Mullā Ṣadrā's Ontology Revisited

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Convening in Tehran in 1999, the Mullā Ṣadrā Institute drew numerous participants who had never before heard of this philosopher. Indeed, I had known little more than the name until I read Henry Corbin's edition of a summary work—*Les penetrations metaphysiques*—and was fascinated to find many affinities with the work of Thomas Aquinas, notably in his exposition of existence.[1] The gathering itself inspired me to translate the passage on existence from Mullā Ṣadrā's magnum opus, *al-Ḥikma al-mutaʿāliya fī l-asfār al-ʿaqilyya al-arbaʿa* [The transcendent wisdom on the four journeys of the intellect].[2] The experience of translating encourages me to present Mullā Ṣadrā by extending the standard narrative of Islamic philosophy to make way for both Sunnī and Shīʿī successors to Ibn Rushd, while making al-Ghazālī—the scapegoat of the standard narrative—into the axial figure in this recasting of the history of Islamic philosophy.

The new narrative will need a plot, which sustained efforts on the part of thinkers in each of the Abrahamic faiths readily supply: the struggle to articulate the relation between the created universe and its singular source.[3] Moreover, what makes the relation quite ineffable is the unique "distinction" of creator from creation; a distinction that proves axial to each faith-tradition's averring that creating is the free act of one God.[4] So it is not surprising that it

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1   David Burrell, "Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and Mulla Sadra Shirazi (980/1572–1050/1640) and the Primacy of *esse/wujūd* in Philosophical Theology," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8 (1999): 207–219. Mulla Sadra on 'Substantial Motion': A Clarification and a Comparison with Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Shiʿa Islamic Studies* 2, no. 4 (2009): 369–386.

2   Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Ḥikma al-mutaʿāliya fī l-asfar al-ʿaqilyya al-arbaʿa*) 9 vols., ed. Muḥammad Riḍā Muzaffar, et al. (Beirut, 1981).

3   David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

4   Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994); and David Burrell, "The Christian Distinction Celebrated and Expanded," in *The Truthful and the Good*, ed. John Drummond and James Hart, 191–206 (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996).

is philosophical theology that shapes the now extended narra-
tive, moving us beyond the ways in which al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā
employed the model of logical deduction to present creating as a
timeless and even necessary emanation from the One. For while
emanation is a metaphor that can move in diverse directions, as
it clearly does in Plotinus, the deductive model inhibited a clear
elucidation of "the distinction," since the initial premise of a logical
deduction differs from its consequences only by its pre-eminent
position. Even Ibn Rushd, who had little patience with al-Ghazālī's
critique of "the philosophers" in Islam, had even less hope that Ibn
Sīnā's scheme, adapted from al-Fārābī, could elucidate the act of
creating. Yet his own attempt to clarify that, while subtly intimating
Islamic tradition and Qurʾānic precedent in its focus on "practical
reason," set the stage for further development more than it resolved
the outstanding issues. This development would follow Islamic
thinkers from Andalusia back to the heartland of the Levant, in the
persons of Suhrawardī (1154–1191), Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), and Ṣadrā
al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī [Mullā Ṣadrā] (1572–1640). All of these thinkers
are explicitly beholden to Ibn Sīnā, yet each endeavors to adapt his
philosophical mode of inquiry to articulate the relation between
creation and the creator. So their agenda, singly and cumulatively,
brings explicitly theological issues to the fore; however each of
them is still taken up with philosophical concerns ancillary to that
central task: Suhrawardī with epistemology, Ibn ʿArabī in searching
for ways to articulate so unique a relation, and Mullā Ṣadrā with
bringing a bevy of philosophical issues under the ambit of *existing*
as resulting from the One who is existing.

As the last of this trio, Mullā Ṣadrā is hardly intelligible without
his two predecessors in the Levant, so these efforts to identify his
specific position and contribution demand that we present their
achievements in the process of elucidating his. Yet economy demands
that Suhrawardī and Ibn ʿArabī be included by way of background
briefing, as we present specific issues in Mullā Ṣadrā's thought. Superb
explications of Suhrawardī are readily accessible in the work of John

Walbridge[5] and Hossein Ziai,[6] together with their joint translation of Suhrawardī's central *Philosophy of Illumination*,[7] and of Ibn ʿArabī in William Chittick's two works: *Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* and *Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-Arabi's Cosmology*.[8]

    I offer excerpts from our translation from Mullā Ṣadrā's *Asfār* to convey the flavor of his mode of inquiry, utilizing as well the work of Christian Jambet,[9] illuminating articles by Hamid Dabashi,[10] Hossein Ziai,[11] and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.[12] A lasting gratitude is due to Henry Corbin, whose pioneering work opened this field to so many, most of whom will also endeavor to reflect the particular orientation he celebrated in Ishrāqī ["oriental"] thought. It should be clear by now that this later extension of Islamic philosophy enjoys far less publicity than the earlier Peripatetic phase; yet, unless it is brought into focus, to show how it both develops and alters earlier themes, any presentation of Islamic philosophy will unwittingly falsify the picture. It has surely been the case, however, that short of a distinctly "postmodern" sensibility, philosophers have found their inquiries bordering on the esoteric, and are thus hardly fit for sober

5   John Walbridge, *Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardī and the Heritage of the Greeks* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); *Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

6   Hossein Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination: A Study of Suhrawardī's "Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq"* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990).

