

Intellect and Revelation: Notes on Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī's Approach in His Commentary on Usul Al-Kafi

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Abstract: The relation between intellect and revelation is one of the critical questions of theology, with roots extending back to both Muslim, Christian, and Jews. It has been mentioned that “The concept of *‘aql*, “intellect,” is one of the most controversial in the history of Muslim thought. Also, it is well known that in Islamic history, there have been different approaches toward understanding religious texts and the correlation between intellect and revelation. Understanding Ṣadrā ’s conception of the relation between intellect and revelation and the way in which he explains their interaction is the concern of this essay.

Keywords: intellect, *‘aql*, revelation, Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī, Uṣūl al-Kāfī

Introduction

Like their predecessors in Jewish and Christian traditions, Muslim intellectuals applied different approaches in interpreting their revelation. If a philosophical and Sufi approach is taken into consideration, Mullā Ṣadrā (d.1050/1640), a prominent figure of Islamic intellectual tradition, presents many commentaries in the Islamic religious context.¹ Chief among them is his incomplete exegesis on the Quran known as *Maḥāṣin*

¹ For his Quranic exegesis see Mohammed. Rustom, "The triumph of mercy : philosophy and scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā," (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012). Also Sajjad H. Rizvi, "Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī : his life and works and the sources for Safavid philosophy," (Oxford :: Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of Manchester, 2007). <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/fy1001/2007281937.html>. For more on Ṣadrā’s methodology see Aḥad Farāmarz Qarāmalikī, "Ravish’shināsī-i falsafah-i Mullā Ṣadrā," ed. Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (Chāp-i 1., Tihrān: Intishārāt-i Bunyād-i Ḥikmat-i Islāmī-i Ṣadrā, 1388). For his philosophical school also see Fazlur Rahman, "The philosophy of

al-ghayb and commentary on the Shii doctrinal Hadith collection, i.e., *al-Uṣūl al-Kāfī*.²

The latter is compiled by Abu Ja'far al-Kulaynī (d. 329 AH/941).

Ṣadrā's main philosophical theses are well known, and his major work of philosophy *the Transcendent Wisdom in the Four Intellectual Journeys* (*Al-Hikmat al-muta'āliyah fī al-asfār al-'aqlīyyah al-arba'ah*) marks his most important work.

Nevertheless, his important contributions in the interpretation of revelation based on his particular philosophical-mystical approach are in need of more examination. Therefore, this paper tries to shed more light on Ṣadrā's approach to the question of the relation between intellect and revelation.

In their assessments of Transcendent Philosophy, some scholars have declared that Sadra's approach consists of nothing new and innovative but an integration of previous schools of thought, namely philosophy (*Burhān*), Gnosticism (*Irfān*), and revelation (*Qurān*).³ On the other hand, an opposite group claims that Sadra, with his comprehensive understanding of all previous schools of thought, had established his own system of thought known as Transcendent philosophy (*Al-Hikmat al-muta'āliyah*).

Mullā Ṣadrā (Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shirāzī)," (1st ed., Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975).

² For his scheme of intellect in the Shi'i hadith collection and its relation to cosmology and ontology see Seyed Amirhossein Asghari, "Ontology and Cosmology of the 'aql in Ṣadrā's Commentary on Uṣūl al-Kāfī," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1353/isl.2017.0011>.

³ For more on these view see Murtada Razavi, *Naqd-i Mabānīyi Hikmat-i Muta'āliya,, , 1380 AH*. (Qom: Intishārāt-i Maktab-i Ahl-i Bayt, 1380/2001). Also Yahyā Yathribī, *ʿAyar-e Naqd (Naqdi bar hastī shīnāsīy va Ma'ād-e Mulla Sadra)* (Tih-rān: Intishārāt-i Pāyā, 1379/2000).

For those who see Sadra as an innovative scholar and philosopher, his access to diverse sources and avoidance of any kind of methodological restriction, and the conscious adherence to a certain methodological pluralism make his approach a unique one.

