

## Henry Corbin: from Heidegger to Mullâ Sadrâ Hermeneutics and the Unique Quest of Being

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### Abstract

*The fact that Corbin left the realm of Western philosophy to devote himself to Islamic philosophy and Iranian theosophers has usually been considered as a radical "rupture" in Corbin's philosophical thought. This article aims at showing that in reality, there is no contradiction but rather a deep continuity in his philosophical path, which was guided by a unique quest of being. Corbin was therefore deeply influenced by Heidegger's main issue of "being qua being" as well as his hermeneutical methodology, but reached another apprehension and level of being through his acquaintance with Mullâ Sadrâ's transcendental philosophy. This crossed-approach led to the transformation of the Heideggerian "Being-towards-death" into the Sadrâian "Being-beyond-death", and revealed the deep correspondence between the mode of being and the mode of comprehension as well as the complementary nature of philosophy and mysticism; the latter being the essential and only true realm in which, through presential knowledge, "the fundamental reality of being" may be grasped.*

**Keywords:** *Henry Corbin, Martin Heidegger, Mullâ Sadrâ, Being, Hermeneutics, Transcendental philosophy, Western philosophy.*

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## Introduction

Henry Corbin (1903-1978) was one of the most prominent scholars in philosophy and theology of the twentieth century. He was the student of Etienne Gilson, Emile Bréhier, Jean Baruzi and Louis Massignon, and a renowned professor of Islamic studies at the Sorbonne. Through his numerous writings on the thought of some great figures of the Islamic philosophical tradition – especially Iranian philosophers or, according to him, "theosophers"<sup>1</sup> such as Shahâb ad-Dîn Yahyâ Suhrawardî<sup>2</sup> (1155-1191) and Mullâ Sadrâ<sup>3</sup> (1571-1640) -, as well as the translation into French of some of their main works, he greatly contributed to reveal their philosophical thought and their metaphysical horizon to the West. His works also helped to invalidate a widespread assertion of that time, according to which Islamic philosophy and theology would have come to an end after Averroes.

Therefore, Henry Corbin's education firstly consisted in Western philosophy and scholasticism. In this realm, he carried out the first French translation of Heidegger's *What is Metaphysics?*<sup>4</sup>, as well as of some early works of Karl Barth. From the beginning, he showed a deep interest for the issue of the relations between speculative knowledge and spiritual experience and, more generally, between philosophy and mysticism. It is in the wake of the numerous questions he was asking to his professor Louis Massignon, that the latter decided to give him the lithographed edition of Suhrawardî's *Hikmat-ol-Isbrâq* (Philosophy of illumination) in 1928, through which he became acquainted with the realm of Islamic philosophy. However, after this discovery which, in his own words, "*sealed his spiritual destiny for the crossing of this world*" (Corbin, 1981a), he simultaneously pursued his researches in Western philosophy, notably deepening his knowledge of religious thinkers pertaining to the German theological tradition such as Luther or Johann Georg Hamann.

Corbin was acquainted with Mullâ Sadrâ through his commentaries in the margin of Suhrawardî's *Hikmat al-Isbrâq* (The Philosophy of Illumination), and through Sadrâ's commentary of Mohammad ibn Ya'qûb Kolaynî *Osoûl-e Kâfî* which contains the main *hadîths* accepted by Shia Islam and unveils some aspects of Mullâ Sadrâ's own thought on key religious and philosophical issues. Corbin's main work on Mullâ Sadrâ was a critical translation and edition of the Arabic treaty *Ketâb al-Mashâ'ir* (Shîrâzî, 1988) (The book of Metaphysical Penetrations), which is of paramount importance as it contains the demonstration of the issue which lies at the basis of its philosophy, that is, the principality of being

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(*isâlat al-wujûd*). In addition to the translation of the original text, he added extended footnotes as well as commentaries explaining the translation of the main concepts into French, and comparing the original Arabic concepts to their French but also Persian and Latin equivalents. He also wrote a substantial introduction in which he presents a biography and a detailed but not exhaustive bibliography of Mullâ Sadrâ, as well as the main aspects of the Sadrian philosophy. In addition, Corbin translated a part of the *al-Hikma al-'Arshia* which was published in *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (Corbin, 1977). He also expounded the main aspects of the Sadrian philosophy in the fourth volume of his main work, *En Islam iranien* (In Iranian Islam) (Ibid, 1972). At last, he dedicated numerous conferences and classes in France as well as in Iran to the presentation of Sadrâ's thought<sup>5</sup>, and referred to him in numerous articles and academic discussions. He also considered himself deeply indebted to the Shaykh Mohammad Hosayn Tabâtâbâ'î for his new edition of Mullâ Sadrâ's *Asfâr*, as well as for the numerous discussions he had with Corbin which enabled him to get a better understanding of the Sadrian "theosophy". In these various and detailed works on Mullâ Sadrâ, Corbin followed a phenomenological approach to understand the scope and deepness of his thought since, in Corbin's words, "*Mullâ Sadrâ can only be explained by himself*" (Corbin, 1964, p. 18).

These eclectic activities and his passage from Heidegger to Oriental philosophy has often been debated, leading some critics to interpret it as a "drastic rupture" and, for some of them, to conclude that the "disappointment" or "disillusion" of Corbin regarding Western philosophy was the reason that induced him to move towards the realm of Islamic philosophy and mysticism. Therefore, Corbin was at the same time the first to introduce the work of Heidegger and Iranian philosophers such as Suhrawardî and Mullâ Sadrâ in France. Accordingly, we may wonder if there is a link between those two realms of studies, and what has led Corbin to give up Western philosophy to devote himself to Iranian philosophy and more precisely to Mullâ Sadrâ's transcendental philosophy (*al-hikmat al-muta'aliyah*). Even though it may appear as a radical rupture, Corbin's interest for Iranian philosophy corresponds in reality to the upholding of a unique quest, which we may call "the quest of being" as well as of a living and unique "Sophia".