7   Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, ed. and trans. John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999).

8   William Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) and *Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabi's Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

9   Christian Jambet, *L'acte d'etre: la philosophie de la revelation chez Molla Sadra* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).

10   Hamid Dabashi, "Mir Damad and the founding of the 'School of Isfahan,'" in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Leaman and Nasr, 1:597–633 (New York: Routledge, 1996).

11   Hossein Ziai, "Mulla Sadra: His Life and Works," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Leaman and Nasr, 1:635–642.

12   Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Mulla Sadra: His Teachings," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Leaman and Nasr, 1:643–662.

philosophical elucidation. Indeed, Corbin's presentation had the effect of intensifying those fears, so the guides whom I have indicated are intent on offering an alternative view of their work, as am I. Yet the fact remains that any attempt to elucidate the ineffable relation between creator and creatures, which is the central task of these thinkers, challenges categories exclusively tailored to created things.

The Primacy of *Existing* over *Essence*

Mullā Ṣadrā is best known for taking issue with Suhrawardī, and insisting that *existing* take precedence over *essence* in explicating the metaphysical composition of creatures, as well as their mode of emanating from the Creator. But the very distinction between *existing* and *essence*, as well as the role it played in offering a way of identifying creatures as created, anchors our narrative in Ibn Sīnā, and shows the inherent continuity in a philosophical saga whose second phase often appears to be very different from the first. Yet both, as we shall see, were shaped by Ibn Sīnā. The overall context is Mediterranean, and lest this sound banal, we need only remind ourselves that the bulk of western reflection on medieval philosophy was crafted in western and northern Europe. So the standard accounts we have received spoke little of the philosophy (or the philosophers) in the Muslim or Jewish traditions, yet we have found that they were, where possible, in contact with one another, and beholden to one another.[13] Yet all three traditions had to contend with Plotinus' radical adaptation of Aristotle to focus on the origination of the universe, retrospectively seen as paradigmatically "neo-Platonist." For it had come to occupy the philosophical center stage, so that later thinkers who sought to incorporate a revealed creator into the Aristotelian worldview would spontaneously begin with a Plotinian scheme, with which some found it necessary to contest. This is especially clear in al-Fārābī, who adopts the emanation pattern quite directly to signal the relation between "the First" and all that emanates from It; that is, everything else.[14] Ibn Sīnā modifies the scheme inherited from al-Fārābī (and so from Plotinus), and introduces his initial version of the essence/existing distinction to clarify how al-Fārābī's "First," now Ibn Sīnā's "necessary being,"

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13   John Inglis, ed., *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

14   Richard Walzer, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

relates to everything else: being possible in itself, when it exists, becomes 'necessary' by the existence it derives from the One, who is distinguished from all else as necessary being. It will prove crucial to the later development of the *essence/existing* distinction that this One, ancestrally related to Plotinus' One (explicitly "beyond being") is now denominated "necessary being." The Jewish interlocutor in this discussion, Moses Maimonides, was well-instructed by Ibn Sīnā, yet took issue with his apparently seamless adaptation of the Farabian/Plotinian scheme to display the free creation of the universe by the one God, now revealed in the Torah. In so reacting, he may well have been emboldened by al-Ghazālī's trenchant critique of Ibn Sīnā's apparently necessitarian picture of creation, for Maimonides' cultural context was thoroughly Islamic.[15]

The opening lines of Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's cosmological/political treatise, *Mabādiʾ arāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila* [On the perfect state] offer the following straightforward assertion of the original distinction, with clear intimations of the metaphysical one:

> The First Existent is the First Cause of the existence of all the other existents. It is free of every kind of deficiency, whereas there must be in everything else some kind of deficiency. . . but the First is free of all their deficiencies. Thus its existence is the most excellent and preceded every other existence. No existence can be more excellent than or prior to its existence. Thus it has the highest kind of excellent existence and the most elevated rank of perfect existence. Therefore its existence and substance cannot be adulterated by non-existence at all. It can in no way have existence potentially, and there is no possibility whatever that it should not exist.[16]

He continues with a host of nearly equivalent statements, capped by: "it is the existent for whose existence there can be no cause, . . . and it is impossible for anything else to have the existence it has." Note that he has not taken the boldest step of all: to identify the First in what it is (its essence) with existing, for he still speaks of the First as "having" existence. But he has taken us to the brink, by

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15   David Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

16   Walzer, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, 57.

emphasizing how utterly different is the "First Cause" from all that emanates from it; that is, from all else. Ibn Sīnā, with Maimonides in his wake, makes that further precision.