Qarāmalikī, in his observation of Sadrā's approach, illustrates his attention to various sciences is to solve a single problem. He moreover indicates that Sadra takes the benefit of different methods and branches of knowledge in understanding a single problem in the vast domain of theological studies. He states that,

deep down, what attracts his complete attention is the collection of miscellaneous approaches. In fact, he draws on diverse approaches to analyze a single problem. Third, he does not get involved in a comparative evaluation and selection of the best approach. Neither does he try to put the findings of different sciences in solving single problems together; rather, his method is to challenge the different views and approaches to solve a single problem. (Qaramaleki, 2006)

In addition to what mentioned above on Sadra's methodology, one should not ignore his Sufi/mystical and intuitive approach to the problems. In Sadra's methodology, "intuitive intellect" (*'aql-i Shuhūdī*) places as a higher method of understanding theological and philosophical concepts and realities. Nasr states that "his "eye of the heart" opened, and he was able to have a direct vision of spiritual world".⁴

⁴ Seyed Hossein Nasr, "The Qur'an and Hadith as source and inspiration of Islamic philosophy," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyed Hossein Nasr; Oliver Liman (London: Routledge, 1996). Tabātabā'ī, Mutahharī, S.H. Nasr, Henry Corbin are among those who emphasized the authenticity and innovative aspects of Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy.

Intellect and Revelation:

The relation between intellect and revelation is one of the important questions of theology, with roots extending back to both Muslim, Christian, and Jew thinkers. It has been mentioned that “The concept of ‘ aql, “intellect,” is probably one of the most controversial in the history of Muslim thought.” (Kermani 2001) Intellect is the human’s faculty of apprehension whereby he can understand, argue, and provide a critique. Contemplation of intellectual realities, such as primary self-evidential, mathematical and logical principles, are among the functions of intellect. When the relation of revelation and intellect is discussed below, questions could help to clarify dimensions of this interaction:

- Is there a similarity between the meanings of intellect as it is used in the religious text with that of philosophers or theologians (*Mutekallemun*)?
- Does revelation accept the philosophical intellect defined by philosophers?
- What is the function of intellect according to revelation, i.e., Quran and tradition?
- What kind of epistemological sequences exists between intellect and revelation? Does intellect have priority over revelation or vice versa?
- What is the role and borders of intellect in one’s understanding and discovering the meanings of revelation?
- In the case of the conflict between the results of intellect and revelation, which one has priority?
- Does the outcome of the intellect remains out of the borders of religious knowledge and opposite to it, or it is inside of the religious

knowledge? Could intellect be supposed as an authentic source alongside the tradition to evaluate human knowledge about religion?

- The major point concerns what sort of relationship can be established between intellect and revelation. Should we prove religious statements by means of the intellect? And what about a response to the doubts about religion by the rational defense? Does the authenticity of religious belief depend on its rationality?

More and more questions could be put in this regard. The history of Islamic theology, philosophy, and mysticism is full of debates on these issues. While Ash`rites emphasized the literal meanings of religious text, Mu`tazilite were advocates of an intellectual interpretation of revelation. Shi`ites, however, had their own approaches. Nevertheless, among Shi`ites, one can find Akhbārī and Usuli trends along with the recent anti-rational trend of the *Tafkiki* movement. A characteristic of this school is a harsh critic of philosophical interpretation of religion and denying any harmony among intellect and revelation.

Historical debates reveal a misunderstanding or misinterpretations of both Intellect (*`Aql*) and revelation. Some attacks on the intellect have taken place without any clarification. One, however, needs to emphasize that the Intellect for Muslim thinkers did not have a single meaning. There exist numerous definitions of intellect in the Islamic sciences that one can find in philosophical, theological, and mystical texts. Chittick has sorted out some of the Muslim thinkers' objections of intellect in grasping the reality of revelation. Sanā'ī, for instance, emphasizes that "Exercising intellect (*'ā qelī*) is the work of Ibn Sīnā" or "How can a spider snare a phoenix?" Rumi defines those involved in Partial intellect (*`Aql-i juz`i*) as having wooden legs.⁵ Chittick moreover

⁵ See William Chittick, "AQL," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, (2011).

states that the Peripatetic philosophers, such as Avicenna, al-Kindi, and al-Farabi, supported the premise that the 'intellect' (al-'aql), ... was a sufficient guide for man to understand the realities of things and to attain ultimate truth. They did maintain that the very act of acquiring knowledge entails a kind of illumination by the Active Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'al*), but they emphasized the rational knowledge that any human being could attain through the healthy functioning of his mind without any special divine aid or grace.⁶

In the Islamic hadith collections, the intellect has different functions. While it is highly prized as human faculty of intellection, it has also mentioned that this faculty is not capable of understanding all the Divine secrets. Some indicate the inability of the intellect to understand revelation. In one instant, "the religion of God could not grasp by intellects." This narration could mean that the philosophy behind the religious law cannot be understood by means of analogy, perhaps. Also, a prophetic narration emphasizes the contemplation of God's names rather than his essence.

