

# Presential Knowledge and Proving Its Instances

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**ABSTRACT:** This article aims to elaborate the nature of presential knowledge. This concept among Muslim philosophers is considered as one of the most fundamental principles of epistemology in Islamic philosophy. The article also elucidates the epistemological applications and implications of presential knowledge. Setting out the historical background of this discussion, the author refers to the ideas of Muslim philosophers in order to introduce the characteristics of presential knowledge and to bring up some instances and reasons for this mode of human knowledge.

**KEYWORDS:** presential knowledge, conceptual knowledge, self-knowledge, self-evident.

## *Introduction*

Presential knowledge is the most foundational element of Islamic philosophy, especially Islamic epistemology. This subject has been discussed predominantly in academic forums on mention of philosophical psychology, ontology of science and philosophical theology. In spite of the great importance of the epistemological aspects of the presential knowledge, this paper mainly discusses the subject with an ontological approach. Hence, we shall elucidate the epistemological applications of this knowledge in Islamic philosophy insofar as Islamic philosophy deals with issues of human knowledge by giving inevitable analysis to it. Regarding the significance of presential knowledge, Avennasar and Avicenna have stressed the difficulty or impossibility of conceptual knowledge's grasping the knowledge of the reality of

beings. Complementary to their standpoint, the mystics believe that the attainment of knowledge of the reality of God and other beings is only possible through presential and not conceptual apprehension.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Historical Background of Presential Knowledge***

This is primarily to acknowledge the debt owed by early Islamic philosophical teaching on the theory of knowledge – especially in the context of presential knowledge and its incorporated concept such as illumination – to philosophers of Neo-Platonism. Based on this historical evidence, the concept of presential knowledge, as a discrete term, did not appear in the works of the Milesians, Pythagoreans, Eleatics, Atomists, Sophists, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle or the Hellenists. In the modern age, it was John Locke who introduced the term knowledge by intuition which appeared to be similar in some respects to presential knowledge. The notion of presential knowledge, however, escaped Hume and Kant's attention in the 18th century – and we find no trace of this discourse during that time. It is, then, on the basis of Schleiermacher's thesis on 'religious experience' and research into mystical unveilings, that the concept of what appears to be presential knowledge has drawn the attention of Western philosophical circles.

Islamic philosophy has throughout its history undergone a systematic flow of doctrines into a coherent affirmation of the foundation of its philosophy. We find the concept of presential knowledge gaining credence among Muslim philosophers of various schools of philosophy who insist on the lucidity of this fundamental mode of human knowledge. Avicenna, for example, divided knowledge into presential and conceptual in the discussion of knowledge of self.<sup>2</sup> Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi was the first Muslim philosopher to apply the term 'presential knowledge'. He intricately developed the theory and explained the nature and levels of this knowledge.<sup>3</sup> In his opinion, a man can know himself only by the way of being at presence of his reality.<sup>4</sup> This stance was continuously refined by his disciples.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Muslim mystics, especially those of Ibn 'Arabi's school, wrote extensive treatises on intuition and its levels, in which they distinctively addressed presential knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606 A.H.)<sup>7</sup> and Sa'd al-Din Taftazani<sup>8</sup> have also discussed the subject. Mulla Sadra Shirazi contributed more to the development of this knowledge than any other philosopher and theologian. In his view, divine knowledge and self-knowledge

are two instances of presential knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Deeply influenced by their master, Mulla Sadra's direct students have extended presential knowledge to a wider area of ontological, epistemological and anthropological disciplines.<sup>10</sup>

Even though in contemporary (Neo-Sadrian) Islamic philosophy, Muslim contemporary philosophers go back to the origin, to the principles of Islamic philosophy – so called presential knowledge – they apply it successfully to problems and situations many of which were confronted by Islamic masters of the old. They deal on the one hand with well-known issues of Islamic philosophy and on the other with new problems arising from the challenges posed by modern thought to all non-Western intellectual traditions. 'Allamah Tabataba'i, for example, contributed most to the revival of Islamic modern philosophy in which he fluently expounded presential knowledge together with its implications.<sup>11</sup> Complementing 'Allamah's endeavors, his students attempted to expand his approaches on philosophical, theological and Qur'anic discussions.<sup>12</sup>

