrā is equally disparaging of those obsessed with other matters he considers petty and spiritually useless, even when they fall in the domain of the 'aqāli sciences, including theological debates, “philosophical sophistries,” and “Sufi fantasies.” He is critical in general of those who spend their time in what his contemporaries might have considered “intellectual pursuits,” but which bring one no closer to an understanding of spiritual reality. For example, he criticizes those who concern themselves with the legal minutiae of various hypothetical legal scenarios, or who engage in theological debate merely to prove their intellectual dominance. In fact, at times he compares the perspective of the naqāli traditionists favorably with those who substitute their own individual opinion (ra'y) on a religious matter for the known teachings of the Prophet and the Imāms. In his commentary on the numerous aḥādīth in Kullānī’s chapter on the Imāms’ strident rejection of the practice of qiyās in determining legal rulings, Ṣadrā follows the tone of the Imāms’ antipathy to this practice. He asserts that qiyās offers “neither sound knowledge nor a strong opinion” (zann qawi), and in fact leads to a spiritually destructive pride and desire for worldly dominance that one does not find among those who limit themselves to the naqāli sciences, which do not provide the same prestige. Of course, even the Usūlis did not engage in qiyās strictly speaking, given the Imāms’ widely reported prohibition, but Ṣadrā’s commentary elsewhere suggests criticism of those who consider ijtihād, more generally, as a reliable method of arriving at truth.

63 Sharḥ, 214.
64 Ibid., 42.
65 Ibid., 294. See also Sharḥ, 39, where Ṣadrā recommends that regarding subjects that cannot be adequately apprehended by one’s intellect, one must defer to the teachings of the Prophet.
66 Ibid., 315.
67 Ibid., 303.
68 See Ibid., 108–109, where Adam’s fall is said to result from an “error of ijtihād”; and 320 where true knowledge comes neither from “hearing,” that is the naqāli sciences, nor from ijtihād. On 97 the knowledge of the mujtahidin and those who practice the speculative sciences is likened to the light of flames and lamps, in contrast to the more “celestial” light of true knowers, because their knowledge does not come directly from the essential source of knowledge, just as the light of flames and lamps does not come directly from the sun.
Taken as a whole, his commentary indicates that he is not critical of any one school of thought or any one branch of the religious sciences; rather his criticism is directed against all who seek knowledge with worldly intention, as well as those who would limit necessary and worthwhile religious knowledge to any one form, be it theology, jurisprudence, Qur'ānic recitation, hadith transmission, or the experiential knowledge of Sufism divorced from other forms of religious knowledge.69 For Ṣadrā, these sciences are a means to an ultimate end, which is access to the divine knowledge that transcends and is the source of them all.70 He writes,

... every universal principle of knowledge has an opening onto the acquisition of this luminous faculty called guidance, since even if it is speculative, it has an essential effect on the illumination of the heart; and if it is practical, it has an effect through the intermediary of acting upon it, with regard to purifying the inward nature and refining the mind and purifying the soul.71

The truth may be accessed by many different paths, and all sound knowledge, when it is undertaken with proper intention, leads in the direction of “purifying” and “refining” the soul.

Whatever the political situation of Ṣadrā may have been at various points in his life—and the existing biographical evidence does not seem sufficient to determine his political position with any real certainty72—the virulence of his criticism of those who trafficked insincerely or ignorantly in the religious sciences can be sufficiently explained by his transcendent conception of knowledge itself, as the single path by which one might purify and save one’s soul, and by which one reaches the very proximity of God. It seems clear that one who held such a view as consistently and, it appears, sincerely, as Ṣadrā did, would have little tolerance for those who peddled knowledge in the intellectual marketplace for worldly

69 Ibid., 4–5.
70 Ibid., 55, 60.
71 Ibid., 83.
72 See, in general, Rizvi, “Reconsidering the Life of Mullā Ṣadrā.” Nonetheless, hints of political motivations behind at least some of his criticism can be seen in places where he chides the “worldly scholars” for aiding the “sultans of oppression” and the “commanders of injustice” (umārā‘ al-jawr); see Shark, 135.
gain. Furthermore, for Šadrā, knowledge, like being, was a unitive reality, differing only in intensity, and so there could be no tolerance for those who would divide knowledge into separate, isolated branches, or make them compete in importance. Most importantly, for Šadrā, the acquisition of knowledge was theorized, and meant to be experienced, as a purely vertical movement toward greater intensity of being and proximity to the divine. Those who considered knowledge to be the mere collecting of variant opinions would seem, by contrast, to be traversing a purely horizontal plane—and the “journey for knowledge,” much celebrated in Islamic intellectual history but dismissed by Šadrā,73 is a perfect metaphor for this “horizontal” pursuit.