Opposite to the above-mentioned Hadiths and sayings, except Koranic verses, are numerous narrations that allude to the importance of a belief that is based on intellect or intellectual understanding of religion. The best witness of this sort is the first chapter of Shi'a Hadith collection: *Usul al-Kafi*. Kulaynī, the compiler of the hadiths, has gathered thirty-four narrations regarding the importance, cosmology, and cosmogony, responsibility, component, and opponents of intellect from Shi'a Imams in the first chapter of his *Hadith* collection. Mulla Sadra as a Philosopher and Muslim thinker has written a commentary on this collection, and "In writing these glosses, Sadra seems to be particularly interested in illuminating the

⁶ William C. Chittick, "Mysticism versus Philosophy in earlier Islamic History: The Al-Tūsi,

Al-Qūnawī correspondence: WILLIAM C. CHITTICK," *Religious Studies* 17, no. 1 (1981).

intrinsic relation between two sources of knowledge, viz., transmitted-religious and intellectual-philosophical.”⁷

A Philosopher's Approach to a Religious Text:

Mulla Sadra is better known as a philosopher rather than an exegete of religious texts. But it should not be neglected that his approach towards religious texts, along with his innovations in philosophy, has many novel features. Therefore, one finds a deeper understanding of revelation and religious narrations. However, this area “has received relatively little attention”⁸ Nevertheless, “These works taken together constitute the most imposing philosophical commentaries upon the Qur'an and *Hadith* in Islamic history.”⁹

Among these works, one can refer to *Mafatih al-ghayb*, *Asrar al-ayat wa-Anwar al-bayyinah*, *Mutashabihat al-Qur'an*, *Tafsir Ayat al-Nur* and *Ma'ani al-alfaz al-mufrada min al-Qur'an*¹⁰ as commentaries on *Quran* and *Sharhi Usul al-Kafi* as a commentary on *Shi'a hadith* collection. Sadra's work on *Hadith* or Islamic transmitted sciences shows us how the relationship between intellect and revelation

⁷ Ibrahim Kalin, "An Annotated Bibliography of the Works of Mullā Ṣadrā with a Brief

Account of His Life," *Islamic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2003),

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20837250>.

⁸ Mohammed Rustom and محمد -la hītāfaM<cilati> eht ot nonemogelorP s'ārdaŞ ālluM" رستم,

byahg / <cilati/> مقدمة ملا صدري لكتابه "مفاتيح الغيب", "J lanruoQ fo cina'ruS seidot9 on. 1 (7002),

[.24282752/elbats/gro.rotsj.www://:ptth](http://www.ptsj.gro.elbats/24282752)

⁹ Nasr, "The Qur'an and Hadith as source and inspiration of Islamic philosophy."

¹⁰ For Sufi/Mystical interpretation of the Qurān see Seyed Amirhossein Asghari, "Sufi

Interpretation of the Qur'ān," *Burhan Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016).

could be and how philosophy became integrated into the Shiite intellectual world.¹¹

As Nasr has indicated, this work may help the reader “to realize the philosophical fecundity of many of the sayings of the Imams and their role in later philosophical meditation and deliberation.”¹² It also indicates that how Sadra re-appropriated early Shi’a *hadíth* through the lens of the intervening seven centuries of theological, mystical and philosophical developments within Islam.”¹³

Sadra, in his introduction to *Usul al-Kafi*, explains why he decided to comment upon this collection. As he emphasizes: “Nowadays we encounter to a group of people that a deep contemplation of theological problems are considered by them as heresy, and thinking of God’s signs as a ruse” (Sadra, *Sharh-e Usul al-Kafi* 1383 A.H).

It is obvious that Sadra clearly encounters the problem of an anti-rational faith in his time and, to avoid its consequences, tries to explore some of the complex and deep intellectual meaning of revelation and the inner harmony of intellect and religious statements. This is evident in his commentary on *Kitab al-‘aql wa’l-jahl* (the book of intellect and ignorance). The narrations in this commentary discuss intellect, intellection, ignorance, and knowledge. So Sadra’s work is an extensive philosophical and mystical discussion on a religious text.

¹¹ Nasr, "The Qur'an and Hadith as source and inspiration of Islamic philosophy."

¹² Nasr, "The Qur'an and Hadith as source and inspiration of Islamic philosophy."