Of course the term 'presential knowledge' in Islamic philosophy is essentially different from 'intuitive knowledge' discussed in the philosophies of Aristotle, Bergson, and other western philosophers. Intuitive knowledge is the opposite of discursive knowledge. It is the knowledge which is not obtained through reasoning processes while its truth and validity is based on a direct link to the actual subjects. Thus, intuitive knowledge, proposed by many western philosophers, is an instance of conceptual knowledge and is the opposite of discursive knowledge.

### ***The Nature of Presential Knowledge***

Knowledge in Islamic philosophy is defined as the unveiling and presence of a being in another, or the presence of that which is known in the knower.<sup>13</sup> This unveiling is either conceptual, presential or illuminative. In other words, knowledge is associatively that which is known attained either presentially – meaning that the existence of that which is known is present in the knower – or acquired by means of representation of that which is known, that is a mental image or concept. The former is denoted by presential knowledge whereas the latter refers to conceptual knowledge. These are two logical contradictories (*nafy wa ithbat*) with no third option (*la thalitha lahuma*).<sup>14</sup>

As regards the definition of knowledge in Islamic philosophy which is based mainly on unveiling (*mukashafah*) and presence (*hudur*), it follows that presential knowledge is firmly a form of knowledge. However, since the validity of an instance of knowledge is justified by its correspondence to assertions and conceptions, we have to ascertain the locus of presential knowledge. Conceptual images, formed in the mind after being perceived by the senses are what are known presentially as they are presentially perceived. Yet, the external phenomena are what are known conceptually for they are obtained by conceptions.<sup>15</sup>

Mulla Sadra differentiates between presential and conceptual knowledge as follows:

Sometimes, we come to know a real thing in such a way that the existence of our knowledge is united with the existence of that which is known. This form of knowledge (which is presential) is clearly seen in self-knowledge of non-material objects, the knowledge of their essential qualities, the knowledge of their deeds and characteristics, and even the knowledge of their conversations. However, knowledge of real things is sometimes different. This is when the existence of knowledge and the existence of that which is known are two different units of the absolute existence; they are two types of existence that do not have unity in existence. One is actual existence and the other is conceptual existence ... This knowledge is represential and passive and can be divided into conception and assertion.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, the distinction between these two types of knowledge – presential and conceptual – has also been drawn by other great Muslim philosophers who have very capably analysed and explained presential knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

The essential difference between presential and conceptual knowledge lies in the availability of representation or mediation. Conceptual knowledge mainly represents things; unlike the presential knowledge which has no need for representation. Based on this, our knowledge of mental images is presential. The use of representation becomes the condition for conceptual knowledge. Hence, when mental images do not represent what is beyond them, they are presential; however, whenever they are represented by something, they become conceptual knowledge.

### ***Characteristics of Presential Knowledge***

Concerning the nature of knowledge, Muslim philosophers have decided that the characteristics of presential knowledge are as follows:

#### 1. Independence of representation

Presential knowledge has no need for representation by means of conceptual forms. It is definitely the existence of the known which is present in the knower. What is a seemingly conceptual form, is in fact, just one meaning of the known, namely immanent object, in terms of “what is in it” and not “what is it”, which is actually free from conceptualization.<sup>18</sup>

#### 2. Unity of the knowledge and the known

Presential knowledge is a type of knowledge that necessitates the unity of the knowledge and the known<sup>19</sup> since no separation takes place due to the absence of any mediation or representation.<sup>20</sup> The known in presential knowledge is actual whereas the known in conceptual knowledge remains none other than second-hand, acquired knowledge which is considerably partial or vague conception. It is called presential knowledge (*ilm huduri*) because of the immediate presence (*hudur*) of the known in the mind of the knower which is primarily identical to the knowledge itself.<sup>21</sup>

