THE POSSIBILITY OF THE NOBLER (*imkān al-ashraf*)

IN ṢADRĀ’S PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORICAL ORIGINS

SUMMARY

The principle known as the possibility of the nobler, *qā’idat imkān al-ashraf*, is arguably one of the most often employed principles in later Islamic philosophy. In its standard formulation it states that if something baser exists, a nobler thing must have existed prior to it. A similar argument from the degrees of perfections has had a long career in the history of Western philosophy as well, with its beginnings reaching Stoicism. However, whereas in Christian theology and philosophy it serves most importantly as a proof for the existence of God in the so-called henological argument of Aquinas, in Islamic philosophy it serves a much wider scope of goals in ontological investigations of its proponents. The article analyses the application of the principle in Ṣadrā’s philosophy and enquires about its historical roots.

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The principle of the possibility of the nobler had at least two famous, and related, antecedents. We can call them (1) the principle that the cause is greater than its effect and (2) the argument from degrees of perfection. Even though they are not identical with the principle we are to present in this paper, they are all intricately connected. Principle (1) became an oft-used axiom in the Middle Ages, whereas principle (2) was famously employed by Aquinas in his henological argument, or his fourth

* The present paper is part of the research conducted within grant GR 5850 “The Reception of Ancient Philosophy in Mullā Ṣadrā’s Writings” financed by the National Science Centre of Poland.

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way of proving the existence of God. The Muslim proponents of the principle of *imkān al-ashraf* expand on these two previous principles and use them as axioms in their own versions of the principle. In what follows, I will offer a brief overview of principles (1) and (2) which will lead us to the principle in question, first clearly formulated by Suhrawardī and then examined by many thinkers of later Islamic philosophy. This will enable us to discuss the principle in Ṣadrā as he draws from this rich tradition.

### 1.1. The principle in Aristotle and Neoplatonism

The wide use of the principle that the cause is always greater than its effect dates back to the Neoplatonism of Plotinus, Proclus, Porphyry and the like. Its beginnings, however, can be traced back to Plato and, most importantly, Aristotle.\(^1\) A. C. Lloyd sees it as an elaboration on the transmission theory of causation, that is, a theory in which causation is understood as transmission of some property from A to B within a class of objects belonging to the same species, so that similar species can come into existence.\(^2\)

In Aristotle, it derives from the principle stating that the cause has to be in actuality prior to its effect so that the effect can be actualised (*De gen. an.* 734a30-32).\(^3\) Neoplatonists will later agree with Aristotle about that, for they share with him the transmission theory of causation.\(^4\) But the Neoplatonist principle diverges from the view of Aristotle, or at least a part of it, as he seemed to have two versions of the principle, stronger and weaker. The weaker one says that the cause is either equal

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\(^1\) Cf. the article by A. C. Lloyd: idem, “The Principle that the Cause is Greater than its Effect,” *Phronesis* Vol. 21, No. 2 (1976):146-156.

\(^2\) Cf. Lloyd’s discussion in: ibid.:146-148. This is, of course, the classical theory of causation contested by Hume’s constant conjunction theory.

\(^3\) Cf. ibid.:147. Aristotle offers an argument for the priority of actuality over potentiality in *Met.*1049b4-1050b6.

\(^4\) Ibid.:147.
to or greater than the effect; the stronger, which excludes “equal to,” claims that what is the cause—to be a cause—must possess in itself in the highest degree the property which it transmits. The problem is, however, that the stronger version only appears twice in Aristotle. One example is: “fire, which is the cause of heat in everything else, is the hottest thing;” the second one maintains that “what makes us love something is more loveably” (Met. 8993 b 24-26, An. Post. 72 a 29-30, respectively).\(^5\) Lloyd explains the rare occurrence of the stronger version by the fact that Aristotle was mostly interested in physical causation, i.e. production of substances, and the paradigm of causal explanation for him was movement of one thing by another.\(^6\) It was the Neo-Platonist understanding of the universe where Ideas are causes that attracted them to the stronger version.

Therefore, Neoplatonists adapted the stronger version of the principle, in which the cause is not just equal to but greater than the effect. Proclus, who equated the non-physical causation, understood as procession and generation, with the transmission of property, thought that what followed from it was that the effect participates in its cause and is in it. He offered a deductive proof in which he rejected the weaker version.\(^7\) For Neoplatonists, the rationale behind choosing the stronger version was that they applied it first and foremost to the non-physical causation in the intelligible world and the emanative chain of being with its degrees and intermediaries. They understood the causal power as the activity from the cause, not the activity, or substantial form, that makes the essence. Thus understood, the effects are merely traces or images of the cause, with the standard of a cause being

\(^5\) Ibid.:149.

\(^6\) Cf. ibid.:155.

\(^7\) For the analysis of the proof, cf. ibid.:152-155. For the Proclus’ argument, see: E. R. Dodds, The Elements of Theology (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962 [1st ed. 1933]), proposition 7. According to Lloyd, Plotinus himself is closest to offering an argument for the superiority of the cause in Enn. VI 2[43], 5 11. 5-7 where he says that the effect has less unity and thus less being, cf. ibid., 149.
the Platonic Idea. As we shall see below, the limitation of the working of the principle to the intelligible world became one of the two necessary conditions of the validity of the principle for the Muslim philosophers.

In the Christian context, the stronger, Neoplatonic version of the principle attracted the attention of the Scholastics. We find it in Thomas’ and, later, in Descartes’ proofs of God’s existence which trace the chain of causes to God. The most Platonic of Thomas’ proofs, the argument from degrees of perfection, is founded on the principle that there are degrees of approximation to something that has a given property in the most perfect way, to the superlative. Thomas’ example is Aristotelian (Met. II, 1, 993 b 25): various hot things differ in terms of their approximation to the hottest of things, fire, which is the cause of the hotness of all other things. But in order for the argument to work as the proof for God’s existence, Thomas, as Sanford demonstrates, limits the argument to perfections which do not imply any sort of imperfection, so different than physical attributes (red, white, long, etc.) which are measurable, divisible and ultimately perishable and as such cannot be completely perfect. Instead, Thomas talks about transcendental perfections which allow of complete perfection, such as truth, goodness, nobility and the like.

1.2. The principle in Islamic philosophy until Avicenna

8 Cf. ibid.,148.


10 D. Sanford, “Degrees of Perfection,” 325.
The distinction between the weaker and the stronger versions is rarely, if ever, found among Muslim philosophers to whom Șadrā refers. The reasons seem clear enough—Muslim philosophers were most likely not acquainted with Proclus’ formulation of the principle and the refutation of the weaker versions in his Elements of Theology. It is known that this text was translated together with Theologia Aristotelis already in al-Kindī’s circle, and it experienced something of a revival of interest in the Safavid times.  

Mīr Dāmād mentions Proclus several times but all the references he makes are related to the controversy between those philosophers who claimed that the universe is eternal, such as Proclus himself, and those who believed the universe to be created. If Proclus was known by name mostly as the defender of the eternity of the world, to which fact even the late reception by Mīr Dāmād attests, it is, then, not all that surprising that Șadrā does not mention Proclus in al-Asfār, or, to the extent of my knowledge, anywhere else. Even more importantly, the problem with Proclus’s treaty is that it is not known if a complete translation had ever existed and if the extant material had undergone reworking. From this comes the plausible conclusion that—even though Proclus’s work is an exposition of the first causes of things—proposition 7 has not been translated into Arabic.


