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On the incompatibility of God's knowledge of particulars and the doctrine of divine immutability: towards a reform in Islamic theology

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Abstract: **Affirming that divine knowledge of occurrent changes among particulars is incompatible with the doctrine of divine immutability, this article seeks to resolve this tension by denying the latter. Reviewing this long-running debate, I first formalize the exchange between al-Ghazālī and Avicenna on this topic, and then set out the ways in which contemporary Sadrāean philosophers have tried to resolve the incompatibility. I argue that none of the cited Sadrāean attempts to resolve the incompatibility between divine omniscience and immutability is successful. Then, by reference to certain principles drawn from Shia theology, I indicate how one might seek to reject the dogma of divine immutability. I conclude that by emancipating ourselves from that dogma, new horizons could be opened for Islamic philosophy, free from traditional Hellenistic constraints.**

On the incompatibility between divine immutability and divine knowledge of particulars

According to Avicenna, the idea of divine immutability is inconsistent with the claim that God has knowledge of occurrent changes among particulars; philosophers, therefore, have no choice but to deny that God possesses one of these attributes. Favouring the former attribute, Avicenna thus denies the latter.

> If, then, the knowledge of the Necessary Being had been temporal, I mean a time referred to it, so that He knows such-and such an object does not exist at this time and exists tomorrow,

> [then] His knowledge will be changing. Then, just as this object does not exist now and exists tomorrow, likewise the knowledge of it is such that either [i] He knows it in that manner, in which case [His knowledge] is changing or [ii] His knowledge of tomorrow is [the same] as His knowledge of this day, in which case it is not knowledge. Hence, it is impossible that His knowledge of tomorrow be [the same] as His knowledge of this day; rather, [His knowledge] has changed. (Avicenna (1984b), 13)[1]

Avicenna thinks, then, that any change in the object of knowledge requires a change in the knower (the subject of knowledge); and since God's intrinsic properties – such as His having knowledge that an eclipse is occurring *now* – would definitely change if He knew the eclipse in a temporal manner, then His essence would also be subject to change; but that is impossible. For Avicenna, if a subject's intrinsic properties change then the subject herself also changes: 'the meaning of a thing being changed is that a property which it has ceases to exist and there occurs for it another property' (Avicenna (1984a), I.2, 17). In other words, he thinks that if God has knowledge of occurrence of changes in particular objects in a temporal way with reference to 'now' and 'then', then there must be changes in God's essence and it is this which is impossible. Instead, Avicenna thinks that God knows particulars in a 'universal' way, which is to say He knows them as He knows universals, and 'hence His knowledge does not change since His object of knowledge does not' (Avicenna (1984b), 26). The consequence of attributing this kind of knowledge of particulars to God is that God does not know what time it is; and through a parallel argument[2] we can reach a conclusion that He does not know what particular qualitative or phenomenal properties any particular individual has been experiencing when he or she has felt a pain or some other sensation.[3]

Three questions now confront us: first, why does Avicenna think that God's temporal knowledge of objects entails changes in His intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) properties and hence to His essence?[4] Second, can Avicenna successfully explain knowledge of particulars through universals? Third, why does Avicenna think that any change in God's essence is impossible?[5]

Al-Ghazālī addresses all three of these questions in Discussion 13 of *The Incoherence of Philosophers* (by 'philosophers' he refers mainly to Aristotle, al-Fārābī, and Avicenna and his followers in the Muslim Peripatetic tradition). My focus here is on his challenge to Avicenna regarding the third question, concerning divine immutability. Al-Ghazālī challenges Avicenna's (and other philosophers') reasons for adhering to the doctrine of divine immutability, based on which they have denied God's knowledge of particulars (in the temporal sense). Why, he asks the philosophers, 'would you not hold that this kind of change is not impossible for him, just as Jahm, among the Muʿtazilīs, held, to the effect that His cognitions of temporal events are [themselves] temporal and, just as some of the later Karrāmiyya believed, that He is the receptacle of temporal events?' (al-Ghazālī (2000), discussion 13, 140). Al-Ghazālī thinks that the only argument the philosophers can cite in favour of acceptance of divine

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changelessness is 'that whatever undergoes change is not free of change, and what is not free of change and temporal happenings is temporally originated and is not eternal' (*ibid.*). But since the philosophers do accept that the world can be both eternal and yet not free from change, they should therefore see no inconsistency between eternality and changeability. So, he thinks, they should deny divine immutability rather than denying that God has knowledge of occurrent particulars.[6]

Both Avicenna and al-Ghazālī, then, see an incompatibility between the doctrine of divine immutability and God's knowledge of occurrent particulars. We can formalize this argument for the incompatibility of the two doctrines as follows:

1. God is omniscient.
2. Every omniscient being knows all past, present, and future particular states of the world and of individuals.[7]
3. Particular states of the world and of individuals change.
4. Every sort of knowledge will change with change of its object.
5. [Therefore] God's knowledge of occurrent particulars changes.
6. Knowledge is an intrinsic property of every individual, including God.
7. [Therefore] God's intrinsic property regarding His knowledge of particulars changes.
8. God's intrinsic properties are His essential properties.
9. [Therefore] God's essential properties change.
10. [Therefore] God is not immutable.[8]