#### 3. Infallibility of Presential Knowledge

Presential knowledge is fundamentally infallible for in its case, it is reality itself which observed. Error in perception is conceivable only where there is an intermediary between the person perceiving and the entity perceived, and knowledge is realized by means of it. When there is no external object, the medium cannot subsist; therefore, the matter of correspondence is out of the question. Since the intermediary is a condition for failure, in sense that the object perceived is present before the perceiver without any medium apart from its very own existence, or, is united with it, no error is conceivable.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Indivisibility of Presential Knowledge

Presential knowledge is independent of the dualism of the categorisation of

knowledge into conception (*tasawwur*) and belief (*tasdiq*). In fact, it is only thus categorised by logicians as a limited concept of conceptual knowledge. It means that the reality of presential knowledge, being present in the knower's mind, and, moreover identical to its essence, does not involve any conceptualization or representation which are properties of the duality of conceptualization and confirmation.<sup>23</sup>

#### 5. Absence of Medium

In presential knowledge, the known is immediately present in the knower, whereas conceptual knowledge requires a medium for the known to be known. In other words, presential knowledge needs no representation or intermediary.

#### 6. Unity of Knowledge and the Knower

The knower of presential knowledge finds the actual existence of the known thing, and it is not separated from his own existence; moreover the reality of the known object is identical to his existence – just as an extension is not separate from the body's existence – meaning that it can be only abstracted by mental analysis. By the same token, presential knowledge, in the sense that the known is actually none other than the reality of the knower, can be no different to the knower's existence. Hence, the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'knower' are indeed derived from the existence of knower through mental analysis.<sup>24</sup>

#### 7. Independent of Means and Faculties of Perception

Presential knowledge has no need for means and faculties of perception to attaining the known. The knower finds out the reality of the known through his own reality and essence. For example when someone wills, he intuits his will through his own essence. 'My existence' knows the existence of other mental facts, like affections, passions, excitements, thoughts, etc, directly and not by means of any faculties of perception. Thus, presential knowledge is not linked to any specific faculty of mind.<sup>25</sup>

#### 8. Concomitance of Presential and Conceptual Knowledge

Concerning the relationship between knowledge by presence and knowledge by correspondence, we consider the notion of concomitance between them in the act of knowing. As a mental process, the mind always pictures what comes to it (*yahduruhu*) like an automatic machine. From this, it takes specific forms and concepts and analyses and interprets them, like when one experiences fear and pictures a state of fear. The entire mental process, which is achieved so quickly, differs from the state of fear and presential knowledge of it. Presential knowledge has no room for error whereas conceptual knowledge does. This proposition and concept of fear are instances of conceptual knowledge. Similarly, the mind can sift out the details of that specific situation and perceive the general concept of fear, and sometimes uses its earlier information to interpret this coming state, reasons for its occurrence, and what it requires.<sup>26</sup>

#### 9. Intensity and Weakness

A further point too important to overlook is the fact that not all cases of presential knowledge are equal in terms of intensity or weakness.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes, presential knowledge is powerful and intense enough to come to someone's consciousness, while at other times it is so weak and pale that one is only semi-aware or even unaware of it. Different knowers' levels of existence bring about differences in levels of presential knowledge. It means that if someone's level of existence is more perfect, his presential knowledge will be more perfect and he will be more aware of it. It is like a patient in pain who feels less pain when he sees a dear friend, and feels more pain when he is alone.<sup>28</sup>

#### 10. Independence of Logical and Conceptual Principles

Logic – the study of preventing failures in thinking – is limited to conceptual knowledge. In this light, principles of logic such as syllogism, design, inductive and deductive reasoning, and other logical secondary intelligibles, are not applicable to presential knowledge.<sup>29</sup> That presential knowledge in its very essence does not avail itself of any conceptions, either

universal nor particular, frees it from any relationship to conceptual principles.