14 Richard C. Taylor analysed the structure and content of Arabic version of Liber de Causis which consists of only 31 propositions compared with in Proclus, cf. idem, “A Critical Analysis of the Structure of the Kalām fit mahd al-khayr (Liber de Causis),” in: P. Morevedge (ed.), Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 11-40. Taylor noticed that the Proclanian division between proposal and the proof is blurred and the original Proclean material is often eliminated and simplified while some propositions are not even derived from The Elements of Theology, suggesting an influence of another source, ibid. p. 18. Neither can the proposition be found in the 20 other fragments attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias first edited and translated to German by Gerhard Endress: idem, Proclus
Instead, all the authors starting from Fārābī and Suhrawardī up to Śadrā and his direct predecessors draw heavily on *Theologia Aristotelis* in explaining the principle. The text, as is now well established, is a paraphrase of *Enneads* IV-VI. In the much analysed Prologue, the text presents itself precisely as theology, not only above physics, but the culmination of metaphysics,\(^\text{15}\) therefore, one can hardly expect any satisfactory exposition of physical causation. This and the fact that the Proclus’ proof was not available leads to a likely conclusion that the principle reached Muslim philosophers in its version limited to the non-physical causation in the intelligible world that can be found in the Arabic paraphrase of Plotinus.

The principle is first used in a fragment discussing the immateriality of the soul. The fragment can be found in *mīmar* III, entirely devoted to the topic of the soul’s immateriality and incorporeality, being a rather faithful paraphrase of *Enn.* IV. 7. Like the *Enneads, mīmar* III offers a series of arguments in refutation of Stoic corporealism. The fragment in question\(^\text{16}\) attacks the Stoic doctrine of “complete transfusion,”\(^\text{17}\) furnishing it, as I will presently show, with more arguments and a somewhat different language than in the Greek original. It discusses how the soul permeates the body without increasing its size and encompasses the whole body, mixing with it completely. This is what materialists also agree on; they say, however, that the soul is a kind of body. If the soul was a body, goes the apagogical argument against the Stoic doctrine, to mix completely with another body the

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soul would have to cut through every part of this other body. This is, however, impossible because it requires bodies to have actually infinite parts. The argument concludes that, since it has otherwise been proved that the soul permeates the whole body it has to be incorporeal.

The Greek text ends here and directly proceeds to a different set of arguments (disproving the doctrine that the soul is a spirit). The Arabic text, however, has an added fragment which is a further clarification of the previous argument and something of an axiomatic proof in which our principle is put to use (mīmar III:35):

But the soul penetrates the whole of the frame and all of its parts without needing, in her penetration of the body, to cut through the parts bit by bit; on the contrary she cuts through them as a whole, that is, she encompasses all the parts of the body because she is the cause of the body, li-anna-ha 'illa li-l-jirm, and the cause is greater than the effect, wa-l-`illa akbar mina-l-ma`lūl, and does not need to cut through its effect in the way of the effect, but in another way that is loftier and more sublime, bi-naw` ākhar a'lá wa-ashraf.\(^{18}\)

Similar reasoning can certainly be found in various parts of the original Enneads and Theologia, but here it seems to be added with the direct purpose of strengthening the proof of the soul’s incorporeality in its form found in the Enneads. And it is exactly because the author of the paraphrase sees the principle at work in so many other fragments of the original text, that he feels free, I contend, to employ it further, wherever he thinks fit.

Several lines down in the Theologia, where we read about the causal chain starting from God through the Intellect to the Soul, the text explicitly invokes the prior actuality principle, this time

\(^{18}\) Aflūṭīn ʿinda-l-ʿarab, 49. Translation by Lewis, cf. Plotini Opera, 203. I did not change the feminine pronoun for the soul in Lewis’s translation, however, in my own translations I decided to use the neutral “it.”
actually paraphrasing the equivalent fragment of the *Enneads*.” But whereas the text of the *Enneads* plainly restates the Aristotelian argument—without offering much of its own elaboration—that the cause must be actual and in prior existence, ὄντος πρότερον, to bring something from potentiality, hence, the better which exists in actuality must have a nature different than the body which cannot actualise itself, the *Theologia* produces an argument why it is so. Namely, fragments III:38 and III:44 state that the cause, i.e. what is superior, *afdal*, is also more general, *aʾamm*, and what is more particular, *akhass*, is inferior, *adná*.

The discussion in the *Enneads*, even though it alludes to the emanationist scheme by arguing that the materialists reverse the true order of being by putting the Nature first, is focused on the rejection of the Stoic psychology. What is philosophically at stake in the *Theology*, however, is not only rejecting the materialist theories of the soul but also proving the whole ontological hierarchy of emanation; and in both these cases the principle that the cause is greater than effect is put to use. Both texts argue in a similar way, but again the Arabic paraphrase spells it out more clearly and builds on the argument only sketched in the Greek original: from the assumption that the body is prior to the soul, stems the absurd conclusion that the soul is prior to the Intellect and its cause, and that the mind is posterior to nature. Since this is absurd, the causal order of the universe must be reversed, starting from what is superior and more general, *afdal wa-aʾamm*, in the following well-known Neoplatonic scheme: God, Mind, Soul, Nature; God being the cause, direct and indirect, of all beings.

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19 *Aflūtin 'inda-l-ʿarab*, 50 (III:42) and *Enn*. IV 7, 8’14.


21 Cf. *Aflūtin 'inda-l-ʿarab*, 50 and 51. In both fragments, the words are added and we do not find a similar reasoning in the *Enneads*, cf. *Enn*. IV 7, 8’1-22.

22 *Aflūtin 'inda-l-ʿarab*, 49-50. It has no clearly corresponding fragment in the *Enneads*, which again polemicises with the Stoic *scala naturae* of pneuma-charged substance from character, ἔξις, to nature, φύσις, soul, ψυχή, and mind, λόγος.
Other fragments of *Theologia Aristotelis* give some further reasons why the cause is greater than the effect. Added *mīmar* VIII:98-102\(^{23}\) talks about the First Creator as the most excellent being. As such, the First Creator causes the excellence in all excellent, i.e. intelligible, beings beneath Him by His pouring forth life and excellence onto these beings “according to their degrees and ranks,” *ʿalā darajātihā wa-marātibihā*, that is, their receptiveness, which, in turn, is explained by the proximity to the First Cause.\(^{24}\) One should notice that the principle seems to be restricted here to the causation in the intelligible world,\(^{25}\) and also that the term “nobility,” *sharaf*, which will become part of the name of the principle with Suhrawardī, is used. The greatest nobility of substance is equated with the closest proximity to the Creator which makes this nearest substance the first intermediary between God and other beings:

> But if it is the first recipient and in its highest degree, near to the Creator, it is necessary that it should be more complete and more surpassing, *atamm wa-afdāl*, than all beneath it, because of its proximity to the Creator and the nobility of its substance, *li-qurbīhi min al-Bārī wa-sharaf jawharihi*, and the excellence of its reception of virtue and life (VIII:101).\(^{26}\)

The hierarchical order of being according to the ranks of entities emanated from the First Cause is seen as a necessary corollary of the principle that the cause is greater that the effect. In *mīmar* X:3-5, which is another addition of the Arabic paraphrase, origination is explicitly called deficiency,

\(^{23}\) Aflūṭīn *ʿinda-l-ʿarab*, 108.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 108.