Ibn Sīnā takes the next step of integrating the original (creator/creature) distinction into the very metaphysical "composition" of every created thing, thereby offering a signal innovation to Aristotle's metaphysics of substance. This may indeed reflect his awareness of the *aporia* that Edward Booth has identified as central to the Aristotelian tradition: that between the essence of a thing and the individual thing itself.[17] Aristotle had, of course, taken pains to identify the individual existing thing with its essence, precisely to avoid Plato's notorious "third man" argument; much as he had insisted that the paradigm for substance is the individual existing (even better, living) thing. Yet when it came to his exposition of *substance* in book Lambda (VII) of the *Metaphysics*, the best he could do in explicating *substance* was to identify it with *form*.[18] So in the end, if you will, Plato won, despite Aristotle's opening polemic (in the same book) against Plato's apparent insouciance for individual things. This *aporia* recurred throughout the commentary tradition, which largely attempted to suppress it rather than address it; much as it will emerge in the course of an introductory class. Nor did Ibn Sīnā himself succeed in neutralizing it, though the distinction he proposed helped others to resolve it. Like Aristotle, in other words, he has the essence in mind, but unlike Aristotle, he needs to offer an explicit account for its existing only in individuals. That is, of course, Aristotle's anti-Platonic assertion, but he was unable to explain how it works; while Ibn Sīnā saw clearly that Aristotle's paradigmatic individual existence cannot be accounted for by the essence itself. So, in what we might dub a neo-Platonic manner, Ibn Sīnā identified essences with possible beings, and asserted that, "as regards the possible existent, . . . it necessarily needs some other thing to render its existing in actuality."[19]

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17   Edward Booth, *Aristotelian Aporectic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Writers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

18   Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 1031a10.

19   Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of Healing*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 38; Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Shifaʾ: al-Ilahiyyat*, ed. G. C. Anawati and S. Zaydi (Cairo: al-Maʿārif, 1978), 47, ll. 10–11.

As if to show how the distinction for which he is reaching reflects the original distinction of creator from creatures, Ibn Sīnā draws the contrast in philosophical language. There is one alone whose existence is necessary, and that One, "the first, has no essence [*māhiyya*] except in its existence [*anniyya*]." So necessary being has no essence [*māhiyya*] except that it be necessary being, and this is its existence [*anniyya*].[20] By proposing another term for the essence of necessary being, *dhāt*, Ibn Sīnā intended to remove consideration of its *whatness* from that attending creatures, whose quiddities [the Latin answer to the question 'quid est?', or 'what is it?', as *māhiyya* functions in Arabic] will ideally be articulated in the normal form of genus/species (e.g., 'speaking animal'). Contrary to the essence of the one necessary being, however, Ibn Sīnā's insistence that all other essences require something else to bring them into existence introduces a new mode of composition into all creatures, beyond that of matter and form, which he presumes throughout: one of essence [*māhiyya*] with some other factor that causes the individual thing to be. That factor is never identified by Ibn Sīnā; the elusive term *anniyya* expresses the "real existence of a particular individual" rather than identifying what it is that makes the individual exist. Yet by distinguishing what something is from that which makes it be, he seeks to introduce a notion of essence without any qualification: "mere essence," best parsed as what the normal formula (e.g., 'speaking animal') signifies. Neither universal nor particular, essence is taken simply as what can be predicated of individuals, in which it alone exists, thereby formulating what Aristotle was reaching for. (C. S. Peirce shows how the modern proclivity to identify essences with universals misses the point of the relation peculiar to predication; for in saying that Socrates is a man, we are not saying something universal about him, but simply stating what he—in all his individuality—is.)

So far, so good; a brilliant stab at the kind of reformulation of Aristotle required to accommodate the grounding fact that all such substances are created. Yet some infelicities remain. One respects identifying such essences with *possibility*, and doing so in such a way that "they" *receive* existence, which he would name (in Arabic) as an "accident," or something which "happens" to essence. Ibn

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20   Ibid., 344, l. 10; 346, l. 11.

Rushd fastens onto this error, which any student of philosophy can quickly identify: if *existing* is an *accident*, there would have had to *be* something in which it could inhere. But "simple essences" cannot be said to be, nor is it possible for there to *be* anything to receive *existence*. Later commentators on Ibn Sīnā will neutralize the *aporiae* stemming from a simple-minded identification of *existing* with an ordinary *accident*, but the dilemma imbedded in the language of "receiving existence" will perdure.[21] The identification of "simple essences" with *possibility*, and especially with "possibilities," extends to discussions in our day, so Ibn Sīnā cannot be said to have the last word, either on the subject itself, of relating created to uncreated and creating being, or on the distinction intended to suggest that relation without pretending adequately to display it.