### 11. Ineffability

Some instances of presential knowledge are ineffable, meaning that the experience cannot be conceptualised in terms of public understanding. The human mind can conceptualise the reality of some presential knowledge. However, due to specific characteristics, some other forms of presential knowledge cannot be described by words and concepts in any conventional form of language.

### ***Examples of presential knowledge***

Muslim philosophers have set out categories and examples of presential knowledge in their works of philosophy and logic. All philosophers, regardless of their philosophical approaches, have considered self-knowledge to be an instance of presential knowledge. Avicenna, for example, says: “the man living in an empty space, where there is nothing to draw his attention, knows himself presentially, but not through forms and concepts.” This is also accepted by Mulla Sadra.<sup>30</sup> To the same account, illuminationist and transcendent philosophers have also submitted some instances without denying the possibility of there being other examples of presential knowledge. However, the variety of these forms does not necessarily mean that every human being has experienced every single instance of presential knowledge. In spite of this fact, those who have achieved these instances, the higher the level and more intense the experiences, the more benefit they will get from them.

Instances of presential knowledge according to Muslim philosophers are:

- Knowledge of non-material beings’ attributes, deeds, emotions, and modes; like one’s knowledge of mental images, knowledge of will and decision, and knowledge of joy and pain.
- The creator cause’s knowledge of its effect.
- The effect’s knowledge of its creator cause.
- The effect’s knowledge of another effect through its knowledge of the

creator cause.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Demonstrative proofs of presential knowledge***

In addition to giving examples of presential knowledge, Muslim philosophers have developed demonstrative arguments to prove presential knowledge. What follows are some demonstrative proofs:

#### ***1. Proof of presential self-knowledge***

Avicenna believes that man in every state, regardless of whether he is healthy or sick, awake or asleep, and, regardless of whether his inner and apparent senses are active or inactive, is aware of himself. Even if he lives in an empty and free space, where there is no external impact, and even if he is not aware of his body, he never neglects himself. He finds out his state in every moment through presential knowledge.<sup>32</sup> In a more elaborate argument, Suhrawardi contends:

If the rational soul knows himself through mental images, two things are possible. He might know himself through images without knowing that they are images of himself, or, alternatively, he might know through images, knowing that they are images of himself. In the first case, the rational soul cannot know himself, because he does not know that what he has perceived is an image of himself; but, we know that the soul knows himself. In the latter case, he knows that the images are derived from himself, and this means that he knows himself without images, because without knowing himself, he cannot know that the images are derived from himself.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, he also asserts:

If self-knowledge is a conceptual knowledge, I must have perceived my mental image; it means that the mental image must have been related to me. So, 'I' have to be known to let 'my mental image' be known. Now, the question is whether perception of 'I' is conceptual or presential? If the reality and existence of 'I' is known, 'I' can be known presentially and the claim is proven. Furthermore, if this knowledge is conceptual, then the meaning of 'I understand myself'

would be ‘I understand my mental image’; this would also mean that I understand the mental image of my mental image, and so on ad infinitum. By doing so, we would never be able to know ourselves. Therefore, our conceptual knowledge of ourselves must be based on presential knowledge. Firstly, we know ourselves through presential knowledge, and then our mind processes this direct finding to at the proposition: ‘I understand myself’.<sup>34</sup>

In affirmation of Suhrawardi’s account of self – knowledge, Mulla Sadra, by way of commentary on this issue, adds another argument to reason that self-knowledge is an example of presential knowledge. He says:

Man can only know himself through presential knowledge, because, conceptual knowledge of things is achieved either through cause – propter proof – or through effect – quatic proof. However, man’s self-knowledge is achieved neither through cause, nor through effect; because existence of the self is more obvious than existence of causes.<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly, we cannot know ourselves through our effects, our deeds, or even our faculties, because deeds and faculties are inherently part of and derived from ourselves; it must be the case that we knew ourselves prior to those faculties and deeds from which they originated.<sup>36</sup>

