

**Mulla Sadra, The Elixir of the Gnostics:
A Parallel English-Arabic Text**

William Chittick, trans.

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Professor Chittick undertook the translation from Arabic of the *Iksir al-`Arifin* (Elixir of the Gnostics) at the bequest of the Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute. No doubt, one of the institute's reasons for making this request is because Chittick is currently one of North America's most formidable scholars of the Islamic "sapiental" tradition, the stream of thought that combined both *falsafah* (philosophy) and *tasawwuf* (Sufism). He has to his credit some of the best English translations of medieval Arabic and Persian texts. Chittick's wealth of knowledge comes out in the extensive endnotes, running 28 pages, which not only help explain obscure passages and terms, but also trace many of the ideas to their sources.

The *Elixir* is a unique work of Sadra's in that it is, as Chittick notes in the introduction, something of a translation of Kashani's (d. 1213-14) Persian *Jawidan-nama* (Book of the Everlasting). One could argue that the *Everlasting* serves simply as a template for Sadra's work, since he

removes 40 percent of the text and increases it by half the length of the original. In that regard, most of the *Elixir* is original. However, the basic structure of the *Everlasting*, four parts divided into 35 chapters, remains. The four parts deal with the classification of the various sciences, the nature of the soul, and cosmic beginnings and ends. Within the rubric of these four broad categories, a range of subjects are covered: from time, space, Adam, and Satan, to birth, death, and the resurrection. The *Everlasting*, it is worth noting, was also translated into English by Chittick just 2 years before the publishing of this work, in the *Heart of Islamic Philosophy* (pp. 194-233), another factor rendering him a most suitable translator for this text.

The *Elixir's* central message is the importance of knowledge, for knowledge separates human beings from the rest of creation. However, there are knowledges that have an ultimate benefit for the soul and those that do not, and so they are divided into the worldly and after-worldly. One recalls here al-Ghazali's division in his *Kitab al-`Ilm* (Book of Knowledge). Unlike al-Ghazali, however, who was critical of philosophy, Sadra accords it a lofty status, for in his eyes it can generate certainty regarding the ultimate nature of things, provided that it is coupled with revelation and self-purification. The intellectual sciences (*al-`ulum al-`aqliyah*), in general, are essential for eliciting genuine conviction, because real faith cannot depend on *taqlid* (imitation).

Of the various forms of knowledge, the most important one for Sadra is self-knowledge, since it functions as a precursor to knowledge of God. His position here merely echoes the prophetic tradition, often cited by the Sufis: *man `arafa nafsahu faqad `arafa rabbahu* (he who knows himself, knows his Lord). Self-knowledge entails an awareness of the soul's origin and return, which then acts as an elixir (and thus the book's title), that alchemically transmutes the soul into a mirror reflecting the divine reality. Through self-knowledge, one also truly understands the nature of the world, since the human-cosmic relation is that of a microcosm to the macrocosm. "Despite his oneness," writes Sadra, man [sic] "is all things" (p. 19), and "all things in the cosmos are potentially among the parts of man [sic]" (p. 21). Since the cosmos manifests the divine attributes, cosmic knowledge also gives rise to divine knowledge. In effect, there is a triad of God, humanity, and the cosmos.

Any reader of the *Elixir* will be struck by Sadra's genius for detecting parallels. He frequently encourages the reader to gauge this-with-that. The relationship between the body's constriction in the womb and

its freedom in the world, for example, is likened to the soul's constriction in the world and its freedom in the afterworld. Elsewhere, he claims the relation between a tree and its fruit is like the cosmos and the human being, both being teleological ends. He then presses the analogy further: if the human being is conceived of as the tree, then the rational soul and acquired intellect are the fruit; if the acquired intellect is the tree, then the encounter with God is the fruit. This paralleling tendency, often locating analogies within analogies, permeates the text and is rooted in a vision of the world, central to the sapiential tradition, in which things simply are not what they seem, not brute facts. Rather, they are signposts directing the soul toward higher levels of awareness. "[W]ith respect to everything outward and witnessed," writes Sadra, "there is something inward and curtailed" (p. 28). These inward meanings are multi-layered, with only the gnostics (*'arifun*), imams, and prophets being privy to their depths.

Another salient feature of the *Elixir* is its interconnection with the Qur'an. Within its brief 87 pages, there number almost 200 Qur'anic citations. (Chittick provides a useful index of verses.) Although the *Everlasting* utilizes Islam's primary text in a manner uncharacteristic of Kashani's other works, its Qur'anic usage (about 60 citations in a work of approximately two-thirds the length), does not match the scope of the *Elixir*. Sadra does not simply reproduce Kashani's quotations. But the *Everlasting's* dependence on the Qur'an, notes Chittick, must certainly have made it appealing to Sadra, who had the unusual habit, for a philosopher, of constantly using scripture to substantiate his views. Even though his interpretations would unquestionably raise the ire of many ulama, Sadra's response, no doubt, would simply be that his exoterically inclined critics have not sufficiently penetrated the Qur'an's inner truths.

On the whole, Chittick's translation is characterized by technical accuracy. But, at least in the eyes of this reviewer, this mars the text's flow. His choice lay between a smooth translation that overlooked the subtleties of the original terms, or a philosophically precise one that sacrificed eloquence for accuracy. Considering the nature of the work, he quite reasonably opted for the latter, bringing to it more than 25 years of painstaking experience. The reader simply has to put up with unusual terms like "soulish Sovereignty" and "sense-intuitive potency" to appreciate the range of nuances within the original Arabic.

As a final note, all words in the Arabic text that are supposed to end in a disjoined *qaf* end in a *lam*, plainly the result of a typographical glitch.

Sidq, fawq, akhlaq, tafarruq, ifтираq, sharq, and dhawq appear continuously as *sidl, fawl, akhlal, tafarrul, iftirал, sharl, dhawl*, and so on. But this is not a major blemish, because the facing English makes it easy to pick out the errors.

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