Perhaps a more important consideration when trying to situate Šadrā's epistemology in the context of the intellectual politics of his day, particularly in relation to the Akhbari/Uṣūli debate, was the extent to which those on both sides of this debate represent an epistemological break from the Shi'i scholars of earlier times. While it might seem natural to view the Akhbari/Uṣūli divide as a continuation of the traditionalist/rationalist scholarly divide of the fourth/tenth–fifth/eleventh centuries, Robert Gleave explains in two recent studies of the Akhbari school that while the traditionalist and rationalist Shi'i scholars of earlier times held that the attainment of certain religious knowledge was possible, albeit via competing scholarly methodologies, both the Akhbāris and the Uṣūlis of the Safavid era accepted and worked with the assumption of varying degrees of “inevitable doubt” in religious knowledge, particularly as regards formulations of the law.74 Šadrā, by contrast, was clearly in pursuit of certain knowledge that approximated, or perhaps even reached, the knowledge of the prophets themselves.75 Given this, the Akhbari/Uṣūli debate, with its competing strategies for managing uncertainty in matters of religious (particularly legal) knowledge, would have meant little to Šadrā, at least intellectually.

73 Ibid., 57, 66–67.
75 See Sharh, 218, where he compares those whose knowledge is based on certitude with those whose faith is acquired “from the mouths of men” and from “blind imitation” (taqlid), and whose knowledge is therefore shaken by the slightest doubt.
Şadrâ has a terminology and a set of metaphors that he repeatedly draws upon to distinguish between the spiritually and ontologically transformative knowledge that he considered to be the only real vocation of human life, and the various intellectual and transmitted sciences that passed for religious knowledge in the society of his time. He refers to those scholars who were masters of the traditional religious sciences as the “conventional knower(s),” using the phrases *al-ʾālim al-rasmi*\(^7\) or ʿulamāʾ *al-rusūm*, which he claims to have adopted from ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qâshânî’s, *ʾIṣṭilâḥât al-ṣūfiyya*\(^7\). He also makes widespread use of Ghazâlî’s division of religious knowledge into “knowledge of transactions” (*ilm al-muʾāmalât*), which can be known through transmitted reports and through human reasoning, and “knowledge of unveiling” (*ilm mukâṣhafa*),\(^7\) which can only be attained through divine bestowal, usually after a long period of spiritual and intellectual preparation. Like Ghazâlî, Şadrâ maintains that only a tiny minority of people attain to the “knowledge of unveiling,” and that such people are “rarer than red sulfur,”\(^7\) although he criticizes Ghazâlî for limiting the pursuit of this knowledge to those who are spiritually unsatisfied by the *ʿilm al-muʾāmalât*.\(^8\) In keeping with Şadrâ’s continuous metaphorical association of knowledge (and being) with light, he also explains the

\(^7\) Ibid., 211.

\(^8\) Sharḥ, 5–6, 36–37. Şadrâ opens his treatise, *Iksir al-ʿarifin* with a similar distinction between ordinary religious knowledge and the “knowledge of unveiling”; see Şadrâ, *The Elixir of the Gnostics*, trans. W. Chittick (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2003), 4. Abû Ḥâmid al-Ghazâlî presents this distinction in the introduction to his *Iḥyâʾ ʿulâm al-dīn*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2005), 112, but says that the “knowledge of unveiling” is not something to be written in books, but only something to be attained by the true seekers, for even the prophets did not speak of this knowledge except in symbolic terms.

\(^7\) Sharḥ, 36–37. The phrase “rarer than red sulfur” seems to have been a common metaphor for rarity, employed in at least one Shîʿî hadith to describe the rarity of the Imāms’ true followers (Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 2:241–242, h. 1; Daylamî, *ʿAḥam al-dīn* [Qum: Muʿassasat ʾĀl al-Bayt li-Iḥyâʾ al-Turāth, 1408/1988], 123). For other references to the “knowledge of unveiling,” see 16, and 20–21 (where he quotes Ghazâlî’s own discussion of these terms).

\(^8\) Sharḥ, 8–9.
differences between various kinds of knowers through an analogy to different intensities and sources of light. The knowledge of the prophets and the saints (awliyā’) is like the light of the sun, which illuminates by its own divinely-bestowed essence and nature, and is dependent upon no external source for its light; the light of the advanced and serious “knowers” who take their knowledge from the prophets and the saints is like the light of the moon and the fixed planets, which give off a less intense light that is nonetheless a reflection of the light of the sun, and on which they are dependent; the sincere worshippers, who do not possess or seek advanced knowledge, are like the stars, which give off even less light, and whose minimal light is effaced by the presence of the full moon.81

According to Ṣadrā, it was the ancient Persian philosophers who first realized this analogy, but it was later expounded by his Ishrāqī predecessor, Suhrawardi, whom he quotes in this context.82

If Ṣadrā borrows much of the terminology for his hierarchy of knowledge from his predecessors, his discussion of this hierarchy as it is found in the Sharḥ ʿusūl al-kāfī also makes use, perhaps inevitably, of Shīʿī terminology and conceptual frameworks that would be deeply resonant to a learned Shīʿī audience; but he broadens and nuances those terms and frameworks in ways that simultaneously reinforce and undermine key Shīʿī notions of spiritual hierarchy. I will review some of these hierarchical conceptions of knowledge as found in Twelver Shīʿī tradition, and then analyze Ṣadrā’s use and modification of these ideas in his commentary.