Another proof that self-knowledge is an example of presential knowledge, is by way of demonstrative argument on conceptual knowledge premises as follows:

1. Man’s conceptual knowledge of himself is obvious; because every man has a mental image of himself.
2. Man consciously finds his conceptual finding corresponding to his reality. This means that he considers his mental image to be in correspondence to his reality.
3. Unveiling the correspondence between the mental image and the actual reality is impossible without direct perception of that actual reality. Thus, man undoubtedly has presential knowledge of himself. Accordingly,

Suhrawardi concludes that: “one who does not know that it is an image of himself, cannot know himself; and one who knows that it is an image of himself, knows himself without any images.”<sup>37</sup>

## **2. Proof of Presential Knowledge of self mental images**

One of the most important proofs of presential knowledge is an argument of the impossibility of infinite regress which has been presented in various ways. The human knowledge of a mental image or concept does not result from other images or concepts; otherwise, knowledge of the mental image would be produced by knowledge of another mental image which must in turn be generated by another mental image, and so on ad infinitum. This way of knowing mental images entails an infinite chain of attaining mental images.<sup>38</sup>

With reference to the above analysis, we should affirm that if knowledge of an object including knowledge of a mental image, is considered to be conceptual knowledge, the chain of images simultaneously remains ad infinitum which subsequently leads to vain knowledge based on ignorance. There is no end of the chain which we can say is certainty. Thus, the claim is false, for, if knowing an image depends on knowing an infinite number of images – which is impossible to achieve completely – the original image can never be known.<sup>39</sup>

## **3. Proof of Presential Knowledge of self emotions and faculties**

Man’s knowledge of his psychological states, feelings, and affections is achieved directly and without any medium. When a man is scared, he perceives this mental state directly and without any intermediary, and, without the need for any mental image or concept.<sup>40</sup> Think of a man who feels pain because a part of his body is cut or hurt. This feeling is not related to any mental images left on the painful part or any other parts. What he feels is nothing but the pain. This inner experience proves that our knowledge of our psychological states and emotions is based on perceiving their realities.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, our knowledge of our faculties is also presential knowledge. Our knowledge of our faculty of thought, our faculty of imagination, and our other faculties are presential knowledge. We do not know them through mental images and concepts because we never fail to know or experience them. For example, our

faculty of thought does not cease to operate when our faculty of movement is in operation, and our faculty of thought does not cease to operate when our body is in motion at any given moment.<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

1. For more information regarding mystics' viewpoint, see Abdallah Javadi Amuli, *Rabiq Makhtum*, vol. 1, (Qum: Isra', 1375 S.A.H.), 254.
2. Bahmanyar, *Al-Tabsil* (Tehran: Tehran University, 1375 S.A.H.), 574-575.
3. Murtada Mutahhari, *Usul Falsafeh va Ravesh Realism* (Tehran: Sadra, 1377 S.A.H.), 307.
4. Shaykh Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, *Hikmat Al Isbragh* (Tehran: Pazhuheshgah 'Ulum Insani Va Mutale'at Farhangi, 1373 S.A.H.), 69-74 and 478-479;  
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5. Qutb al-Din Shirazi, *Sharhe Hekmate Al-Esbragh* (Qum: Bidar Publication, d) 358-366 and 290-296;  
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6. Dawud ibn Mahmud Qaysari, *Sharh Fusus al-Hikam* (Anwar Huda: 1375 S.A.H.), 85-94.
7. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Al-Matalib Al-Aliab Min Al-Ilm Al-Ilabiyyah* (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al- Ilmiyyah, 1420 A.H.) 75-80;