### Heidegger's philosophical approach and its influence on Corbin's thought

The philosophical approach of Martin Heidegger, which is essentially based on hermeneutics, as well as his analysis of the issue of "being" and its implications, deeply influenced Corbin and provided him with the so-called "*clavis hermeneutica*" (hermeneutical key) he used in his approach to Iranian philosophers, amongst whom, as we will analyze it later on, Mullâ Sadrâ.<sup>6</sup>

First of all, Corbin got acquainted with the issue of being and the study of "being qua being" through Heidegger's criticism of philosophy, which is based on the distinction between the concept of "being" ("*das Sein*"; "*Esse*" in Latin or "*être*" in French) encompassing all that exists, and beings ("*das Seiende*", "*ens*", "*étant*"), which refer to individual and determined "existents" such as a particular man, a tree...; distinction that he called the "ontological difference". According to Heidegger, from Plato<sup>7</sup> until now, philosophy has taken a wrong path and confined itself to tackling only the determined existents (beings) and their properties expressed through the notion of "quiddity", instead of struggling to discover the fundamental reality of being. Therefore, the aim of a true philosophy should be to study "being qua being" and aim at grasping "the reality of being", instead of limiting itself to the study of its particular manifestations. For Heidegger, the issue of being is a long-forgotten question which is nevertheless prior to any kind of philosophical interrogation, as it lies at the basis of our understanding of the world. Heidegger also distinguishes the predicative meaning of being in the sense of *what* something is, i.e. its essence (What-being; *Was-sein*), from its existential sense which means that something *is* (That-being; *Das-sein*). The latter is, according to him, the most general feature shared by all beings.

This view is based on a specific vision of the world according to which all the concrete existents would be different manifestations of a unique and all-encompassing reality called "being". Corbin found the same distinction expressed through the concepts of "*wujûd*" (being) and *manjûddât* (determined beings) in some Iranian theosophians' writings. Moreover, as we will see later, Heidegger's quest finds, in many aspects, an echo in Mullâ Sadrâ's philosophical system based on the issue of the "principiality of being" (*asâlat al-wujûd*).

According to Heidegger, knowledge of being is a privilege only

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reserved to the human being, who is the only being aware of his condition of "being a being" or, in Heidegger's words, of his "falling" into being. Man understands and starts his reflection on being from his particular "*situs*" or specific location expressed by Heidegger through the concept of "Dasein" (Being-there). The "da" or "there" refers to human being's presence *in* the world which, through the understanding he has of it, will mark the start of his presence *to* the world.

Even though "That-being" is the most general characteristic shared by all the existents, Heidegger also introduced the idea of the existence of different modes of being (*Seinsart, Seinweise*) and thereby of a qualitative dimension of being (How-being, *Wie-sein*) linked to the act of presence of the "da". As a result, human beings all exist but they *are* in different ways as each of them actualizes personally the possibilities he has in himself and establishes a specific relation to the world. Therefore, each "That-being" has a "How-being" which will actualize itself through a special mode of being that will in turn condition man's apprehension of the world and of his life. The meaning of being in Heidegger's thought is not limited to the expression of the fact that someone or something "exists" (in contrast to its essence), but also refers to Dasein's mode of being (its How-being) and its relation to being as a whole. Heidegger establishes here another fundamental distinction between the "authenticity" and "inauthenticity" of Dasein, which will be determined by its relation and its "presence" to being.

An authentic presence consists in the acceptance of his ultimate finality expressed by the concept of "Being-towards-death", contrary to the unauthentic presence through which Dasein is drawn into a superficial social life and loses its identity in the impersonality of the "They" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 126)<sup>8</sup>, or forgets its real finality in a trivial routine. It also refers to human beings' tendency to conceal their own death from themselves, which is nevertheless the only thing they really possess and makes their being a whole being. Authenticity therefore means rendering oneself possible for death by anticipating it and, alone in front of destiny and anguish, accomplish oneself totally by giving our being the possibility to "form a whole"<sup>9</sup> (*ganzes Seinkönnen*). Achieving this inherent dimension of his being will enable man to reach "Freedom to die one's own death" (*Freiheit zum Tode*), without being influenced by the "They".

Heidegger's methodology based on hermeneutics also deeply influenced Corbin's approach of philosophers and mystics pertaining to the Islamic tradition. For Heidegger, hermeneutics starts with the act of

presence expressed through the "Da" of the Dasein, and, according to Corbin,

aims at revealing how, through the understanding it has of itself, the human presence situates itself, circumscribes the "da", the situs of its presence and unveils the horizon that had remained hidden to her. (Corbin, 1981b)

in other words, the way Dasein makes an act of presence and asserts its being "to the world", from which and through which meaning unveil itself, after being "in the world". According to Corbin, "the essential merit of Heidegger is that he centered the very act of 'philosophizing' on hermeneutics" (*Ibid*), which he defined as "the art and the technique of the *"understanding"*". This aspect of Heidegger's thought also allowed Corbin to perceive the narrow correspondence existing between the "*modi intelligendi*" (mode of understanding) and the "*modi essendi*" (mode of being), and that the very process of understanding as well as the content of the knowledge acquired through it depends on the mode of being, which consequently becomes the ontological condition of the process of understanding, i.e. of hermeneutics. As we will see later, Corbin will find the same issue in the philosophy of Mullâ Sadrâ through the notion of "presential knowledge" (*'ilm hudûrî*), whose scope differs however fundamentally from Heidegger's thought.

The notion of "levels of hermeneutics", which refers to the existence of different modes of understanding linked to specific modes of being, as well as phenomenology also deeply influenced Corbin's approach of religious books and philosophical texts and, more generally, in the study of the "religious phenomenon": refusing to explain and reduce it to the historical and sociological context in which it emerges, he struggles to

come close to the inner "environment" of those thinkers and to live with them in their particular environment, that is to say the spiritual universes that were familiar to them and that they tried to explore in their metaphysical researches. (Corbin, 1972, XVIII)

Corbin also paid much attention to the link underlined by Heidegger between hermeneutics and theology, as it was repeatedly used in the three "religions of the book" as well as by the first commentators of the Bible or by the protestant theologians. We may say that through

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Heidegger, Corbin discovered the importance of hermeneutics as a key opening the doors of hidden meanings and disclosing the esoteric scope of literal texts (*Ibid*).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he repeatedly deplored the fact that this original link between hermeneutics and theology tended to be forgotten or at least overlooked at his time, especially by the young disciples of Heidegger (*Ibid*). Through Heidegger's work, we may therefore say that Corbin got acquainted with the complexity of the phenomenological and hermeneutic lexicon, which later helped him to understand the deepness and complexity of the scope of Islamic philosophy. In many of his writings, Corbin also underlines the fact that "hermeneutics" corresponds to the Arabic word "*ta'wîl*", which derives from the root "*awwala*" and signifies to bring back something to its origin and archetype. It also refers to a special way of understanding containing many different levels corresponding to different level of being.