Ibn Sīnā's distinction set the stage not only for comparing *essence* with *existing,* but also for employing the distinction itself to find something of their source mirrored in creatures. Yet since the essence of a thing corresponds quite simply to *what* it is, and revelation tells us that things are created according to their kinds, essences structure the created universe without bespeaking its dynamic. So the obvious candidate for articulating the founding relation of creation would seem to be *existing*. Yet when it came to articulating that relation, Suhrawardī contented himself with the classic metaphor of *light* to model the issuing forth of creatures from the creator.[22] Moreover, in this respect, Mullā Ṣadrā parted company with his distinguished master, Mīr Dāmād, who may be considered the founder of the illustrious "school of Isfahan" in which Mullā Ṣadrā can be located.[23] Hamid Dabashi offers this translation of Mīr Dāmād's way of arguing for the primacy of *essence* over *existing*:

> The essence of a thing, in whatever shape or format it might be, is the occurrence of that very thing in that vessel; not the attachment or appendage of something

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21 Fazlur Rahman, "Essence and Existence in Avicenna," in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4, ed. Richard Hunt, et al. (London: Warburg Institute, 1958); Alexander Altmann, "Essence and Existence in Maimonides," in *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism*, 108–127 (London: Routlege and Kegan Paul, 1969).

22 Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination.*

23 Dabashi, "Mir Damad."

> to it. . . . Yet the bringing into being of a thing in itself
> is the bringing-into-being of that thing in that thing.[24]

Taken by themselves, these words do little more than re-state philosophers' general predilection for essences as grounding "scientific" inquiry into things by their kinds. Little or nothing is said about the "bringing-into-being" of things. So we might be prepared for Mullā Ṣadrā's passionate recounting of his "conversion" from this default position:

> In the earlier days I used to be a passionate defender of the theist [belief that] the quiddities are extramentally real while existence is but a mental construct, until my Lord gave me guidance and let me see His own demonstrations. All of a sudden my spiritual eyes were opened and I saw with utmost clarity that the truth was just the contrary of what philosophers in general had held. Praise be to God who, by the light of intuition, led me out of the darkness of the groundless idea and firmly established me upon the thesis which would never change in the present world and the hereafter. As a result [I now hold that] the individual existences of things are primary realities, while the quiddities are the "permanent archetypes that have smelt even the fragrance of existence." The individual existences are nothing but beams of light radiated by the true Light which is the absolutely self-subsistent existence. The absolute existence in each of its individualized forms is characterized by a number of essential properties and intelligible qualities. And each of these properties and qualities is what is usually known as quiddity.[25]

As we shall see, Mullā Ṣadrā's account depends directly on Suhrawardī's master metaphor of light to depict the relation between self-subsistent *existence* and *existents*, yet identifies the active principle with *existence* itself. So it seems accurate to say that his move to assert the primacy of *existing* offers an attempt to articulate the relation between existing things and their source. We shall also have

24　Ibid., 616.

25　Muḥammad Bāqir Mīr Dāmād, *Kitāb al-qabasat*, ed. Mehdi Mohagheh, et al., trans. Toshihiko Izutsu (Tehran, 1977), 13–14.

to explore the way he identifies *essences* with "permanent archetypes that have smelt even the fragrance of existence," in an effort to ascertain what such "things" might be. So let us examine his sober prose rendition of this spectacular "conversion," by attending to the introductory remarks of his magnum opus, the *Asfār*, as they locate this inquiry in a wisdom tradition that sees our life and inquiry as a journey with significant stages.

> The First Journey: from creation to the One who [alone] is real and true [*al-Ḥaqq*], by way of investigating the nature of existence [*wujūd*] and its essential attributes, in distinct stages. The First Stage: the knowledge which human beings require for this task, from among all the [modes of] knowing, with an introduction and six stations.
>
> *Introduction*. Concerning our knowledge of philosophy with its primary divisions, its goals and its dignity.
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> Know that philosophy is able to perfect the human soul by bringing it to know the reality of existents according to their proper essences, as well as accurately assessing their existence by way of proofs grasped by the mind; or else accepted by tradition, as befits the majority of human beings. Now if you wanted, you could say that the order of the universe is intelligibly ordered according to human capacity, which can attain to a certain qualified resemblance [*tashbih*] of the Creator most High, since human beings came to be as something kneaded from dough—that is, [by way of] intelligible form together with created sensible matter—"We created man from clay, from earthy substance duly fashioned" (15:26). Yet there is also a dimension of the soul which remains independent and separate, capable of being attracted to wisdom, as is the case with the party of the zealous and whoever is endowed with power to continue inquiry into things free of matter, and such intellectual endeavors.
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> For inquiry with these aspirations [has the effect of] drawing out the soul, along the lines of the form of existence, to [perceive] its order, its expression and its perfection, after which it can become knowing and

rational and conformed to knowledge of things seen
not in matter but in their forms, thereby adorning, [21]
shaping and embellishing the soul. Indeed, this sort of
wisdom is that to which the chief Messenger—praise
and blessing to him—aspires as he asks in his invocation
to his Lord, saying: "Lord, show us things as they really
are." And also to the friend of God [Abraham]—may he
be praised and blessed, when he asked: "Lord, grant me
wisdom" (4:83). Now the wisdom in question must be
right judgment regarding existence, attending to what
may be needed to conceive things properly.