Shīʿī Views of Ontological/Epistemological Hierarchy: The Fixed Status of the Imams

At the heart of Shīʿī notions regarding the spiritual authority of the Imāms is the belief that they possess extraordinary—even miraculous—knowledge. The term “ālim” is used in Shīʿī hadīth literature to refer to the Imām,83 and the Imāms are collectively identified with select groups of “knowers” in the Qurʾān. When the Qurʾān asks, “Are those who know and those who do not know equal?,”84 a

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81 Ibid., 74-75.
82 Ibid., 74, where he quotes Suhrawardi’s Hikmat al-ishrāq, although the editor notes that the corresponding passage is found in Suhrawardi’s Hayakil al-nūr.
83 Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, 1:269–270.
84 Qurʾān 39:9.
Shīʿī ḥadīth attributed to Muḥammad al-Bāqir reads this as a reference to the spiritual distinction of the Imāms. When the Qurʾān declares that none knows the inner meaning of its verses except “those firmly-rooted in knowledge” (al-rāṣikhuna fī l-ʿilm), this is likewise understood as a reference to the Imāms. The Imāms were considered to be the referents of other Qur’ānic terms of nobility: they were, of course, the “People of the House” (ahl al-bayt) and the possessors of authority (ālū ʿl-amr) who had to be obeyed. They were also the awliyāʾ (sing., wali), the true possessors of the spiritual station of walāya. This is based, in part, on an interpretation of Qurʾān 5:55 that identifies the awliyāʾ of the believers as being God, the Prophet, and those who believe, who perform the prayer, and give the zakāh, while bowing down. Both Shīʿī and Sunnī sources widely consider this verse to refer specifically to Ḥāfiẓ Allāh b. Abī Taʿlib; thus Ḥāfiẓ Allāh is the wali of the believers, a title that can then be extended to the Imāms among his descendants. The identification of Ḥāfiẓ Allāh and the other Imāms as wali/awliyāʾ is also based on the famous Ghadir Khumm ḥadīth, wherein the Prophet said, “For whomever I am their master (mawla, var. wali), Ḥāfiẓ Allāh is also their master; O God, befriend (wali) the friend of Ḥāfiẓ Allāh (man walahu) and be the enemy of his enemy.”

The Imāms were the true “heirs of the Prophet” and are believed to have exclusively inherited esoteric knowledge of the Qurʾān and other spiritual teachings from the Prophet Muḥammad through Ḥāfiẓ Allāh. According to Shīʿī ḥadīth literature, this exclusively “transmitted” knowledge was further enhanced by miraculous and divinely bestowed intellectual capabilities (for example, a knowledge of multiple sacred languages), by secret esoteric writings and books

86 Qurʾān 3:7.
87 Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, 1:269. I.e., to the inclusion of the Imāms along with the Prophet among those “firmly rooted in knowledge.”
88 Qurʾān 33:33.
89 Qurʾān 4:59.
90 Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, 1:262.
91 For an extensive discussion of this tradition in relation to the terminology of walāya in early Shīʿī ḥadīth tradition, see Dakake, Charismatic Community, ch. 2, 5.
92 See Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, 1:283–284.
in their possession, and by a form of indirect divine inspiration. No single technical term was definitively ascribed to the Imams’ special mode of divine inspiration; rather, the Imāms were said to be those who were “spoken to” (muḥaddath). The followers of the Imāms were similarly considered to enjoy access to a more elite spiritual and intellectual station by virtue of their attachment to the Imāms. A tradition attributed to Muḥammad al-Bāqir, for example, identifies his Shīʿ followers with the Qur’ānic ʿūlū l-albāb, or “people of intellect,” and a widely reported tradition states that the teachings of the Imāms are difficult, and that only “an angel drawn nigh, or a sent prophet, or the heart of a believer that has been tested for faith” (understood to mean the learned among the Imāms’ followers) can truly grasp them, thus placing learned Shiʿis in the company of angels and prophets as those who alone can bear the weight of the Imāms’ teachings.