The notions of individuality and autonomy, as well as the necessity to disentangle oneself from the material world and the dictatorship of the "They" to reach authenticity also constitute an aspect of Heidegger's thought which seems to have found a deep echo in Corbin's conception of the individual and of spirituality. However, Heidegger's concept of authenticity didn't have any religious scope, as he was convinced that philosophy was essentially distinct from theology; the latter being an historical discipline which aims at studying "the beings disclosed by faith, including faith itself" (Inwood, 1999), whereas philosophy "is needed since the basic concept of a science cannot be explained fully in isolation from our overall understanding of being" (*Ibid*). In his works, Corbin relentlessly denounced the predominance of historicism and the tendency to explain all kinds of phenomena through the historical and sociological circumstances in which they appeared, as well as the communist, socialist or "collectivist" ideologies of that time. However, Corbin gave another dimension to this criticism by underlining the metaphysical implication of the tendency to reduce phenomena to their material conditions of emergence:

I dare to say that, having become the prey of a widespread agnosticism, the actual humanity will falter before it can reach freedom-for-beyond-death. We have erected with much cleverness all the hurdles that could prevent us from attaining it: psychoanalysis, sociologism, dialectical materialism, linguistic, historicism... everything was set up to prevent us

from having any kind of view or signification of what is beyond this material world. (Corbin, 1981b)

Corbin also found the centrality from the concept of individuality in Suhrawardī and Mullā Sadrā's thought, for whom the disentanglement of the material world (*tajrīd*) and mundane life is one of the primary conditions to accede to the real meaning of being. As we will see later, the concept of the "call of being", which is evoked in Heidegger's first writing and expressed more clearly in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962, p. 163)<sup>11</sup> also finds a particular echo in the mystical concept of "personal angel" and of "celestial self" who is guiding the material self to attain the meaning of its true being.

Through his translation of Heidegger's work *What is Metaphysics?*, Corbin also got acquainted with concepts such as "*Erschliessen*" (to open up, to be revealed) or "*Erschlossenheit*" (alluding to a state of "openness") which refer to the acts by which the different modalities of the human presence reveals itself; or expressions such as "*Verborgen*" (unveil the hidden), which have close equivalents in the vocabulary commonly used in Sufism and Islamic philosophy, notably the expression *kashf al-mahjūb* (the unveiling of the hidden under the phenomenon), which corresponds precisely to the phenomenological approach. Corbin also established some parallels between the notions of "*kashf*" and the German concept of "*Enttölung*" (meaning "disclosure", "revelation" and "unveiling"), which both allude to the unveiling of a truth hidden under the apparent or the external phenomena, and that Corbin compared to the notion of "*alētheia*" (truth) in Heidegger's work. For Heidegger, the very meaning of truth consists in taking something out of hiddenness (*Verborgenheit*), or to uncover something (*entdecken*), instead of being a mere correspondence between an object and a subject that can be seized instantaneously. This definition had an essential implication for Corbin's conception of the truth not as something which may be discovered through judgments, representations, or assertions, but that should be found in the reality of being. As a consequence, man's tendency to misinterpret things and his failure to grasp reality may only be imputed to the Dasein's "inauthenticity" and its tendency to forget its real self by drowning itself in the realm of vain thoughts and utterances. This idea of a truth which is not to be found in immaterial ideas but to be disclosed "here", in the reality surrounding man, and through the attainment of an authentic form of being, will be found again by Corbin in many topics of the Islamic philosophy.



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Henry Corbin got acquainted with the issue of being through Heidegger's writings, and his methodology based on hermeneutics had a decisive influence on Corbin's approach of the Islamic philosophers' world, preventing him from falling into the trap of historicism and enabling him to see beyond the appearances to reach the profound meaning of their thought and spiritual experiences. Thus, his coming to the realm of Islamic philosophy and gnosis shouldn't be considered as a rupture, but much more as a continuation of Heidegger's intent to grasp the fundamental reality of being.

However, Corbin doesn't adhere to the Heideggerian conception of the world (*Weltanschauung*) which confines reality only to its material dimension, but gives Dasein a dimension transcending death which will reach its complete achievement in Mullâ Sadrâ's transcendental philosophy. Accordingly, we may say that Corbin uses the Heideggerian analytic system as a frame to reach hermeneutic levels that hadn't been envisaged in Heideggerian philosophy. In spite of that, the hermeneutical key of Heidegger allowed him to "open the locks of being", constituted a sort of starting point leading to higher levels of signification and played a central part in his understanding of the Islamic philosophy.

#### **Mullâ Sadrâ's transcendental philosophy in the light of Corbin's interpretation**

Corbin considers Mullâ Sadrâ to be the instigator of a real "metaphysical revolution", since he was the first to radically question the principles of the metaphysics of essences and to replace it by a philosophical and metaphysical system based on the principiality of being (*isâlat al-wujûd*), in which the "fundamental reality of being" has the priority over the essence.<sup>12</sup> Mullâ Sadrâ established a fundamental distinction between the fundamental proprieties or the essence of a thing (*mâbiyat*) and its existence or being (*wujûd*); distinction which was formulated by Heidegger through the concepts of "What-being" and "That-being". Unlike the essentialists, Sadrâ asserts that a being is what he is through his existence, which means that he *is* his own quiddity and determines it through the actualization of his own possibilities. Consequently, his system invalidates the theory based on the fact that beings are essences to which existence would have been accidentally added. On the contrary, in the Sadrian system, beings (*manjûd*) in

external world become different extensions and actualizations of the single and fundamental reality of being (*vujûd*). It is therefore the act of being (*fe'l-e vujûdî*) that determinates the quiddity, whereas the quiddity *per se* cannot be the source or the cause of any kind of existence. The precedence of the act of existing over quiddity is also deeply linked, as we will see further, to a conception of being as a presence which culminates with the central theory of the unification of the subject of intellection (*'âqil*) and its object (*ma'qûl*).

