

## *Book Reviews*

Sajjad H. Rizvi. *Mulla Sadra and Metaphysics:  
Modulation of Being*

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*Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics: Modulation of Being* appears at a time when the study of Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī's philosophy has reached a critical mass. Critical editions of Shirazi's works are available, and there are numerous studies on aspects of his thought. Rizvi has done an excellent job of synthesizing this information, examining it critically and building on it to push Sadrian studies forward. The philosophical question that Rizvi explores in this book is: "[h]ow can we reconcile the vision of the unity in existence and the quest for a singular explanation for reality with our everyday, phenomenal experience of plurality and multiplicity?" (xi). Rizvi approaches this question both as a philosopher and a historian of philosophy.

The aim of this study is to examine Shirazi's central philosophical idea—the modulation of being—and to use this idea to understand his philosophy. Whereas most studies on Shirazi have focused on *Kitāb al-Mashā'ir* or *al-Ḥikma al-'arshīya*, Rizvi focuses on the section on metaphysics in Shirazi's most important work *Al-Ḥikma al-muta'ālīya*, or simply the *Asfār*. There are two major theses in this book. One, "*tashkīk* is a hermeneutic concept which describes the threefold division of being and its gradation," and two, "gradation and modulation occur in *each* mode of being" (3). As Rizvi points out, "being in expression" is the foundation of Shirazi's semantic theory; "mental being" is about epistemology and psychology; and "actual being" covers metaphysics. "Modulation," then, is the axis around which different branches of Shirazi's philosophy revolve.

Shirazi's project was to use the idea of modulation to strike a compromise between the monism of Ibn al-'Arabī and the pluralism of Ibn Sīnā. But Rizvi does not tell us *why* this was an urgent concern. What were the historical conditions under which Shirazi devoted himself to this synthesis? This is unfortunate because, just as Sadrian studies has evolved, so too has the state of historical scholarship on Safavid Iran. Rizvi's deep knowledge of Islamic philosophy in general, and Shirazi in particular, puts him in the ideal position to offer plausible historical explanations for this synthesis. Instead, however, we are left with a picture of a thinker unaffected by the vicissitudes of time and place.

The introduction to this book is excellent. It contains a comprehensive summary of secondary literature, and it is accessible to scholars who do not specialize in philosophy. Rizvi outlines four approaches to the study of Shirazi's philosophy: esotericism, comparative philosophy, Avicennism, and Iranian nativism. Western scholars learnt about Shirazi through the writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Henry Corbin, the prototypes of esotericism. This approach, "privileges spiritual intuition over Aristotelian ratiocination," discouraging contemporary philosophers from taking Shirazi seriously (6). Many people reading this book will only be familiar with one, perhaps two of the approaches to Shirazi's philosophy. Rizvi's review of the literature puts these idiosyncratic interpretations in perspective.

Rizvi explains his methodology in Chapter 1. He is of the opinion that Islamic philosophy ought to be understood through the lens of analytic philosophy. This is an interesting approach, one that brings Shirazi to life. But it also makes it extremely difficult for anyone who is not familiar with modern philosophy to understand what Rizvi is saying. Chapter 1 also includes an excellent discussion of Shirazi's historical context.

In Chapter 2, Rizvi introduces us to the modulation of being and charts the history of this concept from antiquity to the medieval Islamic tradition. Modulation, it is argued, is a solution to the problem of the one and the many. But Rizvi never explains this problem clearly, nor does he tell us why it is a problem at all. Did late antique philosophical debates determine which questions are important for posterity? Are there reasons why a Muslim thinker in particular might be troubled by it? Did specific historical conditions in the Safavid era bring this question to the fore?

Chapter 3 is about the modulation of being in Shirazi's semantic theory. Rizvi argues that existence is a predicate and explains what that entails. He describes "how the predication of the term 'being' is by modulation by intensity" (58), and he discusses co-extensions of being (that is, affirma-

tion, thingness, oneness, and light). This chapter is important because very little has been written about Islamic semantic theories. According to Rizvi, one of the myths about Shirazi is that he was persecuted by jurists. Rizvi could have problematized this myth by placing Shirazi's semantic theory in the context of other Islamic semantic theories—that is '*ilm al-wad'*, which are normally discussed in jurisprudence.

The fourth chapter is about mental being. Rizvi examines Shirazi's arguments for a mental plane of existence. He also discusses Shirazi's theory of "knowledge by presence," once again showing us how modulation fits into this branch of Shirazi's philosophy. Chapter 5 covers the branch of Shirazi's philosophy to which Islamicists have paid the most attention: the reality of being. This chapter also contains a discussion of the famous "proof of the sincere."

Rizvi assesses Shirazi's solution to the problem of the one and the many in his conclusion. According to Rizvi the key to understanding Shirazi's contribution to Islamic philosophy is understanding that, "[w]hat the Sadrian method does is actually posit a pedagogical method and grounds for argument and debate" (132). In his conclusion, Rizvi also summarizes criticisms of Shirazi's philosophy. This is one of the most fascinating parts of this book. Shirazi's philosophy is so dominant in contemporary Twelver Shi'ism that we tend to forget that there are other philosophical options. Rizvi mentions the criticisms of Shaykhīs, Akbarians, Avicennans and the adherents of the *Maktab-i Tafkīk*.

Rizvi makes a compelling case for modulation as the axis around which Shirazi's philosophy revolves, and not just an aspect of his ontology. This by itself is a major contribution to Sadrian studies. His critical engagement with Shirazi's philosophy is one of the best aspects of this book. One of the book's main themes is the continuity between late Neoplatonism and Shirazi. Rizvi's effort to place Shirazi in a philosophical context stretching back to late antiquity is praiseworthy. There is, however, a problem: the connections between Shirazi and previous thinkers are not established clearly. We are expected to infer continuity based on the similarity between particular notions. As a result the value of these connections—many of which seem reasonable—to the history of philosophy is not as high as it could have been.

This book's most significant contribution to Sadrian studies may be that it does not depict Shirazi as a unique genius. Rizvi's Shirazi is engaged with his predecessors, including theologians, and builds upon their work. Rizvi's effort to make Shirazi speak to analytic philosophers is also

commendable, especially because of the predominance of esotericism in Sadrian studies. But this may have led Rizvi to downplay Shirazi's essential contribution to philosophy: synthesizing different ways of knowing. There is definitely an esoteric side to Shirazi's philosophy, and this esoteric side may ultimately be the root of an impasse between analytic philosophers and Sadrians. However, the blending of scripture, ratiocination, and intuition may also be one reason why Shirazi is quintessentially Islamic.

Islamic Studies tends toward parochialism, so it is refreshing to see references to critical theorists (for example, Gadamer, Skinner, and Foucault) in a book about Shirazi. However, I wonder exactly who Rizvi is talking to. I suspect that the majority of Islamicists will not be familiar with the issues addressed by the above authors—so, rather than simply alluding to their views, it would have been more helpful if Rizvi had explained how they can help us to understand Shirazi's philosophy better. Rizvi has awesome breadth. He may not, however, have a wide audience.

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