



Presential Knowledge and the Justification Gap: A Third-Way Epistemology from Mullā Ṣadrā's Transcendent Philosophy¹

Hassan Husseini²

Abstract

The divide between internalism and externalism constitutes one of the central impasses in contemporary epistemology concerning epistemic justification. Internalists ground justification in reflective accessibility but fail to secure a reliable connection between belief and objective reality. Externalists, by contrast, establish this connection through reliable cognitive processes, yet deprive epistemic subjects of direct access to their justificatory grounds. This article argues that the theory of presential knowledge (*ilm ḥudūrī*) developed by Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrāzī (1571–1640 CE) within his Transcendent Philosophy (*al-Hikma al-Muta'aliya*) offers a genuine third alternative capable of satisfying both requirements simultaneously. Unlike contemporary theories that treat knowledge as a mental state, presential knowledge is understood as an immediate existential relation in which the knower is directly present to the known without conceptual mediation or representational imagery. Grounded in the principles of the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*) and substantial motion (*al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*), this mode of knowledge provides a non-derivative justificatory foundation that secures both existential accessibility and a constitutive relation to truth without collapsing into either standard internalism or reliabilist externalism. Through a systematic analysis of primary sources such as *al-Asfār al-Arba'a* and *al-Shawāhid al-Rubūbiyya*, alongside a

¹ . **Research Paper**, Received: 15/11/2025, Confirmed: 17/5/2026.

². Department of Law, Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kermanshah, Iran.
(Corresponding author)(husseini1390@iau.ac.ir).



critical engagement with the epistemological theories of Alvin Goldman, Laurence Bonjour, and Ernest Sosa, and employing an analytical-comparative methodology, this study reconstructs and evaluates Ṣadrā's arguments in relation to contemporary justificatory frameworks. The article demonstrates that presential knowledge transcends the internalism–externalism dichotomy by dissolving the epistemic gap at its very foundation: the soul's presence to reality is not a secondary relation but an expression of existence itself. The paper further outlines how fallible, acquired propositional knowledge is epistemically grounded in these presential foundations.

Keywords: Presential Knowledge, Mullā Ṣadrā, Internalism, Externalism, Epistemic Justification, Transcendent Philosophy.

1. Introduction

Contemporary analytic epistemology faces a fundamental impasse concerning epistemic justification: the tension between internalism and externalism. Internalists maintain that justification supervenes exclusively on factors cognitively accessible to the subject (Feldman and Conee, 2001, p 231–35; Bonjour, 1985, p 18–25), whereas externalists argue that justification depends on external conditions such as reliable belief-forming processes, irrespective of reflective awareness (Goldman, 1979, p 357–60; Plantinga, 1993, p 3–20). This division reflects what may be called the “epistemic justification gap”: the apparent incompatibility between requiring subjects to possess reflective access to justificatory grounds and maintaining a genuine connection between justified belief and objective truth (Feldman, 2003, p 52–54). Internalism encounters several structural difficulties. The infinite regress problem arises because the justification of any belief appears to require the justification of another belief in an endless chain (Bonjour, 1985, p 23–45). Furthermore, internalism struggles to explain how internal mental states, even when maximally justified by internalist standards, can establish a reliable connection to external reality (Bonjour, 2003, p 8–12). Externalism, on the other hand, faces the accessibility objection: how can subjects be epistemically responsible for beliefs whose justificatory grounds remain inaccessible to them (Bonjour, 1980, p 53–73; Fumerton, 1995, p 176–80)? The “new evil demon problem” further challenges externalism by suggesting that two subjects with identical internal cognitive states may nevertheless possess different justificatory statuses because of differences in their external environments, despite their phenomenological indistinguishability (Cohen, 1984, p 279–94).