In his French translation of *The book of Metaphysical Penetrations* and in the wake of Heidegger's criticism of the "forgetting of being", Corbin underlines the devaluation and impoverishment of the meaning of being in Western philosophy which, according to him, has lost its original signification which referred to something or someone that is existing, to be only used as a copula to formulate a logical judgment:

a being doesn't refer to something existent anymore, but to a thing for which we conceive the concept and whose existence is possible conceivable. (Corbin, 1988, p.60)

Corbin particularly stresses the necessity to distinguish the meaning of "being" as a verb ("*être*" in French or "*esse*" in Latin) and as a substantive referring to a being or beings ("*un être*" or "*des êtres*" in French; "*ens*" in Latin). He also underlines the widespread confusion existing between "being" and "being a being", and the fact that "being" tends only to be understood in the last form, whereas, as he puts it, "*without being, no being could be a being*" (*Ibid*).<sup>13</sup> Thereby, through Corbin's analysis, the struggle of Mullâ Sadrâ to distinguish those two significations of being and avert all confusion between both finds an echo in the Occident of the XXth century, and inserts itself in the Heideggerian framework of concern. Consequently, we may say that Heidegger shared with Mullâ Sadrâ a single and unique preoccupation: they both wanted to grasp the fundamental reality of existence or being (*kehod-e baghîghat-e vojoud*) and justify it in a philosophical frame.

Beyond the limited horizon of the Heideggerian Dasein whose ultimate aim is to accept its condition as a "Being-towards-death" (*Sein zum Tode*) and his becoming a "nothingness", Corbin found in Mullâ Sadrâ the key to the access to another climate of being through higher hermeneutical levels and degrees of presence. Through the analytical framework provided by Heidegger, we may say that the whole philosophical approach of Corbin was guided by the following questions: what are the

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presences that Dasein renders present to itself through its own act of presence? To what or to which *worlds* is he present? Contrary to Heidegger's horizon limited to this material world, the metaphysics of Mullâ Sadrâ culminates in a metaphysics of presence turned towards the attainment of, as Corbin puts it, a "Being-beyond-death" («être pour au-delà-de-la-mort», or in German, "*Sein zum Jenseits des Todes*"). Therefore, the finality of Dasein's presence in this world unveiled by the "phenomena of the world" is not death anymore, but a "Being-beyond-death" through the access to other levels of presence beyond this material world. The meaning of presence is thereby considerably amplified, since Dasein, through its particular act of presence, has the possibility to be present to immaterial and celestial worlds. This distinct horizon lies in a different conception of the world which itself determinates the ultimate horizon of the Dasein: as Corbin underlines it, "the pre-existential philosophical option is a constitutive element of Dasein as well as of the act of presence to the world and its 'variations'" (*Ibid*).

Contrary to Heidegger's thought in which the unveiling of the horizon of Dasein through his presence to his world is also revealing its finitude, for Mullâ Sadrâ, the presence revealed to man through his presence to this world has a metaphysical and transcendental dimension, and prepares the advent of his Being-beyond-death. As a consequence, the ultimate aim of man's presence to the world is not only to gain consciousness of his finitude, but to prepare his own personal being to accede to other levels of being. The meaning of death becomes drastically different and linked to the issue of eschatology: far from being the annihilation of a particular being, death represents only a new start, as well as his access to a higher level of being. It appears that the Sadrian vision corresponds more to Corbin's personal beliefs and inclinations, based on the refusal to limit the horizon of the human being to its material existence. Concerning this matter, he himself declared:

What I was looking for in Heidegger's philosophy, and what I understood thanks to Heidegger, is the same thing I was looking for and that I found in irano-islamic metaphysics.  
(Corbin, 1981b)

Heidegger taught Corbin to analyze the *Da* of *Dasein* and seize the nature of its act of presence, but the Sadrian philosophy enabled him to propel it to higher hermeneutical levels.

The way to attain authenticity and the real meaning of one's being is

not only, like in the Heideggerian system, to flee the mundane and trivial everyday life to face the inevitability of one's death, but may also be realized through the following of a spiritual path which takes the meaning of a return of the soul to its original "homeland" through the attainment of an increasing degree of presence to higher and immaterial worlds. Mullâ Sadrâ's philosophical system is linked to a cosmology postulating the existence of an intermediary or imaginal world (*al-'âlam al-awsat*, '*âlam al-mithâl*'), which is the realm of subtle bodies and images situated between the material world (*'âlam al-molk*) and the world of intellect (*'âlam al-malakât*); however, this world is in no way separated but constitutes a specific level of the unique reality of being. As a result, we may say that the Sadrîan "*Da*" has an intrinsic vertical dimension, and has the potentiality to reach other levels of presence in celestial worlds as well as other levels of knowledge.<sup>14</sup> As Corbin puts it,

the degree of intensity which situates the act of being of each existent, depends on his presence to himself and on the Presences which are present to him. [...] The climbing back [in the scale on Being] takes place with each presence that he reaches; it culminates within man (sometimes within the philosopher, sometimes within the prophet) when he becomes aware of the unity of the subject of intellection (*'âqil*) and the object of intellection (*ma'qûl*), and therefore attains the rank of the active intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'âl*). (Shîrâzî, 1988)

The essence of a being is thereby determined by his presence to this world: the more intense his existence is, the more present his presence will be in higher degrees of being and *be* beyond death. For Mullâ Sadrâ, the attainment and identification to the active intellect represents the summit of being and consequently the highest degree of presence. In Corbin's words,

Mullâ Sadrâ's metaphysics of being leads to a metaphysics of the Holy-spirit [...] identified with the '*âlam al-amr*', the world of the divine imperative as he evokes Being in the imperative form as an *amr fi'lî*, an active Imperative [...] which contains the ultimate secret of the precedence of being over essences or quiddities, because this imperative "imperatives" existence and not the quiddities, that is to say the existences of these quiddities, and not this quiddities in the state of logical abstractions. (*Ibid*, pp.77-78)

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As a consequence, for Corbin, Heidegger and Mullâ Sadrâ shared the common preoccupation to grasp the fundamental reality of being. However, the essential difference between them lies in what Corbin called their "height aimed at" ("*hauteur de visée*"), which determines different "modes of being" (or How-being, to use the Heideggerian terminology) leading itself to different "unveilings" and understandings of the reality, and finally to different horizons and conclusions.