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8. Sa'd al-Din Taftazani, *Sharh al-Maqasid* (Qum: Sharif al-Razi, 1409 A.H.), 299-300.
9. Mulla Sadra Shirazi, *al-Hikma al-Muta'alia fi al-Asfar al-Arba'a al-'Aqliyya* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' Al-Turath Al-'Arabi, 1410 A.H.), 180;  
 \_\_\_\_\_, *Al-mabda' wa Al-ma'ad* (Qum: Daftar Tablighat Islami, 1380 S.A.H.), 181;  
 \_\_\_\_\_, *Mafatih Al-ghayb*, (Beirut: Muassasah Al-Tarikh Al-'Arabi, 1419 A.H.), 185-186.
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 Mulla Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji, *Gawbar Murad* (Tehran: Wizarat Farhang Va Irshad, 1372 S.A.H.), 129.
11. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Usul Falsafeh va Ravesh Realism* (Qum: Al-Nashr Al-Islami, 1422 A.H.), 173-188;  
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- Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Amuzesh Falsafeh*, vol. 1, (Tehran: Sazman Tablighat Islami, 1379 S.A.H.), 175.
13. Mulla Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji, *Gawbar-e Murad*, 258;  
Mulla Sadra, *Rasa'il Falsafi* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' Al-Turath Al-'Arabi, 1422A.H.), 58;  
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14. Muhammad Taqi, *Misbah Yazdi* (Amuzesh Falsafeh, d), 171-172.
15. Abdallah Javadi Amuli, *Rabiq Makhtum*, 79.
16. Mulla Sadra Shirazi, *Agahi wa Guwahi* (Tehran: Mu'assasah Mutale'at wa Tahqiqat Farhangi Iran, 1367 S.A.H.), 4-5.
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18. Mulla Hadi Sabzawari, *ManzumeH Hikmat* (Qum: al-Mustafawi,d), 137.
19. Mulla Sadra Shirazi, *Risalatan fi Al-Tasawwur wa Al-Tasdiq* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' Al-Turath Al-'Arabi, 1422 A.H.), 46.
20. Mahdi Ha'iri Yazdi, *Nazariyyeh Shinakt dar Falsafe Islami* (Tehran: Mu'assasah Farhangi Danish wa Andisheh Mu'asir, 1379 S.A.H.), 41-42;  
Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Amuzesh Falsafeh*, 174.
21. Agha Mirza Mahdi Ashtiani, *Ta'liqeh*, 479;

- Murtada Mutahhari, *Majmu'ah Athar Ostad Shahid Mutabbari* (Tehran: Sadra, 1377 S.A.H.), 272-273.
22. Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Amuzesh Falsafeh*, 175.
23. Mulla Hadi Sabzawari, *Manzumeh Hikmat*, 479;  
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24. Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Amuzesh Falsafeh*, 219-220.
25. Murtada Mutahhari, *Usul Falsafeh*, 28-29;  
 \_\_\_\_\_, *Majmu'ah Athar*, 272-273.
26. Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Amuzesh Falsafeh*, 276.
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28. Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Amuzesh Falsafeh*, 177.
29. Mahdi Mudarris Ashtiyani, *Asas al-Tawhid* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1373 S.A.H.), 479.
30. Mulla Sadra Shirazi, *Asrar Al-Ayat* (Tehran: Anjuman Hikmat wa falsafeh Iran, 1360 S.A.H.), 5.
31. Mulla Sadra Shirazi, *Mafatih*, 108;  
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33. Qutb al-Din Shirazi, *Sharh Hikmat*, 291;  
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34. Murtada Mutahhari, *Usul Falsafeh*, 30;  
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35. Mulla Sadra Shirazi, *Al-Hikmah*, 292.
36. Khawajah Nasir al-Din Tusi, *Sharh al-Isharat*, 292-294.
37. Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, *Hikmat*, 11.
38. Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Amuzesh Falsafeh*, 173.
39. Sayyid Rida Sadr, *Al-Falsafah Al-Ulya* (Qum: Daftar Tablighat Islami, 1378 S.A.H.),  
234-236.
40. Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Amuzesh Falsafeh*, 173.
41. Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, *Hikmat*, 485.
42. Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, *Amuzesh Falsafeh*, 173.  
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