Via this formalization we can see the structure of the debate clearly: in order to reject the conclusion of the argument Avicenna denies premise (2), while al-Ghazālī demonstrates that, given the principles which he has already accepted, Avicenna can accept the conclusion of the argument and therefore there is no need for him to deny premise (2). Avicenna does not baldly deny (2), however; rather, he argues that if we read (2) as attributing temporal knowledge to God then we should deny it, but if we read (2) as attributing knowledge of particulars *through universals* then we can accept it. So, while Avicenna accepts (3), he denies (5), since by his definition of God's knowledge of particulars, God's knowledge is not subject to any change at all. Avicenna's theory of knowledge of particulars through universals is magnificent and insightful; however, it seems that[9] as al-Ghazālī emphasizes (al-Ghazālī (2000), 136), this theory cannot in the end accommodate God's knowledge of occurrent particulars and the phenomenal states of other minds. For al-Ghazālī, it seems that the denial of this sort of knowledge to God is more dangerous than the denial of God's immutability, since he tries to refute Avicenna's reason for preferring the doctrine of divine immutability. He argues that to accept the changelessness of God is either to accept His immutability with regard to His intrinsic properties, or to accept His impassibility with regard to His extrinsic properties. With regard to the possibility of God's change in his

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intrinsic properties, al-Ghazālī argues that Avicenna in his ontology asserts that temporal events can proceed from eternal, in order to terminate the regress of the changing world to the eternal celestial soul of the sphere. Given this, he ought to accept that God's knowledge of occurrent particulars can proceed perpetually from eternity, in the same manner that celestial bodies movements originate from eternity (*ibid.*, 141). So, according to al-Ghazālī, Avicenna can accept that God's temporal knowledge originates in His intrinsic properties, and so His essence is subject to change. In the same vein with regard to the possibility of God's change in His extrinsic properties al-Ghazālī argues that Avicenna in his theory of perception accepts that the coloured figure's presenting itself in front of the perceiving pupil is the cause of the perception of it through mediatory air, so he can accept that it is possible for the occurrence of temporal events to be the cause for the occurrence of the knowledge of them through intermediaries (*ibid.*, 142). He thinks that nothing prevents Avicenna from ascribing such a knowledge of temporal events to God in a way that God is 'the cause for realizing knowledge for Himself, but through intermediaries' (*ibid.*), except that Avicenna thinks that such an intermediary causation would be a sort of enforcement upon God, which is impossible. But, al-Ghazālī responds that Avicenna accepts elsewhere the principle that 'what proceeds from God proceeds by way of necessity and by nature so He has no power not to act. This also is a kind of enforcement [imposed on Him] and indicates that He is akin to one compelled with respect to what proceeds from Him' (*ibid.*, 143). So he concludes that nothing prevents Avicenna from ascribing temporal knowledge to God.

At the end of Discussion 13 he makes reference to a sort of perfect being theology, and claims that since God is perfect He is omniscient, and if knowledge of occurrent particulars is a kind of perfection we should attribute this to God as well.

> For His perfection consists in His knowledge of all things. If there would occur to us knowledge corresponding to every temporal event, this would be a perfection for us, [and] neither a deficiency nor an enforcement [on us]. So let this be the case with respect to Him. (*ibid.*, 143)

This is a very important phrase, since it clearly shows that the main point of the debate between these two philosophers rests on their conception of the *perfectness* of God – to the extent that al-Ghazālī accuses Avicenna of entertaining a wrong conception of God, and so of being an infidel.[10] Al-Ghazālī argues, ingeniously, that if Avicenna and other philosophers think that God's knowledge of occurrent particulars leads to denial of His immutability, they can (according to their philosophical principles) deny divine immutability instead of denying God's knowledge of occurrent particulars, because a God who has this kind of knowledge is more perfect than an immutable God.[11]

Following al-Ghazālī – though not, of course, in declaring any other thinker to be an infidel – in this article I shall try to support the intuition that a God who knows our pain, pleasures, and states here and now is more perfect than an immutable,

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changeless, and senseless God,[12] and that there is nothing to prevent Shiite and Muslim theologians and philosophers from freeing their thoughts of the Hellenistic dogma of divine immutability. First, I shall examine some roots of the doctrine of divine immutability, which has become so thoroughly and firmly accepted in Islamic theology. I shall demonstrate that its source lies in certain Hellenistic ideas about the divine nature. Next, by referring to some Shia theological principles and principles in Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy, dominant in the Shiite world today, I shall indicate how the Sadrāean philosophy offers some support for this emancipation project (despite Mullā Ṣadrā's disagreement with this project).[13]

The roots of the doctrine of divine immutability

Contemporary epistemology defines an omniscient being as one who knows all the true propositions and does not believe any false proposition (Wierenga, 2017). But in Avicenna's terminology (and, also in al-Ghazālī's writings),[14] the object of an omniscient being's knowledge encompasses all the *objects* (e.g. His knowledge of me), *entities* (e.g. His knowledge of numbers), *events* (e.g. His knowledge of the occurrence of an eclipse), as well as propositions (e.g. His knowledge that there is a red flower in front of me). All of these categories can be found in Avicenna's writings as examples of the object of knowledge, but since he refers mainly to God's knowledge of objects and entities in the world, I also use this terminology in this article. Specifically, our focus here is on changeable objects, or as Avicenna calls them, 'corruptible individuals (*al-shakhṣī-al-fāsid*)'.[15]

Traditionally, the doctrine[16] of divine immutability is taken to be the claim that God is changeless regarding His *intrinsic* properties, that is, properties that are wholly instantiated in God's being – such as having knowledge of all truths, having the power to create a new creature, having freewill, and so on. So the doctrine does permit God to change in His extrinsic and relational properties vis-à-vis other beings. If I freely decided to pray to God right now, then God's extrinsic property in relation to me would change, but such a change would not contradict the divine immutability thesis. The other attribute related to God's immutability is divine *impassibility*, in the sense that He is not affected by others' sensations. An impassible God does not experience the pains or suffering of creatures, since He has no experience of emotions. In a stronger sense, this thesis can be read as claiming that God does not have any emotional states, such as grief, pleasure, or pain. The reason why theologians have tended to accept divine impassibility is to secure God's essential changelessness: a common line of argument is that if God were not impassible, He would be subject to change and so not immutable. In this article I seek to challenge the doctrines of divine immutability and impassibility from the perspective of perfect being theology.