A Ṣadrān View of the Hierarchy of Knowers: The Prophets and the Awliya’

In his commentary, Ṣadrā frequently mentions “the prophets and the awliya’,” as those who together occupy the highest level of his ontological and spiritual hierarchy. He considers both to be analogous to the sun, radiating knowledge from their very essence, rather than passively transmitting the knowledge of others. However, the role of walāya in Ṣadrā’s formulation of ontological hierarchy,

93 Ibid., 1:283–285, 294–298.
94 Ibid., 1:298–309.
95 In a few places, it is referred to by the terms ilhām, or more rarely, wahy, which is usually used for prophetic revelation, see Amir-Moezzi, Divine Guide in Early Shi’ism, 72.
97 This is a Qur’ānic phrase used often to refer to those who piously “remember” [God] and who reflect on the signs of God around them. See, e.g., Qur’ān 2:269; 3:7, 13:19, 39:9. For Shīʿ traditions that identify this phrase as a reference to the Shīʿ, see Kulaynī, al-Kāfī, 1:269; al-Baraqī, Kitāb al-mahāsin, 127–128.
coupled with his obvious reverence for the Imāms, has led some to overstate, perhaps, the importance of strictly Shī'ī conceptions of walāya and imāma in his work.\textsuperscript{99} For it is clear, even in Šadrā's commentary on the sayings of the Imāms themselves, that the category of the awliyā' includes not only the Imāms, or even the Imāms and their most learned followers, but rather extends to all who have been ontologically transformed through the acquisition of knowledge and the practices of spiritual purification. Šadrā describes this expanded category of saintly knowers using terms often associated with the Imāms in mainstream Twelver Shī'ī tradition: they are those “firmly-rooted in knowledge” (rašikhūna fī l-ʿilm),\textsuperscript{100} they are the “People of the House,”\textsuperscript{101} and they are the “possessors of authority” (ṭūlū l-amr).\textsuperscript{102} Šadrā bases his more inclusive view of the category of saintly knowers (awliyā') on a correspondingly broader interpretation of “descent” and “inheritance” from the Prophet.

If access to extraordinary sources of knowledge was an inheritance that Shī'ī tradition claims the Imāms received from the Prophet, for Šadrā they were not the only heirs. In Šadrā's view, the Prophet and 'Alī had both genealogical descendants and “spiritual” descendants, such that it was possible to speak about a group of “spiritual heirs” to prophetic knowledge—a group that includes the Imāms, but was not limited to them. Šadrā writes, citing a “recent authority”:

One of the contemporary, distinguished [thinkers] has said, with regard to [this issue], in brief: “The family of the Prophet (s.a.w.a.s.) are all those who descend from him, and of these there are two types. The first is the one who descends from him as a formal and bodily consequence, such as his offspring and those of his blood relations who proceed from him, for whom the accepting of charity is forbidden according to the Muhammadan sharī'a; and the second is the one who descends from him as an immaterial and spiritual consequence, and these are his spiritual children among those

\textsuperscript{100} See Sharh, 43, 66–67, 72, 157–158.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 41, 43.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 91–92.
firmly-rooted in knowledge and the perfected saints and the divine sages who draw from his lamp-niche, whether they precede him in time or are contemporary [or posterior] to him.” And there is no doubt that the second relation is surer than the first, and if the two are combined, then it is “light upon light,” such as is the case with the well-known Imâms from the pure family (a.s.) And just as formal [material] charity is forbidden to his formal [bodily] offspring, likewise is spiritual charity forbidden to his spiritual children—that is to say, the blind imitation (taqlîd) of another in the sciences and in true knowledge.103

Here the spiritual descendants of the Prophet are identified as those who “draw from [the Prophetic] lamp-niche,” as well as those “firmly-rooted in knowledge”—a phrase that, as noted above, was usually understood as a reference to the Imâms in Imâmī hadîth literature. Thus these spiritual descendants of the Prophet, like the Imâms, have access to extraordinary sources of knowledge that place them in a category hierarchically above the ordinary believer. Şadrâ then makes the apt analogy that just as the material (genealogical) descendants of the Prophet are forbidden from accepting material charity, so too are his spiritual descendants forbidden from accepting spiritual charity—that is, the blind acceptance of the doctrinal positions of others—since like the genealogical descendants of the Imâms, they are “fed” from a higher source.104

Şadrâ does not put all “spiritual descendants” of the Prophet on equal footing. The Imâms who can claim both genealogical and spiritual descent from the Prophet occupy a unique rank—they are “light upon light.”105 Elsewhere, Şadrâ tells us that the “trustees” (awṣiyâ‘), meaning the Imâms, are “the most exalted of the knowers, the best and the greatest of them [other than the prophets], while the knowers are the lords of the [ordinary] people (nâs).”106

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103 Ibid., 41.
104 See also, Sharh, 49–50, where Şadrâ notes that a follower of the Imâmî Shîrî sect has a responsibility to be well-informed and have a deep understanding of the principles of religion and must not be a “commoner” who follows the doctrinal positions of others blindly.
105 A reference to Qur’an 24:35.
106 Sharh, 48.
basis of this comment, Şadrā's conception of a spiritual hierarchy based on knowledge would place the prophets at the pinnacle, followed by the trustees (awṣiyā'), then the saintly “knowers” outside the categories of the prophets and the awṣiyā', and finally, the ordinary people. This is similar to what one finds in Shi‘ī tradition as well, which recognized a hierarchical relationship between learned Shi‘a and the more purely devotional Shi‘ī population, as well as non-Shi‘a. The learned Shi‘is were the elite (khaṣṣa) as compared with the “commoners” (āmma or simply nāṣ). In places, Şadrā seems to embrace the idea that the learned Shi‘a occupy a spiritual and intellectual position above others, although this is somewhat belied by the greater extent to which he relies on non-Shi‘ī thinkers as influences for his own philosophical thought.