Corbin's understanding and acquaintance with Suhrawardî's philosophy of illumination greatly helped him to understand Mullâ Sadrâ's thought, as the latter reuses the fundamental distinction established by Sheikh al-Ishrâq between "formal knowledge" ("*ilm sûrî*"), which refers to common knowledge arising through a representation actualized in the mind, and "presential knowledge" ("*ilm hozûrî*") occurring without intermediary and through which

the act of presence of the soul itself generates the presence of things and makes present to itself not objects, but presences.  
(*Ibid*)

This kind of knowledge has also been called "oriental knowledge" ("*ilm ishrâqî*"), as it represents, as Corbin puts it,

the rising of the Orient of being on the soul and the rising of the early-rising illumination of the soul on the things it reveals and reveals itself as co-presences. (*Ibid*)

Mullâ Sadrâ dedicated a great number of his works to the issue of being qua being and to the demonstration of its principality over essences; however, unlike Heidegger, he was conscious of the fact that philosophy couldn't express the fundamental reality of being, but was only able to reflect some of its main properties through mental concepts and logical demonstrations. According to him, the apprehension of the fundamental reality of being is beyond the reach of any concept or rational demonstration, and may only be grasped through presential knowledge and intuitive perception (*shuhûd*), and not conceptual knowledge since it involves the presence of an intermediary – and therefore a gap - between the subject of intellection and its object. As a consequence, the understanding of the reality of being is only possible through a spiritual journey (*seyr-o-sulûk*) and a visionary experience whose deep meaning may not be uttered through words, although the content

of this experience may be justified logically *a posteriori* in a philosophical system. In Mullâ Sadrâ's philosophy, Corbin also recovers the "lost link" between hermeneutics and the sacred through the idea of prophetic philosophy (*falsafeh nabavi*), whose basis lies in the necessity to discover the various levels of signification and the true meaning of the Qur'an; necessity that constitutes the starting point of the spiritual path and gives it its orientation.

Consequently, the essential difference between Heidegger and Mullâ Sadrâ is that the understanding of the reality of being may not be attained in the realm of philosophy but only through a "presential knowledge" (*'ilm hudûrî*) corresponding to the mode of being of the subject of knowledge. Through the Sadrian philosophy, Corbin went beyond the Heideggerian horizon and discovered the path leading to the access to the truth of being, as well as its culmination in a metaphysics of Presence unveiling the reality of the real self. Therefore, the soul should struggle to extract itself from the reign of the matter and free itself from material death - which only concerns the body - to make up for its lag on the total presence. For Mullâ Sadrâ, the denying of this reality will only enhance the lag of a human being on Being, and make him lag behind his real self.

For Henry Corbin,

the stake of the struggle carried out by Mullâ Sadrâ's metaphysics against the reign of the quiddities ultimately consists in the very meaning of the individual. Nevertheless, our social life is the archetype of the reign of quiddities; we always have to classify people, label them and assign them titles which fail to express the very act of existing of each individual, through which he is himself and nothing else. (Corbin, 1964, p. 55)

The individual scope of being is an essential aspect of Corbin thought, since this individual dimension of being is itself linked to the "perfect nature" (*al-tibâ' al-tâmm*) or the "heavenly twin" of each man that manifests itself in the shape of an angel, a spirit, or "*Daena*", the incarnation of one's faith. Corbin also underlines that the roots of this idea lie in the Preislamic concept of *Fravarti* which, in Zoroastrianism, refers to the celestial archetype of each being or its "guardian angel" and reflects the personalist dimension of this religion. This also constitutes an extension of Heidegger's concern to escape the dissolution of our own

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being in the "They" and the fallacious labels and titles we use to define ourselves in the society in order to reach an authentic existence and assume the possibilities of our being. In the light of Mullâ Sadrâ's thought, the authentic existence as defined by Corbin was therefore to respond to a metaphysical call and discover the infinite possibilities of individual's being, through his encounter with his own spiritual and inner guide who is the hermeneut of divine worlds and conduce him to higher levels of existence and presence.<sup>15</sup> This aspect was first discovered by Corbin in Suhrawardî's initiatic tales describing the encounter between the pilgrim and its inner guide, and became a creed that deeply influenced his intellectual and personal life. According to Corbin, Mullâ Sadrâ's philosophy leads to a metaphysics of the Spirit, or, as he puts it, of the "*creative Holy Spirit*" through which

the first meaning of being reveals itself not as substantive being [*étant*, or being in its passive form], neither being in its infinitive form (the act of being), but as a being in the imperative form ("*be!*" or "*kun!*" in Arabic). (Shîrâzî, 1988, p.57).

As a consequence, Mullâ Sadrâ introduces what Corbin called a "theosophy" based on the conjunction of philosophical speculation and mystical experience, through which a direct apprehension of spirituals beings may take place in the imaginal world (*'âlam al-mithâl*). This aspect constitutes the basis of the "prophetic philosophy" (*falsafeh nabavî*) we mentioned before, which reveals the identity between the angel of revelation and the angel of knowledge and, in other words, the unique source from which stems the inspiration of prophets and the experiences of mystics. Corbin was also influenced by Mullâ Sadrâ's conception of the relations between revelation and philosophical meditation, as it was expressed in his commentary of *Kitâb al-Hujjat* under the title "The penetration of the light of the divine existence in existents" (*Sarâyan nûr wujûd fî'l-manjûdat*). In this part of the commentary, Mullâ Sadrâ asserts that divine revelation and the Qur'an are like lights enabling us to see, whereas philosophical meditation may be compared to an eye through which we may actually see what the light of Revelation has unveiled. This again stresses the deep interdependence between revelation and philosophy: without the eyes of philosophy, the light of revelation cannot be seen; whereas without the light of revelation, our open eyes will see nothing but darkness. The deep agreement between divine revelation and philosophy provided Corbin with an answer concerning

the relations between theology and philosophy beyond their opposition and divorce that had been proclaimed in the West.