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To understand the definition of omniscience that the Muslim peripatetic philosophers,[17] and especially Avicenna, would prefer, we must first examine their idea of God. This idea of God draws on a combination of Plato's, Aristotle's, and Plotinus' ideas of a perfect being. From Platonic thought they borrow the idea that the object of knowledge should be imperishable, stable, and unchanging, rather than being changeable particulars. Knowledge, then, is strictly to be differentiated from mere opinion (*doxa*).[18] Like Aristotle, meanwhile, they think that knowledge (*epistēmē*) pertains to universals, since true propositions about universals are necessary and only necessary propositions can provide *certainty*. Certainty, then, is a key desideratum in Aristotle's and peripatetic epistemology. Al-Fārābī (872–950), a commentator on Aristotle and Avicenna, reveals his debt to their thought where he says:

> Real knowledge is what is true and certain at all times, not at some time rather than another, and (not) what exists at a particular time and may not exist afterwards, for in that case we should know something existing now, but when some time has passed, it has possibly ceased to exist, so that we do not know whether it exists or not and our certainty turns to doubt and falsehood. And what may be so is not knowledge and certainty. On that account the ancients did not make perception of what may alter from one state to another knowledge, e.g. our 'knowledge' that this man is now sitting down. For it may be that he will change and come to be standing up after he was sitting. Rather they made knowledge certainty of the existence of a thing which cannot change, e.g. that three is an odd number. For the oddness of the number three does not change.[19]

Certainty, then, was of central importance for the peripatetic philosophers in ascribing knowledge. On their view, God is so perfect and so aloof from mundane events that even to have knowledge about human sensations, sufferings, pains, and pleasures would tarnish His majesty. God, according to their view, is superior and perfect in His knowledge, not only because He knows all facts about the universals, but also because He *lacks* knowledge of particulars of which we are *aware* through our sensations and imagination.[20] His perfectness is thus in part due to His lack of knowledge of occurrent particulars.

It is obvious, as al-Ghazālī points out, that such a God is perfect in name only.[21] A God who is not aware of particular states of pain, pleasure, or thought clearly is not the God introduced in the Qurʿān and the *hadiths*, the God who has sympathy with us, who hears our implorations (Qurʿān 58:7), and who 'is nearer to us than our jugular vein' (Qurʿān 50:16). Avicenna is aware of this objection; as pointed out by Adamson, he actually takes 'the *most* conciliatory position he could have taken towards divine knowledge of particulars' (Adamson (2005), 286). Avicenna tries to explain how it is that God knows particulars through having universal knowledge. To explain God's knowledge of particulars, Avicenna draws on Plotinus' ideas about the relation between the One and every one of His multiple creatures. God initiates creation through a process of self-contemplation, first contemplating His own intellect. Through this (loving or intellectual) relationship, He initiates many levels of thinking and loving relationships between the active intellect in

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heaven and the forms of matter in the sublunary world. This relationship is also to be considered a causal relation whose initiator is God. In this manner, then, through knowing His essence and the intellectual forms and affinities, God could know the particulars that result from them: in other words, God knows particulars through knowledge of universals. However, while possessing this knowledge, God is still 'completely unaware of the accidental features belonging to particulars. For when He knows Zayd through Zayd's species, He will grasp only Zayd's essential features: those features Zayd has in virtue of being human. So, He will not know or even be aware that Zayd is pale, for example' (*ibid*., 291).

But Avicenna's conciliatory position between divine immutability and divine knowledge still does not help him to provide us with a conception of God which is recognizably the worship-worthy God introduced in the Qurʿān. Divine knowledge of particulars through universals does not provide Him with the ability to know the contents of our senses and particular mental states, whereas the God of the Qurʿān is 'the knower of the unseen of the heavens and of the earth. He is aware of the secrets within men's breasts' (35:38). Commands to worship God in the Qurʿān almost always accompany the conception of *Rabb* – namely, the one who nourishes, sustains, and fosters us step by step in our esoteric journey towards perfection.[22] God as our *Rabb* is worthy of worship since He continuously cares for us, helps us, and guides us. We worship Him because He knowingly guides us towards our perfection. Abraham says that he worships his *Rabb*, who is the *Rabb* of all creatures: 'He created me and He it is who Guides me, And Who feeds me and waters me. And when I sicken, then He heals me' (26:78–80). How could a God who is not aware of our particular intrinsic states be our *Rabb* who is so eminently worthy of worship?

The most significant Shiite philosopher after Avicenna is arguably Mullā Ṣadrā (1571–1636), whose influence is still dominant throughout all Shiite schools of philosophy up to the present day. Mullā Ṣadrā introduced and developed two important theses which modify Avicenna's account of divine knowledge of particulars, and proposed an account that is immune to al-Ghazālī's objections. Ironically, as I shall show, his modifications can be used as steps towards the emancipation of Shiite philosophy from the Hellenistic dogma of divine immutability.

The first thesis is the *unification* of the intellect (knowledge), the intellector (knower), and the intellected (known) [*iitihād al-ʿaql, al-ʿāqil, wa al-maʿqūl*]; the second thesis is that *a simple reality is all-things* [*basīt al-haqīqah kull al-ashya'*]. The unification thesis is a thesis about the nature of knowledge. According to Mullā Ṣadrā, the world consists in existent beings, and every existent being has an existing identity and a sensible and material quiddity. The existing identity of a being is metaphysically and existentially prior to its quiddity [*isalat-al-wujūd*], and when one perceives a being, one's intellect perceives the intellectual reality of that being. So every being has an intellectual reality that is existentially prior to its material quiddity. For Avicenna, perceptual knowledge is a