So it is clear that such an inquiry will entail a spiritual journey,
as intimated in the very title of the work itself, and clarified in these
introductory remarks. As we shall see, each thing is linked with
its creator by its very existence, so the link itself will share in the
inexpressibility of God. In this way, a philosophical inquiry into
existence cannot be a merely conceptual (or "abstract") endeavor. It
is fascinating to note how carefully Mullā Ṣadrā proceeds, altering
ways of inquiry already standard to "philosophers," notably Ibn Sīnā,
to meet his stringent demands for articulating *existence* as the link
of creatures to their creator.

So it seems that the best way one can proceed here is
by an interior path, since there can be no definition of
existence, and so no demonstration regarding it. For
definition and demonstration can only proceed when
the definitions concern those things between which we
can distinguish [by weighing them] on proper scales.
But what if one must believe what one cannot perceive,
without perceiving anything else preceding it? So, for
example, when we wish to know whether intelligence
exists, we must first have arrived at yet other beliefs, yet
will certainly come in the end to a belief without any
other belief preceding it [27], indeed one necessarily
[imbedded] in the soul, offering a primary elucidation
from the intelligence itself—like saying that something
is a thing.[26] For a thing has nothing contrary to it; while

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26 Avicenna on being as the first notion in the intellect: "We say: ideas of 'the
    existent', 'the thing', and 'the necessary' are impressed in the soul in a primary

two contraries cannot come together, nor can one be
elevated above the other in position or according to
position, for were one to reason that way, one would
be entering the realm of conceptions.[27] Yet here there
is no need to begin conceiving prior conceptions, as
one must in any [sequence of] conceptions, for [any
such sequence] will certainly be able to be traced back
to an initial conception—like necessity, possibility or
existence—not dependent upon a preceding concep-
tion. Now these conceptions, and those similar to them,
provide trustworthy meanings at the very center of the
intellect, inscribed in [our] intelligence by the inscription
of the first intelligence [*fiṭr*]. So when one intends to
clarify these meanings by way of *kalām*, that can act as
a stimulus to the mind, [turning them into] objects of
attention by focusing on them as significant signs among
the other items at the center of the intelligence. Indeed,
these [conceptions] are better known than others, since
they do not come to the mind from things.

So *existence* will partake of the primary notions available quite
naturally to intellect, yet there will be further peculiarities with this
"notion" which must be more than a *notion*, since what it expresses
cannot properly be expressed in a predicate form. For that reason
Ibn Sīnā's strategy of articulating *existence* as something which
"comes to" [*arada*, *accidit*] the essence will not do, for existing must
be more interior to existing things than a feature of them could ever
be. One way to see this is to remark on the inherently ambiguous
character of the term 'exists' as we apply it. And closely linked to
that, we shall notice his recourse to *participation*. He begins chapter
2 by announcing its subject.

> [1.35] On understanding [that] participated existence
> [is] predicated according to the ways in which what
> [participates in it] comes under it: gradated predicates
> rather than conventional predicates.

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way. This impression does not require better known things to bring it about"
(*Metaphysics*, trans. Marmura, 22; Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifāʾ*, 5.

27   Mullā Ṣadrā is following Aristotle, who insisted that substance has no contrary,
     though predicates will always have them.

> Given that essences participate in existence in such
> a way that existence brings them nearer to the first
> beings, it is also the case that intelligence mediates
> between one existent and another by way of relation
> and similarity, while nothing can mediate between an
> existent and nothingness. For if existents were unable
> to participate in a [single] understanding, so that they
> would differ in all respects, their situation would be
> like that of existence with respect to nothingness: no
> relation at all between them. . . . But we have here
> before us an infinity of things that can be understood,
> though one can only consider each one of them singly,
> asking whether it participates [36] in existence or not;
> unless it were [clear that] its existence is participated,
> so one would not need to inquire into it. . . . Regarding
> existence being attributed to what is below it in gradated
> ways—that is, regarding their being unities or one or
> eternal or perduring—existence in some existing things
> is determined by their essence, while in others it issues
> from them by way of nature, while in still others it will
> be perfected and powerful. Now the existence which
> has no cause has primacy over what takes its existence
> from another, and so is naturally prior to all existing
> natural things. Similarly the existence of each one of the
> active intelligences is prior to that of subsequent ones,
> as the existence of substance is prior to the existence
> of accidents.

The Aristotelian way of speaking of "systematically ambiguous" discourse, which Aquinas will ennoble as "analogous," proceeds "according to *prior* and *posterior*."[28] Mullā Ṣadrā explores this route to help us see how terms used equivocally may lead to unambiguous understanding.