### **The epistemological and philosophical consequences of Corbin's analysis**

Mullâ Sadrâ's transcendental theosophy provided Corbin with new instruments to analyze the conditions and possibilities of knowledge, as well as to reconsider the fundamental aim of philosophy. Thus, we may say that Corbin got acquainted, through Heidegger, to the essential problematics of being, and discovered its metaphysical dimension as well as other levels of being corresponding to other hermeneutic levels<sup>16</sup> in Mullâ Sadrâ's transcendental philosophy. To some extent, Corbin found in Mullâ Sadrâ a response to Heidegger's quest of the fundamental reality of being through the notions of inner intuition (*shuhûd*) and presential knowledge (*'ilm hudûrî*), which doesn't pertain to the realm of philosophy but of mysticism. In Corbin's view, philosophy must in no way be considered as useless since it has an essential role in the definitions of the essential properties of being; however, as it can only express them through abstract concepts, it may only reflect the reality of being. Heidegger's vision and aim is closely akin to Mullâ Sadrâ's principiality of being, as he defended the idea that beyond all the different existents and beings, there is a fundamental and unique reality called "being". However, his philosophical system fails to unclothe its deep reality since, according to Mullâ Sadrâ, its real meaning may only be attained through mysticism. As speculative knowledge and rational demonstration proved their incapacity to reach and justify the fundamental reality of being, his system led him to conclude to inevitable annihilation of beings through their death. Beyond this doomed metaphysical horizon, Corbin discovered the role of imaginal intuition which has, in transcendental philosophy, its own noetic dimension and creates the condition of a true apprehension of being at the level of the imaginal world. Heidegger's vision of the world (*weltanschauung*) didn't take into consideration the existence of this intermediary world, and therefore limited the existential horizon of his Dasein. Through an "epistemological rupture", we may say that Corbin pursued Heidegger's quest in a higher level of signification through the Sadrian metaphysics of presence.

During his whole life, Corbin remained constantly preoccupied with what he considered to be the decline of an "occidental"<sup>17</sup> philosophy that tends to define man as a being "doomed to nothingness", as well as the



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increasing gap between faith and knowledge and the complete divorce between philosophy and theology that has taken place in the West. He also vividly criticized the predominance of historicism and the tendency to reduce each phenomenon to its historical and social context, entailing an infertile "rationalization of the world" limiting the possibilities of being. As a consequence, the evolution of modern Western philosophy has led to a progressive concealment of the real dimension of being by reducing it only to what the material intellect can perceive and grasp. This phenomenon entailed what Henry Corbin called a "metaphysical nihilism", which stems from the tendency to negate the existence of realities that are situated outside the horizon of material experience and may not be grasped through rational demonstrations.<sup>18</sup> According to him, this tendency has also entailed a complete failure to understand spiritual experiences by trying to reduce them to so-called sociological or psychological "factors". Therefore, the predominance of reason consecrated in modern philosophical systems has tended to demystify and negate the sacred dimension of the world, and to confine itself to the analysis of the external and rational aspect of being ("*ẓāhir*"), overlooking its internal and immaterial dimension ("*bātin*"), or its "spiritual being" they couldn't grasp through speculative knowledge and rational analysis. As we mentioned it before, those systems present a doomed vision of man which is essentially reduced to his horizontal dimension and deprived of any transcendental horizon and hope for "beyond death".

Far from yielding to the temptation of historicism, a true *philosopher* (according to its etymology, a "friend of wisdom") should be, for Corbin, a person who refuses to let himself be influenced by those reducing theories and struggle to grasp all the scope of being, as well as all the possibilities it may open for each being's being. As a result, in Corbin's view, Mullā Sadrā and the Islamic philosophy in general give back to man the polar and vertical dimension he had lost since the Renaissance – even though it was present in the thought of great European mystics such as Jacob Boehme of Swedenborg - and restore the meaning of each singular being in its integrality, that is to say its vertical, individual and transcendental dimension. For Corbin, the aim of philosophizing is not only to gather and combine distinct concepts in the mind, but essentially consists in "responding to a Call which relentlessly interpellates us" (Shayegan, 1990, p. 22) – that is to say the call to discover our "complete being" through the recovery of its lost spiritual dimension.

Even though hermeneutics is essential in the process of this

"unveiling" of the hidden dimension of being, man remains fundamentally free to open or lock to himself the doors of being:

Sanctification and secularization are phenomena that take place and have their place not primarily in this world of external forms, but firstly in the internal world of the human soul. Man projects the modalities of his internal being in the outside world to constitute the "world phenomenon", the phenomena of his own world, in which he decides of his freedom or his servitude. Nihilism arises when man loses consciousness of his being responsible of this link and proclaims, with hopelessness or cynicism, that the doors he himself locked are closed.<sup>19</sup>

To counter this tendency, Corbin insists on the personal responsibility of the philosopher to become the heir of a knowledge that doesn't belong to the past, since for him, "theosophy" is an ever-living knowledge which can be perpetually rendered present and live in the soul of the philosopher willing to be his "host".<sup>20</sup> According to this view, transcendental philosophy could be considered dead only by those who are drawn in the throes of the historicist method. On the contrary, Mullâ Sadrâ presents a vision of the soul as a living organ that secretes its own history and contains the possibility of a climbing back in the scale of being, whenever it is ready to accept the responsibility of its own personal destiny.

For Corbin, the accomplishment of each being's destiny may be realized only through the reconciliation between the spirit and the intellect, which may only happen in the Imaginal world. According to him, this world was only defined rigorously by the Islamic theosophers as "*the mediatory world in which spirits become corporalized and the bodies, spiritualized*"<sup>21</sup> in which all the prophetic revelations, visionary experiences of the mystics, and each being's encounter with his "perfect nature" take place. Its negation in Western philosophy therefore entails the annihilation of those vertical possibilities of being, and condemn us to wander in the realms of relativism or, at the very most, agnosticism:

the loss of the imaginal in Occident: a movement started with Descartes and P. Mersenne in their opposition to the Cambridge Platonists and to what J. Boehme, Swedenborg or Oetinger were representing. This is a real "fight for the world's soul" that we should undertake. The Jungian psychology<sup>22</sup> may well prepare the ground for this battle; however, its victorious

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outcome depends on other kinds of arms that don't pertain to the realm of psychology. (Corbin, 1981b)

According to Henry Corbin, the Sadrian metaphysics based on active imagination as the essential organ through which man may find an access to this intermediary world may constitute one of these arms: through the intensification of one's act of being and presence, the material body will increasingly spiritualize itself and accede to higher and immaterial levels of being "beyond death":

the generation of the "spiritual body" happens [...] through this imaginal capacity [...] which is the soul itself "animated" by its "Perfect Nature", its celestial pole. Therefore, if one of the destructive aspects of nihilism consists in the "disenchancing" (*Entzauberung*) of a world reduced to a utilitarian positivity, without finality beyond it, we catch sight of where may rise this rampart against nihilism.<sup>23</sup>

Mullâ Sadrâ thereby invites man to the recovery of his spiritual pole, which constitutes the only key to the access to his own integral being, as well as to the understanding of the all-encompassing reality of being.