\(^{25}\) Of course, the more encompassing version that all things in both the upper and the lower worlds gush forth from God is also to be found, see: ibid., 134 (X:3).

naqṣān, because the effect is lower in rank after having lost some of the perfections of the being above it. The schema also assumes the Neoplatonic position that there can be no gaps in emanation.

The last fragment I want to draw attention to is mīmar VIII 106-110, corresponding to Enn. V 1, 3, 12-25. We read in it that simplicity and the intelligibility are two factors that organise the hierarchy of being in the upper world. The argument that what is simple is better obviously can be found in the Enneads, but it is interesting to notice that when the Greek text and its Arabic paraphrase are compared not only do we see the elaboration on Plotinus’ original argument but also the new language of nobility and excellence unseen in Plotinus:

*Enn. V 1, 3, 23-25* And even the matter of Intellect is beautiful, καλή, since it has the form of the Intellect and is simple, ἀπλὴ. But what Intellect is like is clear from this very fact that it is superior, κρεῖττον, to soul which is of such great excellence, τοιάσδε οὕσης [lit. just like that]. [trans. Armstrong]

VIII:110 We say that the matter of the mind is exceedingly noble, sharīfa jiddan, because it is simple, basīfa, and intellectual, ʿaqliyya, but the mind is more encompassing in its simplicity than it [i.e. the matter of the mind], ashadd min-hā inbisāṭan, containing it, wa-huwa muḥīt bi-hā. We say that the matter of the soul is exceedingly noble, sharīfa jiddan, because it is simple, intellectual and of the soul, but the soul is more simple than it, containing it and producing wonderful affections in it by the aid of the mind, and therefore she is nobler and more exalted, ashrāf wa-akram, than the matter because she surrounds it and produces the wonderful forms in it.

27 Ibid., 135.

28 Lewis translated this phrase as “more simple,” but the word inbisāṭ denotes more the concepts of extension or encompassing.

All the Arabic fragments in which this type of arguments is presented use the language of nobility, *al-sharāf* (less often *al-karāma* or *al-fadīla*) which can be rendered as nobility, divinity, sublimity, honour, or splendour. Nobility may refer to the soul, sometimes to the mind, but the close reading of the fragments in question shows that first and foremost it describes the intelligible world and its beings. The Arabic text persistently stresses that intelligible things are nobler and loftier than physical things. All in all, even though the arguments and some of the language found in the Arabic text can in most part be traced back to the Greek original, what is noticeable is the original arguments are elaborated on or supplemented with new once and that much stronger linguistic emphasis is put on the nobility of the noetic world. Moreover, a clear explanation is given of why some beings are nobler or more perfect than the others; it is due to their simplicity and the proximity to the source of emanation. Another feature of the Arabic paraphrase is the more explicit language of causality in the fragments discussed above.

In sum, in *Theologia Aristotelis* we can find two closely connected arguments which will form the basis of the principle of the possibility of the nobler that we find employed so abundantly in later Islamic philosophy:

1) the principle that the cause is greater than the effect;

2) the argument *ex gradibus*: the hierarchy of being which allows of no gaps is organised according to the levels and ranks of decreasing perfections.

30 Cf. for example: ibid., 7, 56, 60, 92, 110. *Sharīf* and *ashraf* (and also *akram, afdal*) correspond to Greek *κρείττον*, as seen also in the fragment cited above. In this and other Neoplatonic texts these terms are also used as equivalents of Greek *θείος*, *τίμιος* and - especially in the *Theology* - of *σεμνός*. For a detailed comparison of the terms describing spiritual entities in Neoplatonic texts in Arabic, see G. Endress, *Proclus Arabus*, 127-131.
What remains to do in this section is to say something about the developments in the classical period; the later period from Suhrawardī to Mullā Ṣadrā will witness the true peak of the popularity of the principle and will be dealt with separately.

Even though the works of Proclus and Plotinus were translated in al-Kindī’s circle, it has been noticed long ago that al-Kindī (d. 256/873) did not elaborate on the causal relationship between the First Cause and the rest of beings and eschewed both the Neoplatonic doctrine of the unbroken chain of being and the mystic unity with God. But already for al-Fārābī emanation is a central part of cosmology. Indeed, we find in his writings the argument (2) *ex gradibus*. I did not, however, find argument (1) that the cause is greater than the effect.

In *The Perfect State*, al-Fārābī locates this problematic in his new structure of presentation; chapter 1 of *al-Madīna al-faḍīla* deals with the First Cause as having all kinds of perfections in the greatest degree, whereas chapter 2 presents the emanation of intelligible beings from God. The subsequent chapters detail the beings of both the intelligible world (intellects) and the sublunary world. It is in chapter 2 that we find the following argument:

The existents are many in number, and in addition to their being numerous, they vary in excellence. The substance of the First is a substance from which every existent emanates, however it may be, whether perfect or deficient. But the substance of the First is also such that all the existents, when they emanate from it, are arranged in order and rank, and that every existent gets its allotted share and rank of existence from it. It starts with the most perfect, *akmal*, existent and is followed by something a little less perfect than it, *anqaṣ min-hu qalīlan*. Afterwards it is followed successively by more and more deficient existents until the final stage of being is reached beyond which no existence

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whatsoever is possible, so that the existents come to an end at the state beyond which nothing exists at all, or rather, beyond which there is that which cannot possibly exist.  

The argument from degrees of perfection presented here assumes the difference of excellence, *al-tafādul*, of the subsequent beings on the emanationist scale and allows no gaps in this scheme. Al-Fārābī sees this gradation as an expression of God’s generosity and justice, for God gives every being its allotted share. Thus, his God resembles here to some extent the demiurge of *Timeaus*, rather than the One of Plotinus who sees the emanation and its order as pure ontological necessity. The characteristic trait of al-Fārābī’s account is that the human beings should arrange their lives and society in same manner, i.e. imitate the divine justice. Hence, al-Fārābī applies the rule of *al-tafādul* to the organisation of the bodily parts and human society, saying that the ruling organ of the body and the king are most perfect; the same rule is also applied to felicity in the Afterlife according to differing grades of rational thought in humans. In this, he is unlike other philosophers, but it is not surprising in light of his own system which assumes close analogy between the macro- and the microcosm. However, in the examples just provided the argument *ex gradibus* loses its metaphysical gravitas.

Ṣadrā, as will be further explained, sees the principle as deriving from *ex unum not fit nisi uno* and is convinced that Avicenna used it. He mentions *al-Shifāʾ* and *al-Taʾliqāt*, but does not provide an exact quotation or even a paraphrase of the supposed passages. Instead, Ṣadrā plainly states that


33 Cf. respectively, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, 232 and 234 (ch. 15, section 4); 266 and 268 (ch. 16, subsection); cf. also Walzer’s commentary, 354-360.