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Meaning of intellect according to Sadra's Sharh-e Usul al-Kafi

Sadra, in his commentary on *Usul al-Kafi*, follows the third Hadith of the first chapter, while pointing to the diversity of the meanings of intellect among people, mentions six definitions for *`Aql* (intellect). He emphasizes that the concept of *`Aql* among some of the meanings has equivocality of names and among some others is an analogical term. His definitions of *`Aql* could be summarized as follows:

1. Intellect is an innate disposition by which humans distinguish themselves from other animals. All human kinds possess this intellect, which is a theoretical intellect, by means of which man is able to know the primary self-evidence and consequently theoretical sciences.
2. The second meaning, according to Sadra, is that of *Mutakallimūn* (Kalamists), which is for affirmation or negation. The purpose of *Mutakallimūn* from intellect is its primary stages that are famous to all. For instance, *`Aql* in this meaning is the knowledge of the fact that four is twice 2.
3. The third definition is referred to in ethical books. This intellect is a part of the human soul that, by keeping the religious beliefs, man gradually gains. By means of this intellect, a human will be able to understand what to practice and what to avoid.
4. Based on the fourth definition, *`Aql* is something that by its presence, people call someone as *`Aaqel* (wise). If someone possesses this, he/she will be able to quickly understand what to choose or avoid, even if it is a sensual desire. Sadra indicates that people of truth do not call this ability *al-Nokra* or mischief, not *`Aql*.

5. The other definition of *`Aql* is the Intellect mentioned in the Kitab al-Nafth (section on the soul) that is divided into four categories of potential intellect, habitual intellect, actual intellect, and *intellectus in actu*.
6. The last definition is the intellect discussed in the book of *Elahiyyat* (Divinity) and knowledge of lordship. It is an entity that has no sort of attachment or connection to anything except its creator, who is the self-abiding God. This definition of intellect applies to an external and objective being, while the previous definitions were part of the human soul or its faculties. (Sadra, Sharh-e Usul al-Kafi 1383 A.H) In other words, it is “an Essential-Substance (*jawhar*) independent of bodies in every respect, not existent in the manner of contingent-Accidents, nor acting and freely disposing in the manner of Souls-Psyches, nor as particularity and mixture as Matter and Form. (Crow 2001)

It is clear that in the discussion of the relationship between intellect and revelation, the second meaning of intellect is intended. The other meanings are not applicable to this discussion. In the third and fourth meanings, *`Aql* does not result in any belief or systematic thought to be compared with religion. Also, the first meaning is the faculty of understanding that appears in the self-evidence and innate matters. The fifth meaning also could not be applied in the relationship between revelation and intellect. The sixth meaning alludes to the intellect, not as a part of the soul or human faculty but as an objective being, which is discussed in cosmology. The second meaning points to those issues that are intellectually perceived and are whether conceptive, assertive, self-evident, or deductive. This meaning of

intellect is applied in discussing the relationship between intellect and revelation.

Intellect and Revelation

Different trends in the history of Islamic theology have defined the correlation between intellect and revelation. Some argue that intellect or all independent acts of intellectuality are rejected by revelation. On the other hand, there is an idea that intellect rejects the revelation. In this part, we want to see what Sadra's approach was toward this question.

In Sadra's system of thought, neither intellect rejects the revelation nor does revelation do so. What Sadra did was involving intellect, revelation, and Gnosticism in his philosophy. It is worth mentioning that it was Ibn Sina was the first one who alluded to this style of thinking in chapter nine of his *Isharat*. Ibn sina, with regard to some difficult issues, asserts that only "those firmly rooted in transcendent philosophy" can solve such problems. So, according to Muslim intellectuals, "only through the objective and universal revelation do the virtualities of the intellect become actualized. It is only by submitting itself to the objective revelation that this subjective revelation in man, which is the intellect, becomes itself fully, capable not only of analysis but also synthesis and unification." (Nasr, *Intellect and Intuition: Their Relationship* 1979) Therefore Sadra, in his introduction to his *Asfar al-arba`ah*, curses a philosophy that its principles are not in agreement with the Book and Tradition.