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representational relation between the intelligible forms or concepts of beings and the mind of the perceiver. According to him 'the forms of things inhere in the soul and contain and embellish it. And the soul becomes like a place for them through the medium of material intellect'.[23] But for Ṣadrā perceptual knowledge is a sort of knowledge-by-presence [*al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī*], just like our knowledge of our own pains and pleasures. He thinks that when we perceive an object, our intellect directly perceives and is united with the object's *intelligible nature* that is its real existence. And so the knower, known, and the knowledge are existentially united.[24] Historically, this view of knowledge as requiring the unification of the object of knowledge and the knower goes back to Porphyry (233–305) in the Greek tradition, and later to Suhrawardī (1154–1191) in the Islamic. According to Porphyry, 'If intelligible entities be within intelligence, intelligence will contemplate intelligible entities and will contemplate itself when contemplating them; by understanding itself, it will think, because it will understand intelligible entities' (Porphyry (1988), 53). Sadrā, contra Avicenna, firmly accepts this Porphyrian idea of unification, to the extent that he wrote a treatise in support of the unification thesis.[25] The grounding thought of Sadrā that underpins his support of the unification thesis is his metaphysics of epistemology, according to which knowledge is an existential relation.

> Knowledge does not simply consist of the concept of the disengaged form of something in that when we represent this form [in our minds], we necessarily obtain its knowledge. Rather, knowledge is the mode of the existence of something that is disengaged from matter. Existence cannot be represented through a mental image in its entirety and thoroughly except through its own existing identity.[26]

Not only is our own perceptual knowledge a form of knowledge by presence, Sadrā claims, but all sorts of knowledge for every knower including God are knowledge by presence. This is because a knower, through the process of perceiving, reaches the true nature of things. Knowledge is the presence of an object's intelligible reality, which is its existing identity, to the subject's soul or intellect, which is her existential identity. Metaphysically, then, knowledge is existential unification.

Mullā Ṣadrā uses this unification thesis in order to modify Avicenna's account of God's knowledge of particulars. Thus he accepts Avicenna's account, except in that, for Ṣadrā, God's knowledge of particulars is knowledge by presence. Knowledge through universals would not guarantee the existential presence of the object of knowledge for the knower. Knowledge through universals only provides a set of properties of the object for the subject's intellect, whereas for Ṣadrā knowledge is a relation between the reality of the object as it exists and the existential identity of the subject. Knowledge, according to Ṣadrā, is presence, and so for any being to be known it has to be present in its existence for God's (active) intellect.[27]

Remarkably, on this account, if all particular states were available for God's awareness immediately, then those particular states which consist in human

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emotional states such as pain and pleasure would also be known by God. But knowing (by presence) a pain state is to *be* in that pain state. A statement denoting knowledge of pain and a mental state of a pain would generally be thought of as different, but obviously when one *knows* one is in pain one actually has to be in pain. So I think Sadrā's account of knowledge by presence and his emphasis on the unification thesis lead us to accept divine passibility, contra his own clear denial of this thesis. It is exactly this consequence that leads Avicenna to reject the knowledge-by-presence account of divine knowledge of particulars.[28] However, by drawing on Sadrā's explication of the unification thesis and the knowledge-by-presence account of divine knowledge of particulars, we can take a step towards rejecting the dogma of divine immutability itself. Proponents of the doctrine of divine impassibility might say that divine knowledge of particulars does not extend to sensible, material objects or emotional states. This might indeed be a rejoinder to al-Ghazālī's argument; however, Sadrā and his followers accept a second doctrine that blocks this latter move for them. This second doctrine is the claim that *a simple reality is all-things*.

Let me explain. In his metaphysics Sadrā is a Monist. According to his monism [*wahdat shakhsī*], there is only one being that exists in its own right necessarily and eternally. This being is called the *Necessary Existent* or brute existent. The Necessary Existent is what really exists at all times and is all that is existent. For monists, other beings (if one could call them that) are only a modification of the Necessary Existent, or are universals, or stuff, or a mere collection of things, or events (van Inwagen (2009), 35). In Sadrā's terminology, other beings are mere relations to or manifestations of the Necessary Existent.[29] Sadrā equates existence with light, knowledge, and the good.

> Existence is neither mixed with non-existence nor concealed by cover, veil or obscurity. No darkness veils it. It is thus uncovered by itself, present to and never absent from itself. Its essence is knowledge, knower by itself and known to itself. Therefore, existence and Light are one and the same thing: 'God is the Light of the heavens and the earth' (Qurʿān 24:35). It is never veiled except through non-existence and imperfection . . . Since the Necessary [Being], exalted be His Name, is above the veil of non-existence, corporeality, composition and potentiality, He is in the highest degree of being a perceiver and perceived and being an intellector and intellected: 'Should He not know – He that created? And He is the One that understands the finest Mysteries (and) is Well acquainted (with them)' (Qurʿān 67:14).105 '[Nothing] is hidden from Thy Lord (so much as) the weight of an atom on the earth or in heaven. And not the least and not the greatest of these things but are recorded in an evident book (Qurʿān 10:61)'. (Sadrā (1999), 88–89)[30]

For an existing perceiver, then, knowledge by presence of the existing reality of the objects of knowledge makes the knowledge, the knower, and the known one in their existence. And if the existence is one being that is God, then God would be the absolute knowledge, the absolute knower, and the absolute known. God knows everything since everything presents its existence for God and therefore is united with God as Necessary Existence. So all things are united with God

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who is the only simple being. In other words, although it is not true to say that everything is God, it is true that God is the reality and existence of everything, based on which every entity receives its quiddity, its objecthood, and being-ness.[31] What is important for our discussion is that for Sadrā, according to his absolute monism, God's knowledge could not exclude sensory and material objects. God knows our sufferings and so suffers with us. If our knowledge changes then His knowledge changes as well. So it seems that Sadrā – based on the philosophical principles he accepts – cannot retain the dogma of divine immutability.