Having explicitly expanded the concepts of “true knowers,” “those firmly rooted in knowledge” and even the “People of the House” (ahl al-bayt) beyond identification solely with the Imāms, and having identified them as the awliyā‘ and the “spiritual descendants” of the Prophet, Şadrā goes on to make bold statements about the cosmological and spiritual role of this expanded group. In particular, Şadrā attributes to the “saints” the same, or similar, access to extraordinary sources of knowledge as enjoyed by the Imāms, and indeed, as we shall see, even the prophets. While Şadrā often groups the prophets and the saints together as those who have access to the highest form of knowledge—knowledge that comes directly from the divine, rather than through human transmission—he usually refers to the divine inspiration received by the saints as ilhām, a less direct form of inspiration than that designated by the terms tanzil or wahy, usually associated with the prophets. In one passage, Şadrā comments on a hadīth attributed to the Prophet through Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq which says, “For every harmful religious innovation (bid‘a) that will arise after me, and that threatens to undermine faith, there will be a wali from the People of my House who will be charged with refuting it, speaking through inspiration (ilhām) from God,

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107 Şadrā distinguishes between those who identify themselves as Shi‘ī because of their love and devotion to the ahl al-bayt, and those who truly understand the esoteric sciences taught by the Imāms, and the true interpretation of the Qur‘ān and the sayings of the Imāms (see Sharh, 66–67), a distinction also articulated in the Shi‘ī hadīth tradition.

publicly proclaiming and illuminating the truth. . .”¹⁰⁹ For Şadrā, this hadīth, which employs the terms “people of the house” and “wāli” in connection with ilhām, indicates that the awliyāʾ, along with the prophets and the Imāms, have an important role to play in bringing corrective divine guidance to the human community. In his commentary on this hadīth, he presents the officially accepted distinction between the prophets and the awliyāʾ, indicating that the prophets are aided by wahy and evidentiary miracles (muṣḏā’t), while the awliyāʾ are aided by ilhām and lesser miracles (karāmāt). Nevertheless, he indicates that both types of divine “aid” are the result of the overflowing of divine light upon the hearts of the prophets and the awliyāʾ,¹¹⁰ thus locating the origin of the epistemological and ontological status of both groups in their direct relationship with the divine.

Şadrā argues that true knowledge comes not from books or scholarly transmission, but only from divine inspiration that falls upon a heart spiritually prepared to receive it.¹¹¹ Šīʿī tradition, however, maintains that one of the primary sources of the Imāms’ knowledge is a unique series of books and written texts in their possession, whereby the special knowledge of the Prophet, or even previous prophets, was conveyed to them. Şadrā does not refute this belief directly, but suggests that such references might be meant as metaphors for inward states of knowledge.¹¹² Commenting on a hadīth that states that the answers the Imāms give their disciples’ come directly from the Messenger of God, Şadrā writes:

Know that the meaning of what [the Imām] said: “I do not give you a response to anything except that it comes from the Messenger of God (s.a.w.a.s.)” is not what the exoterists (zāhirīyyūn) among the people understand, namely that it is [the Imām’s] vocation to memorize sayings from one generation to the next such that their superiority in relation to the rest of the people is the strength of their memorization of transmitted things, or the great number of things they have memorized.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 290.
¹¹⁰ Ibid., 290–291.
¹¹¹ See, e.g., Ibid., 322–323.
¹¹² Ibid., 310.
Rather, the intended meaning is that their holy souls are filled with the light of knowledge and the strength of gnosis because of following the Messenger (s.a.w.a.s.) in spiritual striving (mujāhidā), and spiritual exercises (riyāḍa), along with their inherent state of spiritual preparation (iṣṭīdād ʿaṣlī) and clarity (ṣafāʾ) and purity (ṭahāra) of mind, such that they become like a polished mirror turned in the direction of the truth through the intermediary of another mirror, or without intermediary. Do you not see that the mirror prepared for reflection and the reflection of the other mirror are turned in the direction of the sun and reflect the radiance of the sun to all? Thus the state of one who follows the Messenger (s.a.w.a.s.) with a true following becomes the beloved of the Real, the All-High, and in His words, the All-High: “If you love God, then follow me and God will love you” (3:31). And whomever God loves, He makes divine lights overflow upon him (afāda ʿalayhi), as He makes them overflow upon His beloved [Muḥammad] (s.a.w.a.s.), although the difference is firmly established between the followed and the follower.