The point is that Sadra was in search of the truth, and if philosophy or intellectual practice avoids him from gaining that truth, he rejects it. His solution is to go back to both intellect and revelation and not to leave one

in favour of the others, which, according to Corbin, this dualism results in a secular understanding of religion. (Corbin 1971)

According to Mulla Sadra, intellect is the principal former of human character and the unique tool of discovering secrets of the universes. He meanwhile, in his commentary on *Usul al-Kafi*, interprets and adopts intellectual faculty with the truth issued from Shi'a Imams, which means that he tries to tie intellect and revelation. He neither look at philosophy from the perspective of religion nor to religion from the perspective of philosophy. He depicts an interaction for both of them as follow:

“The Qur'anic Revelation is the light that causes one to see. Intellect in the eye which sees and which contemplates this light. In order for the phenomenon of vision to be produced, there must be light, but it is necessary to have eyes to look. If you suppress this light, your eyes will not see anything; if you obstinately close your eyes, as do the literalists and jurists, you will not see anything either. In both cases there is a triumph of darkness, and the case of him who opens only one eye, the case of one-eyed man, is not better. By contrast, to enjoin the intellect and divine Revelation is to have "light upon light" as the Light Verse of the Qur'an (24:35) says". (peerwani 2006)

Intellect and revelation, for Sadra, both are ways to gain knowledge of God. (Sadra, al-Hikmat al-Muta`aliyah 1981) He also asserts that there is no conflict between the philosophical statements and that of religion. (Sadra, al-Hikmat al-Muta`aliyah 1981) A sound and true philosophy for Sadra is the one that is in favor of revelation. He believes that those philosophers that are not following the prophets are lost, and one whose religion is not that of the Prophets ('a) is not considered to be theosophy at all. And one who is not firmly rooted in the gnosis of realities is not considered to be from the theosophists. (Sadra, al-Hikmat al-Muta`aliyah 1981)

Conclusion:

The relationship between revelation and intellect from Sadra's point of view has been discussed in this chapter. As we emphasized above, Sadra neither looks at the revelation from the viewpoint of rationality or philosophy, nor does he do so to intellect. His commentary on *Usul al-Kafi* and describing the notion of *`Aql* with the stress upon the transcendent philosophy shows that in his vision, both intellect and revelation are means of gaining the true and sound knowledge of God and cosmos. If there seems to be a contradiction, he suggests that there is a problem either in rational understanding or religious interpretation. Therefore, he sometimes refers to esoteric exegesis or *Ta'wil*. In other words, one can understand that according to Sadra, if intellect possesses all its necessary conditions, it will reach the same conclusion as a revelation.

Sadra, while commenting on the hadith number thirty-three of the book of intellect and ignorance, emphasizes the fact that: there is no distance between faith and infidelity, except shortcomings in the intellectual faculty. (Sadra, Sharh-e Usul al-Kafi 1383 A.H)

Sadra's philosophy, on the other hand, teaches the reader that attainment of intellectual perfection and pure knowledge necessitates the arrival to the higher universes. Knowledge and intuition deeply purify the human heart, while opposite them, it results in the eternal death of the heart.

Therefore, faith is not seen as opposed to intellect, as it includes hearty and intuitive knowledge. It gets different steps, such as speculative reason and intuitive intellect. Sadra tries to reconcile the intellect and

revelation with the belief that both revelation and intellect are meant to reach God.

Sadra's approach to this issue seems to be more realistic than that of Fideism for the fact that human being naturally possesses the faculty of intellect, and it is absurd to neglect intellect while encountering an important issue such as revelation. Intellect, according to Sadra, is "the axis of which everything revolves" and "all the arguments rest". (Sadra, *Sharh-e Usul al-Kafi* 1383 A.H) in the book of *Hujjah*, he brings another example:

"he who shuns the intellect and limits himself to the light of the Holy Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet and his progeny ('a) is one who enjoys the presence of the light of the Sun and the Moon, but shuts his eyelids. Thus, there is no difference between him and the blind. Therefore, religion together with the intellect is light upon light". (Sadra, *al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah* 1981)

When God created Adam, he did not ask him to neglect his intellect; rather, according to the narrated second *Hadith* in *Usul al-Kafi*, God asked him through Gabriel to choose between intellect, religion, and modesty. The narration is as follows:

"Jibrā'il (Gabriel) came to Adam and informed him: 'O Adam! I have been ordered to let you choose one out of three things. Therefore, choose one and leave the other two.' Adam asked: 'What are the three things?' He replied, 'Reason, modesty, and religion (din).' Then Adam said: 'I choose reason.' So Jibrā'il ordered modesty and faith to withdraw and leave reason, but they said: 'O Jibrā'il! we both have been instructed (by God) to remain with reason wherever it may be.' Jibrā'il answered: 'Then that is your situation, and he ascended towards Heaven.'"

Adam chose Intellect, and by that symbolic selection, both moral and religion stayed with him. The narrated story is a religious form of harmony of intellect and revelation that Sadra strongly believed in.

Finally, contemporary Muslim society suffers from two extreme opposition regarding religion. Sadra's approach can offer a healthier Islamic society within which intellectuality and spirituality can live in harmony.

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