A number of commentators have tried to show that divine knowledge on Sadrā's account does not extend to material and sensory beings. However, as Ayatollah Javādi Āmolī says:

> This claim that material dark existence is free from knowledge and presence, is not the last view of Sadrā. His matured view is that knowledge equates with existence and is a graded reality. And although material existence has been appointed the lowest degree of existence, every material being still has knowledge and is the knower and the known itself. Therefore, all creation is conscious of God and engages in His glorification. (Javādi Āmolī (2010), 94)

Furthermore, Sadrā believes in what 'he calls the 'penetration of knowledge' (*siraya al-'ilm*) in all things including animals, plants, and minerals. Just as existence penetrates all things, intelligibility as an epiphenomenon of existence is to be found in things with varying degrees of intensity and reality. Although 'rocks and material bodies' represent the lowest level of existence, they nevertheless partake of intelligibility in some way (*ibid*. 116).

So far I have argued that the combination of the unification thesis (the unity of the knower, the knowledge, and the known) and Sadrā's monism would force Sadrāeans to reject divine immutability and impassibility, contra their avowed position. It seems that whenever one defines God's knowledge in terms of knowledge by presence and accepts God's knowledge of particulars (not through universals), then there is no way to accept divine impassibility, as al-Ghazālī argues.

Here one might ask whether adding divine *atemporality* to the debate and seeing God's knowledge of particulars through an atemporal and eternal point of view might help the proponent of Sadrā's philosophy to sustain the doctrines of divine immutability and impassibility. Yet I think this manoeuvre cannot help them. Suppose that God is timeless. If God knows our pain by presence, as it is present now, then He could know it eternally and timelessly. Since knowledge of a pain by presence equates with being in pain, so in this account God has grieved for our pain eternally. An atemporal God then would suffer timelessly for our pains. His grief can be perpetually changeless, and so He would be immutable yet *still passible*. Hence, according to this view, God changelessly knows that His knowledge is changing; and if knowledge has existential reality then God changelessly knows He is changing. Kretzmann, however, attempts to refute this idea:

> According to this familiar account of omniscience, the knowledge an omniscient being has of the entire scheme of contingent events is in many relevant respects exactly like the knowledge

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> you might have of a movie you had written, directed, produced, starred in, and seen a thousand times. You would know its every scene in flawless detail, and you would have the length of each scene and the sequence of scenes perfectly in mind. You would know, too, that a clock pictured in the first scene shows the time to be 3:45, and that a clock pictured in the fourth scene shows 4:30, and so on. Suppose, however, that your movie is being shown in a distant theater today. You know the movie immeasurably better than do the people in the theater who are now seeing it for the first time, but they know one big thing about it you don't know, namely, what is now going on the screen. (Kretzmann (1966), 412)

Drawing on the work of Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Hossein Tabātabā'i'i, Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi offers a rejoinder to Kretzmann's objection. That God changelessly knows that the world is changing now, according to them, means that God in His essence has changeless knowledge that His action in the world is changing. So the property of changelessness is due to God's essence and His knowledge of His essence (from an atemporal point of view), but the changing aspect is due to God's knowledge of His actual actions (from a temporal point of view). In this manner, one could distinguish between God's knowledge of His essence, which is timeless and changeless, and God's knowledge of His actions in the world, which are changing and temporal (Misbāh Yazdī (2011), 475).

Yet even this distinction could not save the doctrine of divine immutability: for God's actions are grounded in God's will which is an intrinsic property of God, and any action requires a new act of will, and so a new intrinsic property. So if God's actions are changing and His knowledge of His actions is changing and His actions are based on His intrinsic properties, then God is not immutable.

So I think that the manoeuvre of divine atemporal knowledge could not heal the sting of al-Ghazālī's argument, and thus the divine immutability thesis should indeed be seen as incompatible with divine knowledge. However, thanks to Sadrā's philosophy as I understand it, I believe we can free ourselves from the dogma of divine immutability.

Some theological points in favour of emancipation from the divine immutability thesis

There are several verses in the Qurʿān that speak literally in favour of divine mutability. These verses have posed significant difficulties for commentators who have tried to interpret them. Yet instead of embracing complex and perhaps paradoxical theses in the attempt to reach a coherent interpretation, it might be suggested that emancipation from this Hellenistic doctrine could help us to see the meaning of the verses more clearly. There are verses that display God's knowledge of particular mental states and even of our pains or emotions (58:1–3); there are also verses that display God's knowledge of what time it is, and knowledge of certain events taking place at a specific time: 'Now God has lightened your task (of fighting), for He knows that there is weakness in you' (8:66). There are also verses that confirm that God aims at a purpose but that His purpose can be

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achieved through human actions. God clearly says that He expects our help in order to fulfil His purposes in our world: 'O you who believe! If you help God, He will help you and will make your foothold firm' (47:7). God's *foreknowledge* also depends on our actions: 'And Satan had no authority over them, except that We want to know who believes in the hereafter and who is in doubt about it' (34:21); 'We shall test you till We know those of you who strive hard' (47:31). It can be seen that the God revealed in the Qurʿān is a God who knows our pains, who hears our implorations, and sees our states in detail.

The Shiite theology also contains the doctrine of *bada'*, which states that 'God's will is not restricted by His eternal destiny, but He is free to intervene deliberately in some current affairs of the universe and direct it towards an end different from what was predestined by Himself' (Saeedimehr (2018), 24). This doctrine is affirmed by most Shiite theologians, while it is denied by almost all Sunnis; yet there are some Qurʿānic verses as well as Imams' remarks [*ḥadīths*] that support this doctrine. God's appointment with Moses on Mount Sinai to receive the Tawrāh (Torah) through divine revelation was first designated as thirty days of *solitude* [*khalwah*] but was then extended to forty (Qurʿān 7:142). God changed His mind about predestined worldly chastisement after the prophet Jonah repented and implored God for forgiveness (Qurʿān 10: 98). Abraham's imploration for God to save Sadom demonstrates that Abraham believed that God can change His mind (Qurʿān 11:74).