Conciliatory approaches, especially virtue epistemologies developed by Ernest Sosa (2007, p 22–96) and John Greco (2010, p 71–78), have attempted to synthesize these positions by distinguishing between animal knowledge and reflective knowledge. Yet such approaches have not fully resolved the underlying theoretical tension. The central question therefore remains: can an epistemological framework satisfy both the accessibility requirement and the reality-connection requirement without reducing one to the other?

The persistence of this problem suggests that the internalism–externalism debate rests upon a shared set of foundational assumptions, most notably the “representational paradigm,” which presupposes a categorical separation between the knowing subject and the known object, connected only through mental representations or causal processes. Despite their differences, both internalism and externalism remain confined within this paradigm, rendering their proposed solutions incomplete.

This article argues that the theory of presential knowledge (*‘ilm ḥuḍūrī*) developed by Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrāzī within his Transcendent Philosophy (*al-ḥikma al-muta‘āliya*) offers a genuinely third alternative that dissolves rather than merely reconciles the internalism–externalism dichotomy. In classical Islamic epistemology, *‘ilm ḥuḍūrī* refers to the soul’s direct and non-representational awareness of itself and its states (Rahman, 1975, p 212–15; Kamal, 2006, p 89–94). Ṣadrā reconstructs this concept upon two foundational metaphysical principles. The first is the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*), according to which objective reality fundamentally consists of existence rather than quiddity. On this basis, knowledge is understood as the existential presence of the known to the knower (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 3, p 310–15; Rizvi, 2009, p 145–52). The second principle is substantial motion (*al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*), which posits that the soul possesses the capacity for existential transformation and perfection, thereby enabling unity with the objects of knowledge through what Ṣadrā terms “the union of the knower and the known” (*ittiḥād al-‘āqil wa-l-ma‘qūl*) (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 8, p 205–12; Jambet, 2006, p 119–25). Together, these principles establish a hierarchical epistemic structure encompassing intrinsic presential knowledge, extrinsic presential knowledge, and acquired presential knowledge (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 48–54).

The central thesis of this article is that presential knowledge transcends the internalism–externalism divide by grounding justification in ontological presence rather than in reflective accessibility or reliable causal processes. In

doing so, it challenges the representational paradigm itself and opens a path toward an existential epistemology.

1.1. Literature Review

Persian-language scholarship on presential knowledge (*‘ilm ḥuḍūrī*) has largely focused on conceptual analysis and its place within Ṣadrā’s system of Transcendent Philosophy. Rahnema, in *Wisdom and Religious Experience*, characterizes presential knowledge as a non-representational mode of cognition in which the knower and the known possess existential unity (Rahnema, 1998, p 89–92). Dinani, in *The Ray of Thought and Intuition in Suhrawardi’s Philosophy*, traces the Illuminationist roots of the concept and relates it to mystical intuition (Dinani, 2002, p 145–158). Abdollahi, in “Epistemological Analysis of Presential Knowledge,” explains the threefold hierarchy of presential knowledge in detail but does not undertake a comparative analysis with contemporary epistemology (Abdollahi, 2010, p 71–85).

Among English-language studies, Gary Legenhausen, in “Conceptual Priority and Presential Knowledge,” emphasizes the distinction between presential and propositional knowledge, arguing that the former provides the basis for conceptual cognition (Legenhausen, 2009, p 118–125). Kamal, in *Mulla Sadra’s Transcendent Philosophy*, investigates the metaphysical dimensions of presential knowledge and links them to the theory of the union of intellect and intelligible (Kamal, 2006, p 102–117). Sajjad Rizvi, in *Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics*, explores the relation between presential knowledge and the primacy of existence, though his discussion gives comparatively less attention to the epistemological implications of the concept (Rizvi, 2009, p 156–163).

Despite these important contributions, a significant lacuna remains. No rigorous comparative study has systematically examined presential knowledge in relation to the internalism–externalism debate within analytic epistemology. Existing scholarship is either primarily interpretive (Rahnema, Dinani) or focused mainly on metaphysical issues (Kamal, Rizvi), leaving unexplored the possibility that presential knowledge may function as a third-way epistemology capable of dissolving the justification gap itself.