34 Cf. Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, *al-Hikma al-mutaʿāliyya fi-l-asfār al-ʿaqliyya al-arbaʿa*, ed. R. Luṭfī, I. Amīnī, and F. Ummīd, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār iḥyāʾ al-turāth al-ʿarabī, 1383/1981), 7:244 (henceforth: *al-Asfār*). Janssens discusses borrowings from *al-Taʾliqāt* found in *al-Asfār* but overlooks this one. It is clear, however, that Ṣadrā’s brief mention of only the title of Avicenna’s work belongs to the first category delineated by Janssens, i.e. allusions to Avicenna’s doctrines
Avicenna in these and other works created a system of existence based on the arcs of descent and return. It is, thus, al-Shifāʾ, book 9 of Metaphysics devoted to emanation, especially chapter 4 dealing with the order of being, that we should assume Mullā Ṣadrā had mostly in mind when he invoked Avicenna’s opus magnum. But the section offers nothing that would resemble wording of the principle in either Ṣuhrawardī or Ṣadrā. The principle, to be sure, is tacitly accepted in the Neoplatonic content of Books 8 and 9, e.g. when Avicenna argues that the first thing originated by God cannot be a material form since that this first, material form and the first matter cause the existence of bodily forms. Further, Avicenna introduces the *ex uno nisi fit unum* principle and argues that the ten Intellects come in an order from the highest to the lowest.

What about al-Taʾliqāt? Janssens sees this works as a super-commentary on the ḫāyiyāt of al-Shifāʾ and stresses that the fragments of the text that correspond to the metaphysics of al-Shifāʾ are mainly concerned with God and cosmology, and have little to say about the soul. Therefore, it would be right to expect that Mullā Ṣadrā did really extract the principle from there without later acknowledging it. Janssens also contends that al-Taʾliqāt offers super-commentaries on the Dānish-nāmih as well. In fact, I was able to trace one fragment in this text that Mullā Ṣadrā had it mind, without textual basis, cf. Jules Janssens, “Mullā Ṣadrā’s Use of Ibn Sīnā’s Taʾliqāt in the Asfār,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13:1 (2002), 2.

35 Al-Asfār 7:244.


admitting however that it is but a guess, as there is no way to know for sure. It corresponds to a section of the Danish-nāmīh discussing the divine attributes of will, īrādīh or khwāst, power, qudrat or tavānāʾī, wisdom, ĥikmat or dānish, and finally, generosity, jawd.⁴⁰ Divine wisdom, Avicenna maintains, is the knowledge of the perfect order of every thing by God who is the First Cause and arranges all beings in the perfect order.⁴¹ Al-Taʾīqāt expands on this idea:

The degrees of beings differ, takhtalifu, in their perfections and privations according to the dissimilarity, bi-l-tafāwut, of possibilities. So, if the dissimilarity of possibilities is specific, then they differ in the species. If the dissimilarity of possibilities is in individuals, the difference of perfection and privation is in individuals. The absolute perfection is where necessity is without contingency, existence without non-existence, actuality without potentiality and truth without falsehood. Then follows everything [else], as it is more deficient than the First, everything else being possible in itself. Then, the difference in that which follows, in individuals and in species, is according to the preparedness and possibility so that each of the Active Intellects is nobler, ashraf, than what follows it. And Active Intellects taken together are nobler than the material things, then — from among material beings — the heavens are nobler that the world of nature. By ‘the nobler’ he means here what is essentially prior and the subsequent existence does not follow except after the former’s prior existence.⁴²

Avicenna’s reasoning in the above passage is built on the enthymematic premises of the principle that the cause is always greater than the effect, argument ex gradibus and his division between necessary and possible beings. The more detached something is from matter, the nobler it is, because the intelligibles are unchanging and, hence, simple.


⁴¹ Ibid., 99-100.

⁴² Avicenna, al-Taʾīqāt, ed. and intr. ʿAbd al-Raḥman Badawī (Qum: Maktāb al-aʿlām al-islāmī, nd.), 21.
It is, I contend, quite likely that Ṣadrā had this passage in mind but since he does not say so, we must take his statement as it is—Avicenna (and al-Fārābī for that matter) employed some or most of the underlying axioms but did not explicitly formulate the principle or a proof thereof. From this, we may conclude that Ṣadrā, in a vague sense, considers Avicenna to have believed in the soundness of the principle.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR THE PRINCIPLE IN MULLĀ ṢADRĀ’S TIMES

Ṣadrā’s discussion of the principle is based on that of Suhrawardī who was the first one to offer its “history” and a demonstrative proof that will become the standard in both wording and the reasoning conducted. To understand what Ṣadrā makes of this argument, we have to first emphasise some facts pertinent to his intellectual milieu and the way philosophy was understood and approached in his times. Mullā Ṣadrā (ca. 1571-1635) lived in the times of what some contemporary scholars have on several occasions called the Safavid “renaissance,” of not only political, but also religious,

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cultural and intellectual nature. However, the processes that finally resulted in new and original forms of philosophical expression, took time. Schmidtke and Pourjavady maintain that despite the 1502 Safavids’ rise to power and the establishment of Shi’ism as the official religion, only at the turn of 16th and 17th century one begins to see an emerging differentiation between Shi’i and Sunni philosophy, and, consequently, the transformation of Shi’i philosophy into one that had a strong Neoplatonic character. This was due, in part, to the return to Greek sources, from before Avicenna. This observation informs the present study.

As is well known, Šadrā’s teachers consisted of prominent representatives of the intellectual revival of the era; Mīr Dāmād (d. 1041/1631) specialised in philosophy, whereas Shaykh Bahāʾ al-Dīn ʿĀmili (d. 1030/1621) in theology. They both cherished a secured place and a prominent position at the Safavid court. As Di Branco says in his account of the relation between philosophy, exemplified by the popularity of Theologia Aristotelis, and political theology in Safavid Iran, “the Shi’ite élite proved to possess the great ability to remain at the centre of the political stage, meeting the ever-changing needs of the rulers who followed one another on the throne.” The revival of speculative

Renaissance: Greek Philosophy under the Safavids (16th–18th centuries),” funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) since 12/2013 was not finished, so we are left with only some tentative conclusions.

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44 Schmidtke and Pourjavady, “An Eastern Renaissance?,” 255. Other scholars as well stressed that it was an outcome of a conscious programme on the part of Safavid rulers, see: S. Rizvi, “New Sociopolitical Formations and the ‘Renaissance’ of Philosophy,” 396-397. On the precursors of the philosophers of Isfahan, see Schmidtke and Pourjavady, 250-255; and Marco Di Branco, “The “Perfect King” and his Philosophers, Politics, Religion and Graeco-Arabic Philosophy in Safavid Iran: the case of the ʿUjlūğiyyâ,” Studia graeco-arabica 4 (2014), 207-212. The exact sources these philosophers were acquainted are still to be examined and determined, but the fact the Theology remained a major source before and after Mullā Šadrā is beyond dispute.

45 Marco Di Branco, “The “Perfect King” and his Philosophers. Politics, Religion and Graeco-Arabic Philosophy in Safavid Iran: the case of the ʿUjlūğiyyâ,” 197. Di Branco argues that the honour bestowed by Shah ʿAbbas on the philosophers and the active roles they were given at the court were linked with an ideological project of creating a new conception
thought was to a large extent possible because of these scholars’ high public stature, as has been scrutinised in many publications on the subject.46

Starting at least with Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (d. 908/1502), Ṣadr al-Dīn Dashtakī (d. 903/1497-8) and his son Ghiyāth al-Dīn (d. 948/1541-2) and continuing to Mullā Ṣadrā himself, Theologia Aristotelis remained in all likelihood the most widely read pre-Avicennan text among Safavid thinkers; in fact, one can even contend it was the dominating and defining text for the Safavid period, and, as Rizvi argues, it was read in an attempt to challenge the hegemony of Avicennianism.47 Other texts included Pseudo-Aristotelian Kitāb al-tuffāḥa, Mahḍ al-khayr, a paraphrase of Aristotle’s De anima and al-Samāʾ wa-l-ʿālam, as well as authentic works by Alexander of Aphrodisias and some writings of kingship. But the regained popularity of Pseudo-Theology is, for di Branco, also a direct consequence of the revival of interest in Suhrawardī and his philosophy, cf. ibid., 204.