The doctrine of *bada'* clearly expresses the idea that God can change His mind and His will in response to what happens in the world based mainly on human action. Although the doctrine is silent about the reasons for which God may decide to change His mind, from some theological reflections we can see that our repentance, supplications, implorations, and prayers may provide such reasons for changing the predestined divine providence.

Regrettably, although they have this theological doctrine in their tradition, most contemporary Shiite philosophers reinterpret this doctrine and the cited verses through the lens of the dogma of divine immutability. Such reinterpretations void the doctrine of its true content. The contemporary Shiite philosophers try to save the doctrine of divine immutability by emphasizing the distinction between divine essential knowledge (from an atemporal standpoint) and His knowledge of actions (from atemporal standpoint); but as I have argued, this line of thought is not successful.[32]

It is also noteworthy that the most crucial doctrine in Shiite theology, the doctrine of *walāyah*, supports the emancipation project under consideration here. *Walāyah* is the path of love towards God;[33] it is an esoteric path which runs through the souls of the Imams whose souls are united with God. A Shia is one who passes along the path of *walāyah* or love, through which one's soul becomes nearer to the souls of God's friends, the *walīs*. This doctrine is the essential doctrine of Shiism and is what primarily distinguishes Shia from Sunni Islam. According to this doctrine, all human beings have the potential to become (like) God's *walīs*, and the essence of Shiism is to follow Imams in this path. Being in

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a love relationship with God – or, more exactly, becoming *the* love relationship with God – is the essence of Shiism, and the Imams in Shiism are the guides on this path towards the relationship of love with God. If we look at this doctrine from the perspective of Sadrā's philosophy, we find that the Imams are perfect human beings who are so enriched by divine existence that they have become the epitomes of goodness, perfection, and wisdom, to the highest level a creature can attain. They reach a point where they can see through God's eyes and God sees through their eyes: in a famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, God says: 'When I love one, I am his hearing through which he hears, his eyesight through which he sees, his hands through which he holds, and his foot through which he walks.'[34] This is the path one ought to follow as a Shia – and the name itself, of course, has the root meaning *follower*. So it seems that through this path of *walāyah* we share our knowledge with God and God shares His knowledge with us.[35] The first implication of such a doctrine is that the nature of the knowledge we can have is the same as that possessed by God. The second implication is that God can know through the eyes of His friends, who still remain human beings through what they perceive. God is closer to us than we suppose: 'And when my servants question you concerning Me, then surely I am nearby' (Qurʿān 2:186).

Concluding remarks

I have tried to argue that the Shiite texts contain a theological and philosophical basis for a rejection of the dogma of divine immutability. My main reason for undertaking this emancipation project is to defend a conception of God which is more worthy of worship than the traditional conception. A project which seeks to redefine our core accepted understanding of God might be deemed so eccentric that its pursuit is barely justified. Yet what motivates me in this project are the social and political implications of the acceptance of such a conception of God. A God who accompanies us, who answers our petitionary prayers, and who perceives what we perceive, is a God who expects us and our leaders to respect human rights and to take care about the evils and sufferings our decisions may cause to other people – whether our family, our neighbours, or those entirely unknown to us. Respect for human rights is a way to respect people's freedom, interests, and dignity. Transgressing these basic rights will make life miserable and sorrowful; and such acts of transgression not only inflict pain on other humans, but also grieve God deeply. This project of emancipation promises to assign to human rights a new degree of importance – they begin to appear, indeed, as infinitely important.[36]

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Notes

1. Except where mentioned I use Zadyousefi's (2019a and 2019b) translation of Avicenna's texts and Marmura's (2000) translation of al-Ghazālī's. In all Arabic transliteration I follow the style of Esposito (2009).
2. Avicenna says that:

> We should try not to make His knowledge subject to change and corruption, definitely, [this is possible] by means of not considering His knowledge as temporal or acquired from sense [i.e.

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> perceptual knowledge] or from the existence of creatures. [If we consider His knowledge temporal or acquired from sense and from the existence of creatures] then time enters His knowledge and then His knowledge comes to be changing and corruptible. (Avicenna (1984a), 116)

3. Knowledge by presence requires the presence of an object's quiddity and its conceptual nature for the subject of knowledge. The quiddity of a table is its table-ness that is itself a concept and is different from the object itself. But the presence of the quiddity of a pain or its pain-ness for a subject is nothing over and above the pain itself. In other words, the presence of a sense of pain (that is its quiddity) is nothing else than to have a pain. When I see you are in pain I don't have knowledge by presence of your pain but just I have knowledge of your pain behavior. Knowledge by presence of a pain or pleasure is to be in pain or pleasure.
4. It is difficult to find an agreed definition of intrinsic and extrinsic properties. For the debates between metaphysicians on how to define these properties, see Marshall (2018). However, for present purposes a rough definition seems sufficient. Roughly speaking, intrinsic properties are properties that are instantiated in an object in virtue of its own existence regardless of its relation to other objects, while extrinsic properties are properties that an object has in virtue of its relation with other objects in the world. For example, my eye colour or age is an intrinsic property to me, while my standing one metre from this desk, or being an uncle, are extrinsic properties. With some qualifications we can also attribute extrinsic and intrinsic properties to God: God has intrinsic properties like knowledge or power or goodness based on His essence. God has also extrinsic properties in relation to His creatures: God thus has the extrinsic property of being the object of my prayers and being the sustainer of the material world.
5. It is noteworthy that for Avicenna every intrinsic property of God is His essential property, since He is a necessary being and for every necessary being the intrinsic properties that are instantiated in it in virtue of its own existence must instantiate in it necessarily. Avicenna calls this consequence the principle of the necessity of a necessary being's attributes (Avicenna (1984b), 16). See also Avicenna (1960), IX. 1, 376 and VIII.7, 367.
6. So He says that 'there is nothing to prevent you from upholding this belief [that God undergoes change]' (*ibid*.) He goes onto show that it is not impossible for an eternal God to cause a temporal event if those events are uniformly and perpetually caused by and proceed from eternity.
7. It seems that our world includes states that are not states of some individuals. Following Peter van Inwagen's *Metaphysics* we can differentiate between particular states of the world and particular states of individuals. He enumerates five types of states in the world that are not 'individuals' states': mere modification of a thing (wrinkle in a carpet), mere collection of things (red books in my library), stuff (water), universal (the novel of *War and Peace*), and events (the Second World War) (van Inwagen (2009), 27–30).
8. A similar argument has been discussed and defended by Kretzmann (1966).
9. Avicenna denies that God knows particulars in a temporal manner and he argues that God knows particulars in a universal manner through which God knows everything: 'not even the weight of an atom escapes His knowledge' (Q 34:3). And then He explains that:

> God will thus apprehend singular things in as much as they are universal, I mean, in as much as they have qualities. If the qualities become specified individually in the singulars, this occurs in relation to a particular time or circumstance. If this circumstance is also [simply] apprehended with its qualities, it will be in the same position as the singulars. But in as much as it is attributed to principles where the species of each is confined in its one individual [instance], it is attributed to individual things. (Avicenna (1960), 360; quoted from Marmura (1962), 308)

   The question is whether this knowledge of particulars through universal qualities can accommodate all particular states of the world. Avicenna thinks it can, but I doubt it. Since through knowing universal qualities we cannot distinguish between particular things that have the same qualities without referring to a distinct particular quality, I think that at least particular states of the world that are essentially *changing* or *sensual* or *temporal* cannot be known through universal qualities or through their causes. God cannot know through universals 'what time is it', 'what does this flower smell like', or 'what sort of pain is my own headache'. For a similar discussion see Marmura (1962).
10. Al-Ghazālī declares Avicenna and other philosophers to be infidels on the three main issues for which he thinks the philosophers' thoughts are incompatible with confirmed religious doctrines: (1) the doctrine of the eternal past of the material world, which seems incompatible with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*;

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(2) the denial of the doctrine of divine knowledge of particulars; and (3) the denial of corporeal resurrection. See the concluding part of *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (al-Ghazālī (2000), 226).

11. In *al-Shifāʾ: Ilāhīyyāt* and elsewhere Avicenna argues that just as we cannot attribute bodily actions to God because this is in contradiction with His *perfection*, nor should we attribute temporal knowledge to Him. As he says: 'And we have explained in our other books that every sensory form and imaginative form, inasmuch as they are sensory or imaginative, are known only through a divisible sense organ (*ālah mutijazziʾah*). And just as the attribution of many acts to the Necessary Being is an imperfection for Him, likewise is the attribution of many acts of cognition (*al-taʿaqulāt*)' (Avicenna (1960), VIII, 359).
12. One might argue that contra Avicenna there is no inconsistency between divine immutability and God's temporal knowledge of occurrent particulars. In other words, one might claim that a changeless God can know what time it is now, or, from a metaphysical point of view, a change in God's intrinsic properties (such as His knowledge of an eclipse) does not necessitate any change in His essential properties (properties that are constitutive of Godhood, like perfectness, goodness, omniscience, and omnipotence). This line of argumentation can be found also in al-Ghazālī's Discussion 13 in *Incoherence*, before he engages in the above-mentioned argument. I disagree with this idea. I think the attribution of change to a subject is to claim that there is change in its intrinsic properties. My property of having particular DNA is changeless, as are my essential properties that fix the reference of my name in all possible worlds, and my changes are due to changes in my intrinsic properties like my pains, pleasures, knowledge, and emotions. Nobody thinks that I am a changeless entity. In the same way one can argue that if God's intrinsic properties change, we can ascribe change to Him regardless of His fixed essential properties. In addition, most Muslim philosophers believe that since God is simple, God's intrinsic properties are the same as His essential properties, and some think that all of God's essential properties are the same. It seems that for this reason Avicenna, and following him Mullā Ṣadrā, firmly deny any change in God's intrinsic properties and try to find a way to explain God's knowledge of particulars that does not commit them to accepting any change in God's intrinsic properties.
13. Like almost all Shiite theologians and philosophers Mullā Ṣadrā clearly accepts divine immutability. One of the early Shiite theologians who does not accept the divine immutability doctrine is Hishām Ibn Hakam (d. after 802 AC). Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210 AC), one of the greatest theologians of Sunni Islam, mentions Hishām's, Jahm Ibn Safwan's, and Abu'l Husayn Basri's ideas and accepts the inconsistency between God's knowledge of changing particulars and the doctrine of divine immutability (al-Rāzi (1992), 412).
14. In *Incoherence* al-Ghazālī (2000) refers to 'all things' (143), 'temporal events' (142), and the 'eclipse' (138), and also 'universals', as the object of God's knowledge.
15. Avicenna says: 'The First [i.e. God] only knows the corruptible individual (*al-shakhṣī al-fāsid*) in this universal way; and hence His knowledge does not change since His object of knowledge (*maʿlūmuhu*) does not' (Avicenna (1984b), 26).
16. According to al-Ghazālī, in conflicts between philosophical argumentation and literal understandings of Revelation, we must distinguish three types of Revelation. First there are passages that are contradicted by demonstrative argument. Here reason abrogates the literal understanding of Revelation. Second, there are verses of the text that demonstrative arguments either confirm or are indifferent to. Here reason ought not to change the literal understanding of the text. Third is the group of verses that no demonstrative argument can reach, such as verses about the quality of afterlife. Here the literal meaning will be untouchable by reason. For details of al-Ghazālī's ideas in this respect see Griffel (2009), 115–116. When our philosophical understanding abrogates the literal meaning of the text, we should be very careful as regards the soundness and validity of our rational arguments. In this article, by the term 'doctrine' I refer to the first of the above-mentioned groups: a theological principle traditionally accepted by philosophical reasoning that is not unavoidably rooted in the literal understanding of the sacred text and so is controversial. I think that by denying the immutability of God, not only do we not lose our conception of a perfect God, but we also gain a conception of a God who is changing due to His understanding our states here and now, and is more worthy of worship than a changeless God who could not know how painful my pain is.
17. In this article by the peripatetic philosophers I mean the Muslim peripatetic philosophers who follow the Aristotelian tradition.
18. For details on influence of Plato's and Aristotle's ideas on al-Fārābī and then Avicenna see Fakhri (2002), ch. 2.
19. Muhammad al-Fārābī (1961), sect. 33.