**Corbin's conception of a unique "*Sophia*"**

We must therefore underline the deep continuity of Corbin's intellectual and philosophical path, which was oriented by a single Quest of a living wisdom which may be found in any place or epochs, and which has its deep roots in ancient Iran:

That's how Iran and Germany have been the geographical landmarks of a Quest that in reality was pursued in spiritual regions that cannot be found on our maps. (Corbin, 1981a, p.42)

Beyond all intellectual classifications between philosophical systems and geographical distinctions established between "Orient" and "Occident", Corbin was struggling to reach the "Orient of knowledge" that may not be found on our geographical maps. Corbin was often asked the reason of his passage from Heidegger to Iranian philosophy, interrogation to which he answered that the simple fact of asking it reveals the symptom of a deep compartmentalization and classification of the different

schools of thought and intellectual disciplines, instead of seeing their complementary nature and build bridges between them.

This also refers to Corbin's personal conception of the philosopher, according to which the latter shouldn't limit his quest to a limited geographical or cultural horizon, but whose mind should be wide enough to embrace philosophies of different cultures and epochs and perceive the links between them:

My education is originally entirely philosophic; that's why I am in reality neither a Germanist, nor an Orientalist, but a philosopher who pursues his Quest wherever the Spirit leads him. If he led me towards Freiburg, Tehran or Ispahan, those cities are for me and before all "emblematic cities", the symbols of a permanent journey. (Corbin, 1981b, p.24)

Accordingly, Corbin was seeking the "Spirit" Western philosophy had lost with the preponderance of historicism and the tendency to reduce all the phenomena to the historical and social context of their appearance. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr puts it:

Corbin was fond of the "spiritual hermeneutic" or "*ta'wîl*" and that's the reason why whereas he was attracted and indebted to Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger and other philosophers that were using hermeneutics, he was looking for an hermeneutics that would show the true reality of the esoteric dimension of things, and this is precisely what the mystics of Islam call "*kashf al-mahjûb*" or the unveiling of the hidden under the phenomenon. Moreover, Corbin couldn't accept the view of existentialism which only led to death and nonexistence and not to eternal life and absolute existence. In reality, before he got acquainted with Mullâ Sadrâ, he was looking for someone like him. (Nasr, 2003).

From the beginning, he was therefore looking forward to discovering the hidden aspect of phenomena and their lost spiritual dimension, which he found in the Iranian "theosophy".

Some considered that Mullâ Sadrâ's attempt to restore the principality of being or existence made him the founder of modern existentialism. However, Corbin emphasized the necessity not to confuse the notion of "existence" (*wujûd*, or "being") in Mullâ Sadrâ's thought and the concept of "existence" as it appeared in the Sartrian existentialism. Even though

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both systems recognize existence as a fundamental reality and its principiality over essence, existentialism limits the meaning of existence to the personal life of each human being, and therefore doesn't take into consideration the all-encompassing reality of being as it is defined in the Sadrian philosophy. Therefore, modern existentialism achieved the destruction of the real and profound meaning of being, by confining it to the expression of "a certain way of being, linked to the period and duration and that has an existential relation to its own origin" (Shîrâzî, 1988, p. 71). Those two systems have two completely different horizons, as one leads to nothingness and death, whereas the other opens the doors to life after death and personal resurrection. For Corbin, the philosophical systems of Heidegger and Mullâ Sadrâ perfectly depicts the different path and orientations taken by the occidental and oriental traditions, and the drastically different conclusions they reached concerning the issue of being.

As a conclusion, we may say that Corbin used the methodological and conceptual tools provided by Heidegger to bring the meaning of his *Dasein* to a higher level of signification as well as to reveal a wider and deeper meaning of being which coincides, for man, with the discovery of his "Being-for-beyond-death". We may say that through the Sadrian "act of being", Corbin propelled the Heideggerian *Dasein* to higher levels of presence, beyond the realm of material death and finitude. For Corbin, Mullâ Sadrâ also represented a specific kind of conscience calling man to acquire the certainty that his "real homeland" is beyond the limit of this world and that the possibilities of his own being transcend death. This *hikmat* (wisdom) is not only one of the paths in a so-called history of ideas or philosophy of Iran and lost in past, but it is a living *Sophia* that may have implications in the present and opens new horizons for the future. Therefore, we may say that he found in the Iranian philosophy a response to a natural spiritual inclination and a desire to escape historicism and the tendency to negate the real signification and dimension of spiritual phenomena. For Corbin, as it "considers the facts of Revealed books as well as experiences of the imaginal world as true sources offered to the philosophical meditation" (*Ibid*), the Sadrian "theosophy" represents a fundamental source of reflection inviting Western philosophy to go beyond the divorce of faith and knowledge to recover its lost spirit; if not, as he adds, "*philosophia* will lose its original relation with the *Sophia*" (*Ibid*).