46 Newman contends that during Ḥāss’s reign clerics, both Iranian and foreign, started to constitute a distinct, loyal, interest group, who integrated into Iranian society through marriages and “appointments,” see: Andrew J. Newman, Safavid Iran. Rebirth of a Persian Empire (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 72. Others mention that Shah Ḥāss’s decision to establish the capital in Isfahan was partially motivated by his will to add the clergy and the Armenian merchants to the slaves as other pillars of his power, cf. Sussan Babaie, Kathryn Babayan, Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe, Masumeh Farhad (eds.), Slaves of the Shah. New Elites of Safavid (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 8. On clerics’ political engagement, see: A. J. Newman, “Towards a Reconsideration of the Iṣfahān School of Philosophy: Shaykh Bahāʾ and the Šafawid ‘Ulama’,” Studia Iranica 15/2 (1986), 165-199. However, what many researchers also stress is the elitist character of these scholars’ philosophy, cf. A. Newman, Safavid Iran, 70; S. Rizvi, “New Sociopolitical Formations and the ‘Renaissance’ of Philosophy,” 397. On the other hand, the focus on the socio-political and religious functions overshadowed the interest in what were these scholars’ curricula and how they contributed to the progress of Shiʿi scholarship, of which things we have no coherent picture, cf. Maryam Moazzen, Formation of a Religious Landscape. Shiʿi Higher Learning in Safavid Iran (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), ix.

of Proclus and Philoponus attributed to Alexander. Non-Greek philosophers favoured in that period included Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb b. Ishāq al-Kindī, (pseudo-)Fārābī, and Yaḥyā b. Adī (d. 974).

Among the topics for which the Safavid thinkers consulted ancient Greek authors, directly or through the medium of pre-Avicennan thinkers, were cosmology, the role of the intellect and the way of acquiring knowledge, the nature of the soul, and the process of emanation.

This begs a question which pre-Avicennan sources did Mullā Şadrā read and in what way did he engage with them? One should credit Seyyed Hossein Nasr as the first scholar to see in Şadrā a historian of philosophy, especially in the light of that the history of philosophy forms an integral part of his philosophical method employed in al-Asfār. In this massive work, he surveyed and analysed rich material from the Pre-Socratics to the philosophers immediately preceding himself, including his own teachers. Unfortunately, the line of historical-philosophical research postulated by Nasr already in 1964 has never been conducted to a sufficient degree. Of course, this phenomenon has not gone

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50 Ibid., 266.

unnoticed by other researchers,52 but Daiber’s article is the only text that discusses Ṣadrā as a historian of (Greek) philosophy head-on and even repeats S. H. Nasr’s appeal.53

One of the often-stressed aspects of Ṣadrā’s approach to Greek philosophers is the admiration he had for the Presocratics.54 In the above-mentioned article, Daiber contends that the reason for that is that he saw their doctrines as prefiguring his own view of creation.55 I would be more inclined to say that he used hermeneutical tools to depict them as such. Let us first take the surprising, given their materialism, endorsement of pre-Socratics out of the way. This is to be explained by several factors, one of the most important ones being the fact that Ṣadrā’s main source for the views of pre-Socratics was al-Shahrastānī’s al-Milal wa-l-nihal, especially those parts taken from Pseudo-Ammo- nius, that is, a Neoplatonising survey of the pre-Socratics, and Aetius’s doxography, Placita philosophorum.56 Ṣadrā also stipulates that he agrees with the Greek sages about the creation of the corporeal world, ḥudūth al-ʿālam al-jismānī,57 leaving the emergence of the intelligible world for a different discussion in which his endorsement of their ideas is not so unequivocal


57 Al-Asfār 5:207.
And so, in the second journey of *al-Asfār*, Ṣadrā adduces Greek philosophers’ views in an attempt to demonstrate that they are easy to reconcile not only with his own conception of the creation of the world but with revelation as well. He divides the philosophers he analyses into those whom he calls “the Milesians:” Thales, Anaxagoras, and Anaximenes, and those whom he calls “the Greeks:” Empedocles, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Because they are all for him possessors of truth and monotheists, *ahl al-haqq wa-l-muwahhidūn*,59 he tries to find in them elements testifying to the harmony of their views about the basic principles of reality. For example, he takes Thales’ water to mean the capacity for receiving all forms, which enables him to identify it with his own concept of the expanding being, *al-wujud al-inbisāti*, which he then equates with the breath of the Merciful, *al-nafas al-raḥmani* of Sufis.60 However, his attitude is not that uniformly enthusiastic and he sometimes passes over some views of these philosophers which are uncomfortable for him. This is the case with Empedocles whose doctrines concerning, i.a, the four elements, the Return and the soul he endorses in the section of *al-Asfār* under discussion but in the same time overlooks Empedocles’s other views about the creation of the world, i.e. its accidental character, which he elsewhere criticises.61

3. The principle in Mullā Ṣadrā’s writings

What follows is a detailed analysis of Ṣadrā’s principle of the possibility of the nobler, which shows another aspect of the fundamental role of the *Theology* and other Neoplatonic texts in his oeuvre and in later Islamic tradition. We can find the principle explained in two places. The first one

58 *Al-Asfār* 5:206-234 (a chapter entitled “About the agreement of prophets and philosophers on coming into being of the world”).

59 *Al-Asfār* 5:205.

60 *Al-Asfār* 5:208, to reconcile this view with revelation he also adduces the following verse: “and His Throne had been upon water” (11:7). Cf. also: Daiber, “Ṣadrā on the Problem of Creation,” 13-14.

61 *Al-Asfār* 5:210-211. For the critique, cf. ibid., 2:253-259.
is in his *Taʾlīqāt* on *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*. This shorter text is then elaborated on in the third journey of *al-Asfār*, in *mawqīf* 9. The entire *mawqīf* is devoted to the divine act of creation of the intelligible world, and we find the principle in chapter 7 whose full title is “On the principle of the possibility of the nobler inherited from the First Philosopher, branching from the principle of impossibly of emanation of many from the True Unity”. The influence of Suhrawardī on the exposition found in Śadrā is beyond doubt. Not only does he borrow the language and basic proof from him, but he also designates a separate section on the principle in a wider discussion on the doctrine of emanation. In Śadrā’s exposition it is Suhrawardī who is the main point of reference, even though he polemicises with him when his own arguments go against Suhrawardī’s ontological principles.

### 3.1. Śadrā’s definition

At the beginning of chapter 7 in *al-Asfār* Śadrā gives the definition of the principle:

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63 *Al-Asfār* 7:244-258. As one can expect, *mawqīf* 10 is on the creation of the material world.