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20. Avicenna thinks that not only does God not have knowledge of particulars in its full sense, but even we do not have such knowledge, since knowledge is categorically a state of the intellect orientated towards certainty, and could not have as its object changing particulars. Rather, we have only awareness (*ma'refah*) of particulars, through our senses (Adamson (2005), 283).
21. Al-Ghazālī rightly stresses that according to Avicenna's theory of knowledge of particulars,

> when Muhammad, God's prayers and peace be upon him, challenged [the heathen] with his prophethood, [God] did not know then that he made the challenge, the same being the case with every individual prophet, that [God] only knows that among people there would be those who would make the prophetic challenge and that their description would be such and such. However, as regards the specific prophet individually, He does not know him. For that is [only] known to the senses. (al-Ghazālī (2000), 137)

Such a God could not know the actions of Muhammad as an individual person, nor even his prophetic mission. For further elaboration on this matter, see Sidiropoulou (2010), 97.
22. For a detailed discussion of the concept of *Rabb* in the Qurʿān, see Tabātabā'i (1980), I.
23. Quoted from Kalin (2010), 51. Avicenna also accepts the unification thesis for God's knowledge of His essence. He says that 'the necessary being is self-intelligible and intellect by itself . . . every form that is not in matter is like this, and the intellect, the intellector, and the intelligible are one' (*ibid.*, 55).
24. A translation of Mullā Ṣadrā's treatise in defence of this thesis can be found in Kalin (2010), 256–291.
25. However, Avicenna blatantly accuses Porphyry of being one who has deluded people by his thesis.

> The person who has deluded people the most concerning this matter is the person who has composed the *Isagogy* for them. He [i.e. Porphyry] was bent on speaking words of fantasy and Sūfī poetry and contenting himself and others with imagination. For this, the people of discernment point to his books on the intellect and the *intelligibilia* and his other writings on the soul. (*Shifa'* in *Ittihad*, *Majmu'ah* (Avicenna (1984b), 81–82); quoted from (Kalin (2010), 50)

26. Quoted from Kalin (2010), 171.
27. I see some similarities between John McDowell's account of perceptual knowledge and Sadrā's. In Sadrā's philosophy our perception is a relation between the subject and the mental existence of the object. This mental existence recalls McDowell's *Bildung* or second nature of objects in the real world, since mental existence is not the Given but is nothing but the real existence of the perceived object. However, to investigate this possibility would take us too far afield from the current topic: see McDowell (1994)
28. See his *al-Taʿlīqāt* (1984b, 26), chapter entitled 'The difference between God's knowledge and other's knowledge', in which he explains why he accepts knowledge by presence for God's knowledge of His essence while God's knowledge of other beings should be through intellectual immutable Forms [*a'yan sabetah*] and universals. He clearly says that knowledge by presence, if applied to God's knowledge of particulars, requires divine mutability.
29. In Sadrā's ontology there is another type of unity thesis called *wahdat tashakhosī* regarding the gradual unity of existence. By Sadra's 'monism' I here refer to *wahdat shakhsī* rather than *wahdat tashakhosī*.
30. Quoted from the translation by Kalin (2010), 121).
31. I emphasize that one should not ascribe pantheism to Mullā Ṣadrā. His monism or unity of existence clearly affirms God's transcendence and aseity.
32. There are two ways of refuting the argument from *bada'* to divine mutability: either to deny that *bada'* implies a change of God's knowledge, or to deny that any change of God's knowledge implies a change in His essence. The first approach is a sort of reinterpretation of the concept of *bada'* through which it loses its forceful content. The second means of refutation leads to the ascription of two sorts of knowledge to God: essential knowledge, and active or relational knowledge. This division in the knowledge of God could not save Him from mutability, as argued above. For further explanation, see Saeedimehr (2018).
33. As S. H. Nasr explains: 'The Arabic root of the terms *walāyah*lwilāyah is *wly*. This root has numerous meanings, including having domination over something, lordship, sanctity, being a master, ruler, friend, and intimate' (Nasr (2007), 106).
34. The Hadith Qudsī translated and quoted by Chittick (1998), 8.
35. Here I offer a mystical interpretation of Shiism as opposed to its dominant canonical interpretation given by traditional jurisprudents. But this mystical interpretation is today becoming more influential due to

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gradual reforms in the Najaf and Qum seminaries. About 100 years ago a mystical school was established in the Najaf seminary by Mullā Hossein-qali Hamadāni, one of the famous jurisprudents and mystics of his time. He educated about 300 students in his school, and there are many famous names among his pupils and his pupils' pupils. For example, Allamah Sayyed Ali Qāzī, Allamah Sayyed Muhammad Hossein Tabātabā'ī, and Imam Khomeinī belonged to this school of thought. As a consequence of the flourishing of this line of thought and its full support from the Islamic Revolution in Iran (in 1979) we can today see a sort of reconciliation between jurisprudence and mysticism among Shia theologians. So I think this mystical interpretation of Shiism would not now be considered eccentric.

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