> [37] Indeed, without considering existence, there can be
> no priority or posteriority, since being prior or posterior,
> perfect or deficient, strong or weak, are found in existents,

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28   G. E. L. Owen, "Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle," in
Aristotle and Plato in mid-Fourth Century, ed. I. Düring and Owen (Goteborg,
1960).

which properly give rise to them without [needing] any
other thing. For with regard to things and essences taken
in themselves, their existences do not properly belong
to them, as you saw again quite clearly in this chapter,
following the investigation of such ambiguities in this
book, where it has already been clarified how existence—
in so far as it can be understood—is something common
to be predicted of existing things according to differences
and not merely conventionally.

Yet the most telling ambiguity in the term "existence" stems from
its ordinary use to identify individuals, by contrast with its more
"philosophical" use as "common existence," an ambiguity already
present in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Mullā Ṣadrā takes great pains to
separate these two meanings in chapter 3: "That common existence,
[known] spontaneously, is equivalent to intellectual existence, and
so differs from what subsists or is individual."

So we [must] say: this distinction between things and
existence is not part of our comprehension of existing
things, but involves attempting to grasp them together
in general terms, which is like melding two discourses.
For the being of an existent may or may not involve
things other than existence, but its existence will shine
forth in the measure that what is fitting to it emerges
from the properties of a thing rather than from an
attempt to comprehend existence itself. What Ibn Sīnā
says in his [book on] metaphysics (*al-Shifāʾ*) clarifies
this: "necessary existence is already understood by the
very [expression] 'necessary existence,' just as unity
is already understood by the very [expression] 'one'"
(*al-Shifāʾ* 1.6). Now one can understand by this either
that the essence of necessary existence is like that of
humanity, or that it is an essence quite different from
other essences like humanity; it simply is what it is:
necessary existence. Recall what we understood about
unity: whatever anything is—something or its very self
or humanity, it remains one. So let it be said: we must
distinguish *unity* or *existent* as essences attributed to

> something, from *unity* and *existent* in so far as a thing
> is one and existent.

This last animadversion should remind us of Plotinus' insistence
that we cannot even say that the One is one! So *existing*, as what
links the One with the many, will share in that same ineffability. Yet
now, it appears, Mullā Ṣadrā is ready to say what can be said.

> Moreover, the following corollaries must be noted as well:
> should I be asked whether existence is existent or not,
> the answer should be that it is existent in the sense that
> the true reality of existence is existent: that is, existence
> is what existentializes. This can be confirmed by what is
> found in renowned commentaries, namely that under-
> standing a thing need not involve an understanding of
> speech, for example, unless there be an accident shared
> within the field. Yet were one to consider the derived
> expression to be adequate to the thing [itself], matter
> would be transformed into a proper potency. [42] Hence
> that thing to which laughter belongs is human, which
> necessarily affirms the thing as what it is; for to speak
> of the thing in interpreting what follows upon [such
> considerations] can show clearly why the mind which
> speaks of it returns to it, which seems to be the way some
> recent thinkers consider the union of accidents with
> accidentality, but that cannot be verified. [43] Yet those
> allusions regarding the soul and the separate substances
> above it as unadulterated individuals and pure existences,
> presented by the divine shaykh [Ibn ʿArabī], might lead
> in that direction. But I cannot understand how he could
> be thought to have denied that existence is something
> happening to individuals, or if so, whether the contradic-
> tion is only verbal.

In other words, Ibn ʿArabī cannot elide the central insight of
Ibn Sīnā regarding the crucial distinction of creator from creatures,
as between that which exists "by right," and that to which existing
is granted. Mullā Ṣadrā attempts to express this *existing* yet more
intimately:

So we [must] say: if existence were not an individual true reality [*ḥaqīqa*], distinct from the properties [a thing has], how could essences differing in themselves ever be described? Or different levels [of things]? Yet they are described in this way. Now necessary existence has no need of a cause to be what it is, while the existence of possible [beings] differs from it essentially. Nor can there be any doubt of the difference, by way of negation or privation, between need and lack of need regarding the necessity of essences or levels of essence. Therefore there can be no doubt that there is in every existent something beyond its properties: namely, understanding it to exist. Otherwise, how could existences differ essentially, as even those who go astray suggest; or [how could there be] different levels [of being], as yet other sects have noticed? Yet sheer generality, by analogy with properties, yields species without any differences.... To realize this, [know that] existence itself establishes the essence, for a thing is not established in its essence unless there be a way of proposing the essence be established....

As the master [Ibn Sīnā] said in his inquiries:... existence which has emanated from another has its being dependent on that other, and subsists in it as though bestowed from another which subsists according to an existence necessary in itself (*al-Shifāʾ* 1.6). Now the subsistence proper to a thing cannot be separated from it since it is proper to it. And he says in another place concerning this: either existence requires another and so is in need of another to subsist, or it is so well endowed with it that its subsistence is proper to it. So it would not be true [in general] that existence exists requiring another and depend on it as though it were not true that existence [also] exists well-endowed and independent, without subsisting from another but rather as an unlimited true reality. I say that a sensible intelligent person, exercising the power of intuition, understands from this discussion why we [47] resist proposing a demonstration of these matters, notably with respect to that time in which all

possible existents and ordered individuals depend on necessary existence for their consideration and their nature, along with the diffusion and blockage of light which does not subsist independently with respect to its very essence [*huwiyya*]. Now it is not possible to perceive [a thing's] proper individual essence separate [from this dependence, any more than we can perceive] individual existents independently, since what is natural is also dependent upon another. . .