Another principle [apart from the principle *ex uno non fit nisi unum*] is the principle of the possibility of the nobler. Its purport is that it is necessary for the nobler possible being to be prior in degrees of existence from the baser possible being and that if the baser possible being have come to existence, the nobler possible being necessarily must have existed earlier.65

This definition is an elaboration on Suhrwardi’s formulation found in *Hikmat al-ishrāq*; later Ṣadrā quotes him almost verbatim.66 In *al-Mashāri’ wa-l-muṭaraḥāt*, which is where Suhrwardi gives the first detailed proof of the principle, he mentions that the occurrence of subsequent noble beings happens one after the other, without gaps.67 Suhrwardi calls *imkān al-ashraf* “our principle,” and Sadrā fully acknowledges its importance as well, saying that God, The Most High, by His grace and good guidance, gave us great profits thanks to it,”68 a claim that is substantiated by a chapter in *al-Asfār*, following the exposition of the principle, in which Ṣadrā demonstrates the applicability of the principle to a number of metaphysical problems.69

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65 *Al-Asfār* 7:244.


68 *Al-Asfār* 7:244.

69 *Al-Asfār* 7:244.
3.2. History of the principle according to Ṣadrā

Having praised the many benefits of the principle, Ṣadrā proceeds by giving a list of philosophers who established its validity to than prove that he is in line with the wisdom that was always alluded to by all the philosophers of previous times. It is here where one can appreciate his knowledge of the Ishraqi history of philosophy. He starts from “Aristotle”/Plotinus. Ṣadrā’s reference to the *Theology* in this regard is not at all surprising, but he also mentions *On the heavens and the world*, in which Aristotle was supposed to claim that one should believe in what is the most noble in the celestial affairs. This again shows the influence of Suhrawardī, as the latter mentions it in *al-Mashārī’ wa-l-muṭaraḥāt*. Next, Ṣadrā claims, as we have seen, that Avicenna employed it in his major works, including *al-Shifā’* and *al-Ta’līqāt*. Based on the principle, Avicenna built the system of existence and explanation of the Origin and the Return. Then, Ṣadrā stresses the importance of the principle in Suhrawardī’s entire oeuvre, employed by the latter to prove the existence of the world of intellects and luminous archetypes, *muthūl nūrī*, of lords of the species, and other problems. Ṣadrā praises Muḥammad Shahrazūrī for following Suhrawardī and compiling a comprehensive explanation of the principle in his *al-Shajara al-ilāhiyya*.74

70 Ibid.


72 *Al-Asfār* 7:244.

73 *Al-Asfār* 7:245.

Ṣadrā’s list of philosophers who endorsed the principle does not include two important names—these are his immediate interlocutors. One of them is Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (d. 1502), with whom Ṣadrā engages polemically at one point, criticising him rather ruthlessly. This polemic is taken from Mīr Dāmād (d. 1631/1632), the other philosopher Ṣadrā sees, naturally, as his immediate predecessor. He cites long passages from Mīr Dāmād’s Kitāb al-qabāsāt, though the answers he gives ultimately differ from those of his teacher. As will be shown, Ṣadrā proceeds with his teacher just like with Suhrawardī: while he takes up many of his arguments, he rejects the other if they conflict with his own ontological commitments.

3.3. The proof of the principle

Even though Suhrawardī claimed the knowledge of the principle was inborn, shahādat al-fiṭar,75 he still defended it logically; as befits his way of philosophising. From Suhrawardī on, the way to demonstrate the validity of the principle took the form of a proof by contradiction, structured as a trilemma. Although already existent in Suhrawardī’s works,76 the proof was fully developed, as Ṣadra pointed to, in Shahrazūrī’s al-Shajara al-ilāhiyya.

The proposition to be proven is as follows:

IF A BASER POSSIBLE BEING EXISTS, A NOBLER POSSIBLE BEING MUST ALREADY HAVE EXISTED

If we assume this proposition to be false, we are faced with three possibilities:

75 Opera I:434.

(1) both beings — the nobler and the baser — are emanated simultaneously from the Necessary Being

BUT: we know that from one only one can emanate (because of *ex uno non fit nisi unum*)

that is, The Necessary Being, being one and only, cannot emanate two entities from Himself, because it would introduce a multiplicity into his essence

SO: two beings cannot be emanated simultaneously from the Necessary Being;

(2) the nobler being is emanated after the baser and through it as its intermediary (*jāza wujūduhu baʿd al-akhass wa-bi-wāsitatihi*)

BUT: that means that the effect is nobler that its cause (*fa-yalzam jawāz kawni al-maʿlul ashraf min ʿillatihi*)

SO: the nobler being must have existed before the baser;

(3) the nobler being does not come to existence together, after or before the baser being

BUT this nobler being that has not been actualised together, after or before the baser being is, none-theless, a possible being. As such it can come to existence because possible beings have nothing in themselves which prevents them from becoming existent. Then if this noble possible being becomes necessary and comes to existence, it has to be due not only to causes beyond its essence but also the essence of the Necessary Being, which is impossible.
Since (1), (2) or (3) cannot be true, the assumption that the proposition is false must be wrong, so the proposition is true.\textsuperscript{77}

The three possibilities are rejected based on presupposed axioms. The problem, however, is that (2) contains a certain circularity. It stems from overlooking that there is equivalency between the terms ‘after,’ baʾd, ‘cause,’ ʾilla, and ‘intermediary,’ al-wāsiṭa. Again, we are supposed to demonstrate the impossibility of the statement that the baser can be the intermediary for the nobler. Clearly, being an intermediary is equivalent here and in whole of Ṣadrāʾs system to being a proximate cause, which Ṣadrā admits in the very same sentence: “Its [i.e. the nobler being’s] existence would have been possible after the baser and through it, so the effect would have to be nobler than its own cause.” There can also be no doubt that by ‘before’ and ‘after’ we mean causal not temporal relation because the condition of validity of the principle is that it is limited to the intelligible world of emanation devoid of any temporal dimensions.\textsuperscript{78}

### 3.4. Two conditions

Next, Ṣadrā claims that those who accept the principle insist that two conditions must be satisfied. He modifies the first condition against Suhrawardī, and fully accepts the second condition.

The first condition, in Ṣadrāʾs wording, states that the principle can be employed only if the noble and the base beings are united in their quiddity, al-māhiyya. Ṣadrā cannot accept it in this form because it is incompatible with his ontology. As he explains, existence is a simple reality, al-ḥaqīqa

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\textsuperscript{77} Al-Asfar 7:245-246.

\textsuperscript{78} Interestingly, in Ḥikmat al-ışrāʾ Suhrwardī gives an alternative version of the proof that deals only with the third premise: the Light of Light necessitates the basest darkness through Its unitary aspect. No aspect remains it It that could necessitate a nobler being. We know, however, that noble beings such as incorporeal managing and dominating lights do exist which means that these beings would have to been necessitated by an aspect more noble than the Light of Lights, which is absurd, cf. Opera II:154 and Philosophy of Illumination, 107.
Individuals differ, then, in their essences, *dhawāt*, solely in terms of perfection and privation in their shared existence. Quiddities, *māhiyyat*, multiply either in species or, in the case of individuals sharing one quiddity, through accidents caused by external factors. This second way of differentiation, i.e. of individuals, exists only in the material world, where the principle does not operate anyway (see the second condition below). We are then left to explain the specific differentiation of quiddities. But this also does not pose a major problem for Mullā Ṣadrā. The principle works in proving the prior existence of a more noble being before the base being even if the two are not united in specific quiddity. This is because their unity is existential and existence is, to repeat, a simple reality having a shared essence, organised ambiguously in levels according to the ambiguity of being. It is, then, sufficient that both beings, the noble and the base, are emanated from God, *al-Haqq al-Awwal*, who is the source of all existence.\(^\text{79}\) In other words, the principle accounts for the order of emanation in gradual levels and the emergence of quiddities and species.