### Endnotes

1. Henry Corbin refers to their system of thought as a "theosophy", and not a strict "philosophy" or "theology". Theosophy comes from the Greek "theos" (God) and "sofia" (wisdom). According to Corbin, theosophy is a type of thought which emerges in the particular environment of a prophetic religion, of a spiritual community gathered around a Holy Book revealed by a prophet, because the presence of this Book requires the foremost task of the hermeneutics of its true meaning, which is to say the understanding of its spiritual meaning, and therefore the discernment of its levels of signification, Mollâ Sadrâ Shîrâzî, *Le livre des pénétrations métaphysiques (Kitâb al-Mashâ'ir)*, Translated from Arabic, with annotations and introduction by Henry Corbin, Paris, Editions Verdier, 1988, p. 17.
2. Shahâb ad-Dîn Yahyâ Suhrawardî was a famous Iranian philosopher and mystic born in the town of Suhraward in 1155, and executed in Alep in 1191. He is the founder of the School of Illumination (*Hikmat al-Isbrâq*). His philosophical system is based on a synthesis between ancient Zoroastrian wisdom, Platonism and the revelation of Islam, according to which all creatures come from emanations of various lights proceeding gradually from the light of lights. He also introduced the theory of an independent imaginal world (*'âlam al-mithâl*), intermediary between the world of intellect and the world of matter. His ideas, and notably the concepts of intensity and gradation of lights, had a significant influence on Mullâ Sadrâ's philosophical system.
3. Mullâ Sadrâ (1571-1640) is known as the greatest figures of the School of Ispahan at the Safavid era and is considered by Corbin as one of the most prominent Islamic theosopher of the last centuries. He is the founder of transcendental philosophy (*al-hikmat al-muta'aliyah*) and the author of many books and commentaries such as *al-Shavâhid al-Rubûbiyyah*, *al-Mashâ'ir*, *al-Tafsîr* (a commentary upon the Qu'ran), *Sharh-î Shifâ'* (a commentary of Avicenna's *Book of Healing*), *Sharh-î Hikmat al-Isbrâq* (a commentary of Suhrawardî's *Philosophy of Illumination*); his main work remains *al-Hikmat al-muta'aliyah fi'l-asfâr al-arba'ah*, in which he presents his main theory of the principiality of being.

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4. *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique? Suivi d'extraits sur L'être et le temps et d'une conférence sur Höderlin*, by Martin Heidegger; translated from German into French with an introduction by Henry Corbin, Paris, Gallimard, 17th ed., 1951.
5. Notably the lecture entitled "La place de Mollâ Sadrâ Shîrâzî dans la philosophie iranienne" (the significance of Mullâ Sadrâ Shîrâzî in the Iranian philosophy) he gave in 1962 in the French Institute for Research in Iran (IFRI) and which was published in Paris the same year by Maisonneuve & Larose.
6. The courses of Etienne Gilson which he attended also contributed to provide him with a method for the reading and interpretation of ancient texts.
7. In his criticism of Plato, he claimed that the ultimate objective of man is to unite himself to the very reality of being in *this* world, and not to seek immaterial beings in a so called "world of ideas" which is nothing but a chimera. However, Heidegger agreed with some pre-Socratic philosophers' view on being such as Parmenides of Elea (early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC) and Heraclitus of Ephesus (535-475 BC) for whom being qua being was a central subject of preoccupation. Parmenides also presented what can be considered the first theory of "the principiality of being", which he acquired through intuitive perception.
8. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger underlines man's tendency to adopt positions or judgment in relation to criteria defined by "the others", our social group or the society, to the detriment of the affirmation and the accomplishment of his personality: "We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they [man] take pleasure; we read, see and judge art and literature as they see and judge". Heidegger therefore denounces the overwhelming presence of "publicness" which "controls every way in which the world and *Dasein* gets interpreted" op. cit., p.127.
9. As we will see further in more detail, the concept of "whole" in Heidegger's thought only has a horizontal dimension and not a vertical one; in other words, its horizon is limited to the material world and doesn't have any transcendental dimension.
10. "Hermeneutics doesn't consist in deliberating over concepts; it is essentially the unveiling of what takes place within us, the unveiling of the reason that leads us to express such conception, vision, projection, whenever our passion turns into an action".

11. "Hearing constitutes the primary and authentic openness of Dasein for its very own ability-to-be: hearing the voice of the friend that every Dasein carries with it".
12. However, Corbin also underlines the deep links between the Sadrian system and other philosophies, and considers him to be the heir of many traditions which he synthesized and, to some extent, reconciled. Mullâ Sadrâ also focused on the complementary nature of the philosophic thought and spiritual experience, which is also a central topic of Suhrawardî's philosophy of illumination.
13. "Sans être, un être ne pourrait être un être".
14. All those worlds also have their own temporality, the time of the imaginal world being more subtle as the time of our material world.
15. Corbin was also sensitized to this issue through Suhrawardî's initiatic and mystical tales such as "The rustling of Gabriel's wings", see Suhrawardî, Shihâboddîn Yahyâ, *L'archange empourpré, Quinze traités et récits mystiques*, translated from Persian and Arabic into French, presented and commented by Henry Corbin, Fayard, 1976.
16. This aspect has been further developed by Mullâ Sadrâ in his theory of the "transubstantial motion" (*barakat jamharîya*) which, by transferring a being to higher degrees of the universe, affects its very substance.
17. For Corbin, the concepts of Occident and Orient didn't have a geographical but more a metaphysical meaning, as they referred to a distinction not between specific countries, but between secularized systems of thought and systems with a metaphysical and "sacred" scope, which don't limit their horizon to the material world but recognize the existence of subtle realities such as the imaginal world.
18. Corbin, Henry, "On apophatic theology as the antidote against nihilism", Conference held in Tehran, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1977, in a symposium organized in the Iranian Center for Civilizations Studies (Centre iranien pour l'étude des Civilisations) on the following theme: "Does the impact of western thought enable the establishment of a real dialogue between civilizations?"
19. Corbin, Henry, "On apophatic theology as the antidote against nihilism", Conference held in Tehran, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1977, in a symposium organized in the Iranian Center for Civilizations Studies (Centre iranien pour l'étude des Civilisations) on the following theme: "Does the impact of western thought enable the establishment of a real dialogue between civilizations?"



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20. [...] "*The essential prerequisite to understand the spirit of Shia Islam is to become its spiritual host. And being the host of a spiritual universe means starting by building it a dwelling place in yourselves*", Corbin, Henry, *En islam iranien – Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Gallimard, coll. Tel, tome 1, p. 7.
21. Corbin, Henry, *En islam iranien – Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Paris, éd. Gallimard, coll. Tel, tome 2.
22. In some of his researches and lectures, Corbin acknowledged the importance of Jung's researches on alchemy which led to the idea of the existence of "world of subtle bodies".
23. Corbin, Henry, "*On apophatic theology as the antidote against nihilism*". Concerning this issue, Corbin finds many similarities between Mullâ Sadrâ and Jacob Boehme's thought.

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