And in general, one should know that the knowledge of the Imāms (a.s.) is not based on ijtihād, or on hearing transmitted reports through the senses. Rather their knowledge is unveiled (kashfīyya), presentational (laduniyya), the lights of knowledge and gnosis having overflowed upon their hearts from God, glory be to Him, not through the intermediary of something based on sensible hearing or writing or upon a report, or anything of this sort.

An indication of what we have just explained and its clarification is [found in] the saying of the Commander of the Faithful, [ʿAlī] (a.s.), “The Messenger of God taught me one thousand doors of knowledge, each door opening upon a thousand doors. . .

And the meaning of the Messenger’s teaching (s.a.w.a.s.) was the preparation of [ʿAlī’s] noble soul, receptive to the lights of guidance, over the course of his companionship [with the Messenger] and constantly being by his side,
through his teaching him and guiding him as to how to travel on the path to God by taming the animal soul and strengthening it for what it has been commanded, and making it subservient to the divine, intellectual spirit; and [through] his teaching him by allusion the means of taming [it] and spiritual exercises [‘Ali] (a.s.) was prepared for the extraction of hidden things, and to be informed about the unseen things. 113

Thus the most important spiritual bequest from the Prophet to ‘Ali was not specific religious teachings that could then be transmitted verbatim to other Imāms and their disciples; rather it was knowledge of the spiritual exercises—similar to those practiced by other mystics in Islam—which prepared the heart to receive the overflow of divine knowledge, and to be a clear mirror for the reflection of divine truth. Rather than “horizontal” knowledge that becomes attenuated as it is transmitted from generation to generation, the Prophet gave ‘Ali the key to the door of “vertical” knowledge, coming straight from its eternal source. The implicit but provocative aspect of Ṣadrā’s commentary here is his suggestion that other human souls, perhaps all human souls, have the potential to acquire those same “keys” to vertical knowledge if they, like ‘Ali, engage in the spiritual practices necessary to purify their own hearts and souls.

For those who succeed and thus reach the level of the awliya’ and the true “People of the House,” Ṣadrā indicates that their degree of knowledge approximates, not only that of the Imāms, but even that of the prophets themselves. He writes:

Thus the People of the House (a.s.) are those firmly rooted in knowledge, and they possess the interpretation of the traditions. The people of the outward husk are distanced from true knowledge of the inner meanings of the Qur’ān, and the interpretation (ta’wil) of traditions; since the husk can only know the husk, while the kernel (lubb) is only known to the possessors of understanding (ālā l-albāb). 114 They are those whose spirits have

113 Ibid., 319–320.
114 For a similar comparison between the people of the husk and the people of the “kernel” (idū l-albab) as it relates to knowledge of the Qur’ān in particular, see Asfar, 7:39–40.
been conveyed from the world of form and sense to
the world of spirit and intellect, for they acquire their
knowledge from God through the light of [spiritual]
states, while others acquire their knowledge from men,
whose method is but the collection of words.

Know that the difference between the People of the
House (a.s.)—that is, the perfected saints—and other
learned men with regard to the inheritance from the
Prophet (s.a.w.a.s.) is that the saint, protected against
error (maṣūm min al-khata‘), does not acquire that
knowledge, which is the inheritance of the prophets and
the messengers, until God inherits it from [the proph­
ets] and sends it to [the saint]. And as for other men,
learned in written documents, they acquire knowledge
transmitted from generation to generation . . . while
the relation [to the initial source] becomes increasingly
remote. As for the saints (a.s.), they acquire the inherit­
ance of the prophets (s.a.w.a.s.) from God, insofar as
it is His inheritance and He gives it freely to them, for
they are heirs to the messengers and the transmitters
of their traditions, through something like the exalted
and preserved authority that does not allow falsehood to
enter into it from in front or from behind—a revelation
(tanzīl) from the Wise, the Praiseworthy.115

A number of extraordinary claims are put forth here. Șadră
ascribes to this expanded group of “spiritual descendants,” whom
he here refers to as the “perfected saints” (awliyā‘), immunity from
error (ʾisma) and a form of divine inspiration (tanzīl) that is usually
said to be the preserve of the prophets and the Imāms. These two
distinctions are directly related. Ordinary knowers receive knowledge
by way of human transmission from one generation to the next. As
the transmission becomes more remote from its initial source, it
becomes increasingly attenuated and sometimes corrupted. The
“perfected saints,” however, acquire prophetic knowledge directly
from God—who bequeaths it to the prophets, and takes it back
upon their deaths, and then transmits it in pure, unadulterated form
directly to the awliyā‘. Șadră refers to this transmission of prophetic

115 Sharḥ, 43.
knowledge through the intermediary of divine inheritance and bequest as a kind of tanzil—a remarkable statement, considering the nearly exclusive association of this term with historical prophecy, rather than with some form of inspiration (ilhām).