According to the second condition, the principle is only applicable to the intelligible beings. Ṣadrā quotes here al-Shahrāzūrī who himself answers to a question posed by Ibn al-Kammūna in his *Tanqīḥāt*.\(^\text{80}\) In *al-Shajara al-ilāhiyya*, which is repeated almost verbatim in *al-Asfār*, the problem is stated as follows:

If you say: if the actualisation of the noble being had been necessary — based on what you established from this principle — then it would have been necessary that somebody would not be prohibited from what is more noble and perfect for him — but this is not the case, because the majority of creatures are prohibited from their intellectual perfections despite the fact that the acquisition of these perfections for these people is more noble and perfect than the lack of their acquisition.\(^\text{81}\)


\(^{80}\) Ibn Kammūna, *Al-Tanqīḥāt fi sharīʿ al-Talwīḥāt*, 266.

\(^{81}\) al-Shahrāzūrī, *al-Shajara al-ilāhiyya*, 343, for Ṣadrā’s exact formulation, see: *al-Asfār* 7:248. See also: Suhrawardī, *Opera* 1:434.
The answer given by Ṣadrā is an elaboration on al-Shahrazūrī, who, in turn, argues that this problem poses a serious threat to the validity of the principle. In order for the principle to be valid, the possible beings under the influence of physical causes must be excluded. Unlike the fixed and unchanging things in the intelligible world whose perpetuity is secured by the perpetuity of their causes, the causal link between physical forces and created things necessitates origination and destruction of these created things due to their contradictions in existence and their mutual exclusion in place and time, etc. Therefore, even though there are potentially numerous perfections in essences and ipseities of the beings in the world of generation and corruption, their actualisation may be prohibited due to other, external causes. It is, therefore, permissible that one thing at one time produces something noble and something base, and this is because of its contradictory dispositions. In other words, the principle works only with possible beings of permanent existence whose non-existence is impossible: the immaterial beings who are eternally existing due to the eternity of their permanent causes.

3.5. Dawānī’s doubt

Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (d. 908/1502) presented what Mīr Dāmād and Ṣadrā both called an exceptionally difficult dilemma. In Dawānī’s eyes it invalidates the third part of Suhrawardī’s proof. Ṣadrā recapitulates the whole problem as it is was formulated by Dawānī and follows Mīr Dāmād’s solution to a certain point but eventually reaches a conclusion based on his ontological principles. Let us see first what the difficulty entails.


83 This reasoning can in fact be traced back to Suhrawardī, cf. al-Mashārī wa-l-muṭṣaraḥāt, in: Opera I:434, also: al-Talwīḥāt, in Opera I:51-2, al-Asfār 7:248.

84 Al-Qabasāt, p. 374, al-Asfār 7:249.
In his commentary on Suhrawardī’s *Hayākil al-nūr*, in haykal 5, Dawānī claimed that there might be confusion in the proof between essential impossibility and possibility, *al-imtināʿ wa-l-imkān bi-l-dhāt*, on the one hand, and impossibility and possibility in relation to another, *al-imtināʿ wa-l-imkān bi-l-qiyyās ilā l-ghayr*, on the other.85

As essential impossibility and possibility are well-known Avicennan categories, we do not have to discuss them here. An example of impossibility in relation to another occurs in pairs of opposites because the existence of one of the opposites is impossible in the absence of the other, for example, if there is no “up,” the existence of the “low” is also impossible. (However, if there is “up,” the non-existence of “low” is impossible; this is the necessity in relation to another. These two opposites can never coincide in reality, but in thought they are always together.) The possibility in relation to another occurs, for instance, between two hypothetical necessary beings, each of which is necessary in itself. If we assume the existence of one of these essentially necessary beings, we are not obliged to predicate either necessity or impossibility of existence on the other essentially necessary being because there is no causal relationship between them.

Dawānī argues that the confusion between the above-described types of modalities and the essential impossibility and possibility leads to ignoring two possibilities:

(1) essential impossibility can be possible in relation to another (This essential impossibility cannot, however, be possible by another, *mumkin bi-l-ghayr*, as all possible beings are possible by themselves.)

(2) essential possibility can be such that essential impossibility is possible in relation to it.

This, in turn, leads to the conclusion that an aspect nobler than that possessed by the Necessary Being, even though impossible in itself, is possible in relation to the noblest possible thing that requires it.\textsuperscript{86} So, something (i.e. an aspect nobler that the Necessary Being) that is essentially impossible for the Necessary Being, is nevertheless possible in relation to the noblest possible thing.

Dawānī maintains that the conditions which would invalidate the last problem in its entirety cannot be met. Namely, the problem could be undone only if the possibility of the effect required the possibility of the cause. This is not the case, however, because the non-existence of the first effect is possible, even though its cause, i.e. the non-existence of the Necessary Being, is impossible.\textsuperscript{87}

It is not necessary to examine here in detail Dawānī’s argument which poses that only a partial solution to the problem is possible.\textsuperscript{88} Șadrā offers his own solution starting with the telling statement “in order to solve it, as you have learned from our way, kamā ʿalamta min ṭāriqatinā, I say:

the possibilities, \textit{al-imkanāt}, belong to beings, \textit{wujudāt}, according to the procession of the possible quiddities from their [i.e. beings’] degrees. Therefore, the essentially created being emanated from the Active Principle, \textit{al-majūl bi-l-dhāt wa-l-ṣādir min al-fāʿil}, is the existence of any quiddity it wants. Next, the intellect analyses the existent, \textit{al-mawjūd}, by breaking it down into the nature of existence and the specific, general meaning, which is called quiddity, as said before. It is the quiddity that is characterised by possibility, that is, if we take it in its essence, disregarding whether it exists or not. Hence, quiddities and their possibilities follow existing

\textsuperscript{86}Al-Asfār 7:250, see also fn. 2 by Sabziwarā: “As in the case of two essentially impossible beings, between which there is no relationship. Their essential impossibility does not prevent them from being possible in relation to the other.”

\textsuperscript{87}Al-Asfār 7:250.

beings and the whole chain of beings ends with the Necessary, lofty be His mention. It is, therefore, impossible to imagine any possible being, whose being, once it is assumed, would not be dependent on the Necessary Being or on something that is dependent on the Necessary Being, and that it would exist in a way that the possibility of its existence would require a cause that is essentially impossible. These are reckless antics of imagination.\(^9\)

The “difficult problem” is only such for Dawānī; the acceptance of Ṣadrā’s ontology makes it an idle intellectual exercise at best. His solution points out that only quiddities, which do not exist by themselves, can be characterised by \textit{imkān}. What exists is a relational chain of beings from the Necessary Being to the lowest one. It is the intellect that analyses the concrete act of being by dividing it into the nature of being and quiddity. The whole chain of beings with their quiddities and possibilities ends in the Necessary Being who is the complete, simple being and as such has no quiddity. Hence, no possibility can be attributed to Him. \textit{Imkān} is a privative notion, i.e. privation of necessity, so it cannot be attributed to the Necessary Being. Every other being, on the other hand, requires a possible quiddity.

