

Fazlur Rahman. *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975. Hbk., v-vii + 277 pp.

This book is the first English monograph devoted to the great philosopher of the Safavid period, Mulla Sadra Shirazi (d. 1641 CE). It begins with a very brief biographical sketch of Sadra's life and times, and proceeds to outline some of the most important strands and figures of Islamic thought who influenced his thinking one way or another. The introduction is a good summary of what is to follow in later chapters and touches on Sadra's influence on later thinkers in the Islamic philosophical tradition. The substance of the book is divided into three parts: ontology, theology, and psychology. In the latter two sections Sadra's engagement with Islamic philosophy, philosophical theology, and theoretical Sufism are clearly discernable. From his proofs for the existence of God to his discussions of the contents of God's knowledge and his understanding of the afterlife, Sadra, although often unique, is an excellent synthesizer of the intellectual currents which preceded him.

The most important part of *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* is the section devoted to ontology. In five chapters Rahman finely analyzes the main features of the essence/existence distinction in Islamic philosophy, particularly focusing on Suhrawardi's defense of the reality of essence and Sadra's arguments against his illustrious predecessor. After establishing an effective basis for Sadra's critique of Suhrawardi's ontology, Rahman highlights the main features of Sadra's defense of the principiality of Being (*asalat al-wujud*) and how it is that concrete things in the universe are all articulations of the modes of Being (*anha' al-wujud*), based on the principle of their gradation (*tashkik*). Only Being is real, whereas from the different modes of Being, that is, things *in concreto*, essences are 'abstracted' or 'presented' to the mind, and are

therefore neither entirely real nor entirely unreal. This is why Sadra believed that pure Being has no essence at all, since it is not modalized in any way. Only when Being becomes modalized can it allow for the possibility of abstracting some notion of essence. For Sadra, essences are abstractions based on the delimitations of Being itself — the more intense a thing's being the less of essence it will manifest; the less intense a thing's being the more of essence it will manifest.

In the preface Rahman expresses the hope that his book will help dispel the myth of Islamic philosophy's 'death' after Ghazali's attack, its last breath of life being in the figure of Ibn Rushd. While Rahman and several other scholars of Islamic philosophy correctly argue that philosophical thinking did not die in Islam with the death of Ibn Rushd, they nonetheless insist that this type of philosophical thinking — even when it is fused with mysticism — is almost entirely rationalistic in nature. Thus, while the likes of Rahman correctly reject the myth of the end of Islamic philosophy at the close of the twelfth century CE, they nevertheless continue to categorize philosophy as such according to the standards set by many of those scholars who popularized this myth in the first place. It is therefore not a question of whether or not Islamic philosophy lived on from the thirteenth century onwards, but more of a question as to what *type* of philosophical activity it is that lived on.

Rahman's inability to define along Western philosophical lines the type of philosophy that lived on in the eastern lands of Islam post Ibn Rushd leaves him in a tight bind. He has a difficult time dealing with what exactly to make of Sadra's mystical insights when they are combined with his philosophical ideas. In the absence of an equivalent type of philosopher or philosophical category in contemporary Western

thought, Rahman struggles with categorizing Mulla Sadra as a type of rationalistic philosopher who relied upon intellectual, intuitive insight. But Sadra was, in fact, so thoroughly influenced by the Islamic gnostic tradition that we cannot simply call him an ‘intuitive philosopher.’ This categorization does a gross injustice to the objectivity of Sadra’s vision. One is therefore inclined to ask whether Sadra was able to come up with such sophisticated views because of or in spite of his experience of an objective reality beyond mere ‘intuition’. If it was because of it, then it must be conceded that he was certainly more than just a ‘rationalist’ or an ‘intuitive philosopher.’ Yet from the Islamic philosophical perspective, no difficulty arises when attempting to define him. His philosophical activity can easily be understood within the matrix of the revealed religion to which he belonged. It is therefore imperative that Islamic philosophy be studied and explicated on its own terms and not through the eyes of the ‘other’, especially when these eyes are virtually blind to the reality of the transcendent — a reality which is the starting and ending point of all genuinely Islamic intellectual activity.

Mohammed Rustom  
*University of Toronto*