While Śadrā keeps the categories of prophet and wali nominally distinct, he elsewhere describes the nature of walāya in a manner that brings it very close to the status of prophethood. For example, Śadrā describes the saintly knowers as “following a clear proof from their Lord” (ʿalā bayyina min rabbihim), a phrase used repeatedly by the prophets in the Qurʾān to assert the divine provenance of their missions. In one passage that occurs in Śadrā’s commentary on a hadith found in Kulaynī’s chapter, Kitāb al-ḥujja [The book of divine proof], he equates walāya with the lowest degree of prophethood, which is occupied by a prophet who receives a divine message in his own soul, perhaps through ilhām, but is not required to convey that message beyond himself. Here Śadrā adds:

\[\ldots\text{this is the degree of the awliya\textsuperscript{\prime}.}\ldots\text{except that the title, wali, was not applied to any of the awliya\textsuperscript{\prime} (a.s.) before the sending of our Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.a.s.); rather they were called “prophets” (anbiya\textsuperscript{\prime}). For there is no difference between prophethood that does not bring with it a scriptural message (risāla) or a divine law (tashrīf), and walāya, except in name rather than meaning. Thus before the sending [of Muḥammad], every wali was a prophet (nabī) in name.}\]

Śadrā is not alone in defining walāya in such a way that it approximates the level of prophethood, at least the level of the non-lawgiving prophets before the time of Muḥammad. Ghazālī, for example, suggested that one can attain to the properties of prophethood through the “fruitional experience” that some acquire by following “the way of Sufism.” Rūzbihān Baqlī, in his Unveiling

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116 Ibid., 57.
117 See Qurʾān 6:57, 157; 7:73, 85, 105; 11:28, 63, 88; and also Naṣr b. Muzāḥim, Waqat ʿSīffin, ed. Ṭabd al-Salām Muḥammad Ḥārūn (Beirut, 1990), 484, where one of ʿAli’s followers describes him in a similar manner.
118 Shārīf, 423.
119 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Deliverance from Error, trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1980), 85; for the fuller discussion, 84–86.
of Secrets (Kashf al-asrār) asserts that God chose him for walāya, but also recalls that when he was a young boy, he heard a voice that identified him as a prophet. And Ibn al-ʿArabī claimed to have reached a state of sanctity such that he became receptive to direct divine inspiration, reporting in his massive work, The Meccan Openings (Futūḥat al-Makkiyya), that all the words that would follow had been “dictated” to him by God.

In fact, Șadrā’s assimilation of the state of walāya with certain kinds of prophethood seems, in places, to have a strong Akbarian flavor. For example, in Șadrā’s commentary on a hadīth in Kulaynī’s Kitāb al-ḥujja, he presents a metaphorical image of the Prophet Muḥammad as the center point of a necklace, with the pre-Islamic prophets who came before him ranged on one side, and the saints (awliya’) who come after him ranged on the other. Each saint is positioned opposite a pre-Islamic prophet whom he resembles in some way. Șadrā says that ʿAlī, the closest of the awliya’ to Muḥammad, faces Jesus, who is correspondingly the closest of the prophets to him, and notes that ʿAlī and Jesus resemble each other insofar as their spiritual stations were exaggerated by certain of their followers. The conceptual relationship between the awliya’ and the prophets suggested in this passage is highly similar to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s discussion of saints who take on the spiritual characteristics of various Islamic prophets. Șadrā is not the first thinker to try to reconcile Twelver Shiʿī belief with an Akbarian conception of walāya; Ḥaydar al-ʿAmuli is known for doing the same. But by comparison, al-ʿAmuli’s formulation was more firmly wedded to Twelver Shiʿī imāmology. For example, he accommodates the doctrine of the occultation of the Twelfth Imām in this discussion of sainthood by identifying him as

121 Baqli, Unveiling of Secrets, 10.
123 See Sharḥ, 433.
124 See, e.g., Ibn al-ʿArabī’s discussion of the affinity between the spiritual natures of certain saints and the various Islamic prophets in Futūḥat, 3:372.
the “seal of sainthood” (*khâtam al-awliyâ’*), just as Muḥammad was the seal of the prophets. 125 Şadrâ does not show similar concern for such doctrinal matters. His conception of *walâya* and the spiritual position and characteristics of the *awliyâ’*, as he describes them, are more closely aligned with Sufi formulations of the term, and have a lesser, and at times almost nominal, connection to Twelver Shi‘i imamology.