Ṣadrā reiterates that the effect is a mode of being in a way of following and necessity, whereas the possibility is a state of quiddity taken in its essence, not a connection with the cause in terms of existence or non-existence. The possibility of quiddity does not require anything of existence or non-existence of the cause, for if it required a cause for itself, this cause - as a cause - would be connected with its effect and created by it, which is impossible. However, if we look at existence with which this quiddity is united, then we see that there is no aspect in it other than relational necessity, \textit{al-wujūb al-ta’al\u{u}qī}.

Ṣadrā proposes a different solution to the problem. He maintains that Dawānī’s problem is unfounded because one cannot imagine an aspect nobler and greater that those which are already actualised in God.\(^9\) The argument is constructed on the principle that there can be no privative or possible aspect in the Necessary Being because that would negate His simplicity. In this reasoning,

\(^9\) \textit{Al-Asfār} 7:251.

\(^9\) \textit{Al-Asfār} 7:252. This is in fact similar to Mīr Dāmād’s argument, cf. \textit{al-Qabasat}, 375-377.
we see that the principle of the nobler possibility is not only a derivative of the *ex uno non fit nisi unum* principle, *qāʾidat al-wāḥid*, but it can also be viewed as one of the proofs of God’s simplicity.

### 3.6. The final problem

Ṣadrā mentions another difficulty which he must have realised from studying Suhrawardī. It is additionally relevant for our present discussion as he needs to work around the fact that the issue he disagrees on with Suhrawardī was supposedly also the doctrine of the ancient Persian and Illuminationist philosophers.

Ṣadrā agrees with Suhrawardī’s basic premise of hierarchical structure of reality. For Suhrawardī, this hierarchy is filled with an infinite number of intellects united in the simple, luminous and pure reality, differentiated according to the intensity or weakness of this luminous quiddity. For Ṣadrā, they differ in existence, a category unacceptable for Suhrawardī who maintains that existence is equal in all. Nevertheless, both ways require that between each of the two intellects posited in the causal chain, infinite individuals must be assumed because for each level of intensity one can imagine beings which are more intense than what is beneath them and less intense than what is above them. Based on that, the principle of the noble possibility must work there and actualise these levels of intellects/lights, so they must necessarily exist. This, however, initially appeared impossible for Ṣadrā, because these different intellects seem to be, as he says, limited and surrounded by two limits, *mahṣūr bayna ḥāṣirayn*, even though it is necessary that there be there an infinite chain of hierarchically organised beings between one intellect and another.\(^{91}\)

What does Ṣadrā mean by this? The impossibility explained above arises only if one accepts Suhrawardī’s doctrine of fundamentality of quiddity. I take the statement ‘surrounded by two limits’ to mean that if one assumes quiddity to be fundamental and real, it follows that all the infinite intellects must be real and fundamental as well, and so—impenetrable and unchangeable, as each quiddity guards its own unity. The problem disappears, for Ṣadrā, if one takes existence to be fundamental and

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\(^{91}\) *Al-Asfār* 7:254.
The fundamentality of existence and its gradation, *tashkīk al-wujūd* dawned upon Ṣadrā during the examination of his own soul: existence is a single reality shared by all individuals who do not differ in the very reality of existence. It is, therefore, existence that is the protector of unity in the

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92 *Al-Asfār* 7:255.
movement from its noblest to the basest representatives, which are not enclosed in any specific limit. With the tool of the principle of the nobler possibility, Ṣadrā could also say that the same fundamentality and gradation of existence must apply to the intellects because they are even nobler than the soul.\(^{93}\) In this fragment, we see that Ṣadrā starts from history as he wants to find a solution to a problem that the ancients and Suhrawardī could not settle but ends with presenting his own ontology as a solution. But even though Ṣadrā’s overall answer, i.e. that limits or definitions do not actually apply to the all-encompassing existence, is clear, the argument about an infinity of actual intellects, at least in the discussed passage, asks for hesitation.

### 4. Conclusions

Given the scope of the material and the numerous reformulations of the principle, this article could not cover all the history of its transformations until Ṣadrā. For example, other versions of the proof were omitted, like that of Ḍūl al-Dīn Shīrāzī,\(^{94}\) modern proofs, like that of ʿAllāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī were also not included.\(^{95}\) Moreover, it should also be stressed that, like Suhrawardī\(^{96}\), Ṣadrā used the principle as an axiom to prove other issues.\(^{97}\)

As for the historical roots of the principle, we may say that, whereas particular axioms that constitute it are abundantly present in Greek Neoplatonism and in Avicenna, it was Suhrawardī who

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93 Al-Asfār 7:256.


95 Al-Asfār 7:245, note 3.

96 Suhrawardī used it in even in such curious discussions as the Pythagorean music of the spheres, cf. Opera I:241-242 (par. 258).

97 This is the topic of a chapter following the exposition of the principle: al-Asfār 7:258-281.
first made it a full-blown principle of cosmology and metaphysics, and Mulla Şadrā who gave it its mature form, having taken into account many developments that happened between Suhrāwardī and his own times. Şadrā stands in a long line of interpreters, quotes and employs many previous analyses, but the final form and understanding of the principle are based on the key aspects of his own system. This makes his view of the principle original, although the purpose of this article was primarily to present him as a historian of philosophy. Focusing on the novel aspects of Şadrā’s philosophy, such as his famous ontological doctrines, may lead one, I contend, to overlooking two important and interrelated points. First of all, Şadrā does indeed discuss many ideas which are part and parcel of the traditional problematic of Islamic philosophy. Chittick made a similar claim when he stressed the centrality of psychology in Şadrā’s works, and soul’s perfection in particular, which are the keys to understanding his stress on the primacy of existence, its ambiguity, and the motion in substance. Only in this comparative light, can his novel ideas be properly understood and his critique of previous philosophers truly appreciated. The almost exclusive focus on what is new and original in his thought unaccompanied by a thorough examination of the relation of these ideas to those of his predecessors might obscure the fact that Şadrā did not introduce his new principles for the sake of being original but to remedy what he perceived to be long-standing incoherences and aporias of a philosophical tradition from within which he was speaking himself.

The second point I would like to stress is that this thorough re-examination of earlier intellectual tradition constitutes Şadrā’s unique view on philosophy and his particular method which can be matched only by figures such as Aristotle. As he states himself in his “autobiography” in the Prologue of al-Asfār, the truth is far too vast to be encompassed by a single mind. Şadrā, then, sees philosophy as a collective effort of cumulative value:

In earlier times, from my early youth and the peak of my adolescence, I dedicated my powers, to the extent in which I was equipped with the ability, to the study of metaphysics and, to the extent appropriate to my efforts, I was granted with it. I followed

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the works of the earlier sages and later scholars, taking over the results of their reflections and views, and using the originality of their secrets. I have mastered what I found in the books of the Greeks, the most brilliant of them, in a way that brings out the core of every chapter, avoiding verbosity.99

Let us circle back to the question of the renaissance with which we started and the way Šadrā approaches Greek sources read anew in the Safavid times. Even though one clearly sees vigorous intellectual revival under the Safavids, including deepened studies on Greek philosophy, there are nevertheless important differences between elements of authentic renaissance phenomenon. The scholars of Isfahan displayed no interest in the return to the original Greek sources, moreover, these sources, in fact, had been continuously available even though not largely popular.100 This suggests that Šadrā was not interested in the antiquarian rediscovery and re-reading of them but in finding, through the return to the Greeks, a new way of philosophising that took full advantage of the past but had its own systematic concerns in the forefront.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


99 *Al-Asfār* 1:4.