Differing from a true reality [*essence*] in that it is pure individual realization and the bearer of individuality, [*existence* is what] individuates without needing any property to identify it. On the contrary, by its union with every essence it affords distinction and realization to the essence, bringing it out of obscurity, ambiguity, and concealment. For true existence appears *per se* in all its ways of appearing, so appearing [69] in everything else that essence appears to, with, in, and from existence. . . [71] It is as though one were to think of the degrees of existences as glowing with the light [proper to] necessary true realities, manifesting the true divine existence as it is manifested in the form of individuals, colored with the colors of possible essences, yet blocked by their created forms from [manifesting] the identity of the divine necessity.

While there can be no demonstration of these matters, primarily since *existing* defies definition, we are nonetheless led to realize that we cannot understand created things properly without a sustained attempt to grasp the internal link they have with the creator in their very existing. Yet while this mode of inquiry exceeds the bounds of philosophical inquiry as normally practiced by Islamic philosophers like Ibn Sīnā, it is arguable that they too realized that an authentically philosophical search must move into these more esoteric arenas.[29] Yet Mullā Ṣadrā's inspiration is clearly Ibn ʿArabī. It is that connection which needs to be more thoroughly explored.

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29   David Burrell, "Avicenna," in *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone, 196–208 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

Ibn ʿArabī: "rationalizing mystic"

If Suhrawardī provides the indispensable background for Mullā Ṣadrā, Ibn ʿArabī offers the bridge from Suhrawardī to Mullā Ṣadrā, by way of intensifying the "therapeutic" role of philosophy signaled to us by Pierre Hadot, in essays Arnold Davidson introduces with a phrase from Wittgenstein: "philosophy as a way of life."[30] Sajjad Rizvi adopts the descriptor "rationalizing mystic" from Philip Merlan's way of depicting "later Neoplatonists, [to convey] absolute transparency between the knower, the known, and knowledge itself" in such a cognitive relation to the creator God. Indeed, what specifies this cognitive manner of relating to the creator, as articulated in "illuminationist [*ishrāqī*] philosophy, is its integration of spiritual practice into the pursuit of wisdom."[31] What is sought here is a way of articulating the relation itself between creator and creatures, parallel to that between *existence* and *existents*, a relation which one knows to be unique, unassimilable to relations between existents. Here the celebrated "distinction," articulated (albeit differently) in Ibn Sīnā and in Aquinas, is intensified by insisting that the One alone *exists*. Ibn ʿArabī uses Qurʾanic language to intimate the manner of bestowing a share of that existence on existents: *He originates and brings back* (85:13). While this verse had been understood to refer to "God's bringing people back at the resurrection," Ibn ʿArabī offers a more metaphysical reading linked to the conserving dimension of creating:

> There is no existent thing to which the Real gives existence without finishing with giving it existence. Then that existent thing considers God and sees that He has come back to giving existence to another entity. So it continues perpetually and endlessly.[32]

God's creating takes the form of command, the "engendering command" God said: *'be' and it came to be* (16:40). Though the Qurʾan is largely concerned with God's "prescriptive commands," the "*Be* that

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30   Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Arnold Davidson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

31   Sajjad Rizvi, "Mysticism and Philosophy," in *Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 227.

32   Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, 65, 66.

brings creation into existence moment by moment is . . . the more basic."[33] Ibn ʿArabī's contribution to this essentially Qurʾānic view of God's creating lies in his identifying the ensuing relation with a Qurʾānic term adapted to this use: *barzakh*. "It stands between Unbounded *wujūd* [existence] and absolute nonexistence" in this way:

> When the cosmos becomes articulated as the words of the All-Merciful, it reflects three fundamental realities from which it emerges—*wujūd* [existence], the Highest Barzakh, and nonexistence. . . . Just as the Highest Barzakh brings together *wujūd* and nonexistence, so also the cosmic *barzakh* brings together spirits and bodies. Through its very essence, a *barzakh* possesses the properties of the two sides.[34]

In other words, we are focusing on the ineffable relation between creator and creatures, to which Ibn ʿArabī finds an epistemological parallel in the imagination, posed as it is between intellect and sense, spirit and bodies. Yet the key to this partitioning is the unique relation to the creator.

Salman Bashier has delineated the key function of the *barzakh* as attempting to elucidate the relation between creator and creatures as the space of union-in-difference which characterizes such a form of knowing.[35] Identified Qurʾānically as the *barzakh*, or the isthmus between heaven and earth, it represents the limit of human understanding which also serves to relate it to its source. As such, it is the "third entity," represented epistemologically as "the perfect man." This intermediate place is identified by Ibn ʿArabī with the "imaginal world," referring to the way in which "the cosmos is real, but its reality consists in the fact that it is/is not the real [*Ḥaqq*]."[36] Citing Chittick, we are reminded how,

> according to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the Realizers' [who have the knowledge of the Saint: ʿārifūn] answer to every question

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33   Ibid., 251.