Like the Sufi thinkers who influenced his thought, Şadrâ is aware of the hesitation and even repulsion with which ordinary people and “conventional” religious scholars viewed claims of divine inspiration outside the category of prophethood. Such a response would have to be expected, even from a metaphysical point of view—for how can the lower grasp the higher, how can the limited know that which is free of those same limits? As he says above, those who receive their knowledge in this extraordinary way are “those whose spirits have been conveyed from the world of form and sense to the world of spirit and intellect.” By virtue of the purification of their souls, they have acquired a form of prophetic knowledge through a divine conduit that has transformed their ontological state. Those who remain at a lower level of being—in the realm of sense and form—deny the existence of what transcends them:

... understanding the stages of *walâya* and prophecy are difficult [for those] at the stage of intellect the majority of people have reached. As it is the nature of common people to deny what they have not grasped, so it is also their nature to deny the state of *walâya* and its wonders, and the state of prophecy and its unique qualities. In fact, it is their nature to deny the next level of being and the life of the hereafter, which is the life of knowledge and of witnessing the angelic realm, because the ontological levels of *walâya* and prophecy are also among the manifestations of authority in the hereafter, and whoever denies the reality of the hereafter inevitably denies these two states. He does not recognize the prophet as a prophet, nor the *wâli* as a *wâli*.


126 *Sharh*, 60. For a similar argument, see Baqlî, *Unveiling of Secrets*, 7.
For Šadrā, who viewed all of reality as a gradated continuum of being, the existence of the state of wala'ya between prophethood and ordinary humanity was a logical necessity. Sharp ontological distinctions made no sense within the logic of this system, and so between the exalted stage of prophecy and the pitiful state of ordinary humanity, there had to be grades of closeness to the light of prophecy itself, and the movement upward through these grades of nearness and perfection was ontologically transformative. Not only should ordinary people not deny or begrudge the awliyāʾ their ontological station, they should seek to reach it themselves through, in part, a humble obedience to these same perfected saints.127

Conclusion

Šadrā’s commentary on Kulaynī’s Uṣūl al-kāfī is naturally assumed to be an exercise in reconciling his philosophy of knowledge and being with the transmitted sayings and doctrinal positions of the Twelver Shiʿī community to which he unambiguously belonged. Yet what we find in this commentary is a faithful presentation of the fluid, gradated, and hierarchal epistemology and ontology he expounds in his systematic, philosophical works. There is little evidence that Šadrā tailors his views to accord with the aḥādīth on which he comments. Knowledge is intimately connected to being, it is the ultimate purpose of all human activity and the vocation of all human life, it is the path to salvation and the very essence of life in the hereafter. It is the light that leads the soul on its journey through higher ontological levels and degrees of spiritual perfection in this world, and that guides it across the širāṭ in the next.

This journey is powered by the soul’s own effort, but initially requires the guidance of true teachers and knowers, who not only possess higher levels of knowledge, but who also occupy a higher ontological level, although among them there is a hierarchy as well. There are the worldly knowers whose “light” is like that of a lamp, emanating from earthly, not celestial, sources; they provide limited guidance, but are saved by their knowledge if their teaching and learning are sincere. Then there are the true knowers, whose knowledge is taken directly from the prophets and the saints (awliyāʾ), and as such are like the moon, illumined by the light of the sun and transmitting it to those below them. And finally there are the

127 Sharḥ, 115.
prophets and the awliyā' themselves, radiant by their own essence like the sun, with knowledge bequeathed to them directly by God. These categories are not fixed: Every learner, in the right company, with proper intention and effort, may become a true knower. Every true knower has, in principle, the potential to reach the level of the awliyā', occupied by the Imāms but not exclusive to them—like the iron rod that moves ever closer to the fire, and eventually becomes like the fire itself. The category of prophethood is exclusive to the prophets, although the status of the awliyā' approximates it in ways many might find controversial.

The hierarchical nature of Šadrā’s ontology, its close correlation with degrees of knowledge, and its positing of an intermediate spiritual level between the Prophet and the ordinary believer are all consistent with the Shī‘ī religious perspective. But the lack of fixed ontological categories below the level of the Prophet, and Šadrā’s concomitant broadening of the category of the awliyā’ beyond the Imāms—even if he maintains a certain privilege for them within this category—challenged more traditional conceptions of the Imāms’ uniqueness. Moreover, Šadrā’s inclusive definition of the category of awliyā’ puts the Imāms in the company, not of the exoteric Shī‘ī religious scholars who claimed to be heirs to the knowledge and authority of the Imāms, but of the saints and gnostics who in Šadrā’s description look far more like Sufi mystics than Shī‘ī devotees. The challenge to exoteric Shī‘ī tradition that this represents is largely smoothed over throughout the commentary by Šadrā’s use of multivalent terms—wāli, ‘ālim, ‘ārif, even imām—and the continual grounding of his spiritual hierarchy in the terminology of the Qurān—‘alā l-albāb, rāsikhūna fi l-‘ilm—terms used by Shī‘īs and Sufis alike as Qurānic proof texts for their own conceptions of spiritual hierarchy. But his view of the highest form of knowledge (the knowledge of unveiling), and of the penultimate rung on the human ontological ladder (walāya), are recognizably Sufi rather than Shī‘ī in orientation. Given his reported and repeated demonstrations of reverence for the Imāms, Šadrā’s commentary is not likely meant to undermine their position, but rather to demonstrate the way in which the teachings of the Imāms, if read correctly, open onto an esoteric dimension missed by the majority of his scholarly contemporaries.