34   Ibid., 259.

35   Salman Bashier, *Ibn al-ʿArabī's Barzakh: Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 68.

36   Ibid.

concerning God and the world is "Yes and no," or, "He/
not He" (*huwa lā huwa*). This is "because the cosmos is
imagination, and imagination is that which stands in an
intermediary situation between affirmation and denial.
About it one says 'both this and that' or 'neither this nor
that.' The universe is neither Being nor nothingness, or
both Being and nothingness.'"[37]

How else can a believer refer to created things, except to allude
to their emanating from a creator as the continuing source of their
being? Yet since what links them, *being*, cannot be a feature of things,
we have no direct way of expressing the relating of creatures to their
creator beyond (as Aquinas expresses it) to insist that their being
must be a "being-to-the-creator."

Yet such a situation cannot but be paradoxical, since authentic
knowledge of the source of being must be of One beyond our compre-
hension: "the possessors of knowledge see that their reason delimits
everything that it knows, while the divine Essence remains beyond
delimitation. Thus they come to know that the only knowledge
about God that reflection can provide to reason is the knowledge
of what God *is not*."[38] This carefully constructed sentence deserves
attention: knowledge, for reason, can only be "knowledge *about*"
something, whereas the knowledge that seekers seek is "knowledge
of" the One, which can only be parsed by reason as "knowledge of
what God *is not*." Bashier cites Nicholas of Cusa at this point, for
whom "the Essence of God can never be found, since it is beyond
all limits,"[39] yet Ibn ʿArabī highlights this limit-situation by inviting
a dialectical exchange between those in his tradition who declare
God incomparable [*tanzih*] and those who declare God comparable
[*tashbih*]: "this attitude holds that each of the contradictory views
regarding the knowledge of the Real can be correct from a differ-
ent perspective, despite the fact that the two views are exclusive
to each other. The attitude of complementarity comes very close
to the true knowledge of the Real." Another way of putting this is
to parse Ibn ʿArabī as "saying that there *is* something that ties the
real to creation, but that this something *is not* something added to

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37   Ibid.
38   Ibid., 136.
39   Ibid., 137.

the real and creation. He is actually stating that there is something and that this something is nothing; . . . the closest definition of the limit situation."[40] So readers are taxed to follow this philosopher into regions which lie beyond the articulation to which philosophers have become accustomed, a space epitomized by Ibn Rushd. Yet what impels philosophy beyond itself is the call to articulate the faith assertion of free creation. This exercise in philosophical theology itself displays the contours of that hybrid inquiry.

However difficult it may be for contemporary philosophers to follow such a hybrid inquiry, especially those who cannot avail themselves of a faith tradition of free creation, all could nevertheless be assisted by Chittick and Bashier to move beyond the stereotype of Ibn ʿArabī as a "monist"—that is, one who elides "the distinction" of creatures from creator. For the precise function of the *barzakh* is to highlight the relation *between* creator and creatures, which however paradoxical it may be for us to formulate, remains a *relation,* even though comparing it to an ordinary relation between creatures effectively elides creation itself—as Maimonides saw so clearly. On this reading, what makes Ibn ʿArabī so radical is not a heretical denial of "the distinction" between the One and all-that-is, but rather a thoroughgoing attempt to keep that distinction from being so trivialized that the One ceases to be "the One" or "the Real," and becomes "the biggest thing around."[41] Yet to negotiate such paradoxical articulation demands the practice of a set of "spiritual exercises," as we have noted to be the hallmark of classical Hellenic philosophy as well as of later Islamic philosophical theology, yet already intimated in the later allegorical writings of Ibn Sīnā.

Concluding Remarks

There are many other features of Mullā Ṣadrā's thought worthy of attention, for which clear treatment can be found in Jambet, Nasr, Ziai, Rizvi, and most recently in Bonmariage.[42] Hamid Dabashi[43] gives especially illuminating "deep background" on the sociopolitical

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40   Ibid., 139.

41   David Burrell, "Creation, Metaphysics, and Ethics," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001): 204–221.

42   Cécile Bonmariage, *Le Réel et les réalités: Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī et la structure de la réalité* (Paris: Vrin, 2007); Jambet, *L'acte d'etre*; Ziai, "Mulla Sadra"; Rizvi "Mysticism and Philosophy."

43   Dabashi, "Mir Damad."

situation in Isfahan and Shiraz, which helps us to appreciate the difficulties which philosophers faced in this time of otherwise spectacular development and opulence. I have focused on the relation between creator and creatures, and Mullā Ṣadrā's identification of *existence* as the philosophical strategy for articulating that relation in order to offer some suggestions how his inquiry may attend to issues that continue to bedevil philosophical theology.