2. Theoretical Framework and Metaphysical Foundations

2.1. The Internalism–Externalism Divide

The internalism–externalism debate represents one of the most fundamental disputes in contemporary epistemology regarding the nature of epistemic

justification. At its core lies a basic question: what makes a belief justified? Each position offers a different understanding of the relation between the knowing mind and the external world. Epistemic internalism maintains that the subject must possess direct conscious access to the grounds of justification. Roderick Chisholm argues that epistemic justification requires subjects to access justificatory grounds through reflection alone (Chisholm, 1977, p 17). Feldman and Conee similarly regard accessibility as a necessary condition for epistemic responsibility, maintaining that only consciously accessible factors can justify belief (Feldman and Conee, 1985, p 24). Bonjour further contends that without such access, the distinction between justified belief and accidentally true belief collapses (Bonjour, 1985, p 41–45). Consequently, factors lying outside the subject's awareness cannot serve as genuine justifiers, since they cannot be reached through reflection or rational deliberation. Yet internalism faces the problem of the mind–world gap. If justification is restricted to what is internally accessible, how can one guarantee that beliefs correspond to objective reality? The problem becomes particularly acute in the face of Cartesian skepticism: even complete reflective access to justificatory grounds does not guarantee that one's beliefs accurately represent the external world (Fumerton, 1995, p 73–78). Internalists have attempted to resolve this issue through coherentism and foundationalism, but neither approach successfully bridges the divide between subjective justification and objective truth. As Bonjour himself acknowledges, criteria of subjective justification do not necessarily secure truth (Bonjour, 2003, p 47).

Epistemic externalism attempts to overcome this gap by locating justification in factors external to conscious awareness. Alvin Goldman's reliabilism, for example, holds that beliefs are justified when they are produced by reliable cognitive processes, regardless of whether subjects possess reflective access to the reliability of those processes (Goldman, 1979, p10). This shifts the focus from conscious accessibility to the causal relationship between subject and world, thereby promising to restore the connection between belief and reality. Alvin Plantinga similarly argues, through his theory of warrant, that beliefs are warranted when produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties operating within appropriate environments, even if subjects remain unaware of these conditions (Plantinga, 1993, p 46–47). Bergmann also defends non-awareness externalism by arguing that reflective access to justifiers is not necessary for epistemic justification and that the violation of this intuition is acceptable (Bergmann, 2006, p 12–19).

Nevertheless, externalism appears to violate fundamental first-person epistemological intuitions. If subjects lack reflective access to the grounds of justification, how can they be considered epistemically responsible for their beliefs? Bonjour sharply formulates this objection by arguing that if justification depends entirely upon factors outside conscious awareness, then justification becomes epistemically accidental from the subject's perspective (Bonjour, 1980, p 62). Conee and Feldman further argue that externalism reduces epistemic agents to passive recipients of external causal relations, depriving them of an active role in justification itself (Conee and Feldman, 2001, p 234–37). Likewise, Matthias Steup maintains that any theory ignoring the subject's access to justificatory grounds fails to account for justification in its genuinely epistemological sense (Steup, 1999, p 377).

The result is a profound theoretical divide: internalism preserves reflective accessibility at the cost of weakening the connection to reality, whereas externalism secures a relation to reality while sacrificing first-person epistemic accessibility. As John Pollock and Joseph Cruz observe, the debate reflects two apparently incompatible insights: the need for epistemic responsibility and the need for a reliable connection to truth (Pollock and Cruz, 1999, p 115).

Attempts at reconciliation, particularly within virtue epistemology, have yielded only partial success. Ernest Sosa's distinction between animal knowledge and reflective knowledge attempts to mediate between accessibility and reliability, yet it remains unclear which level possesses epistemic priority (Sosa, 2007, p 23–33). Similarly, John Greco emphasizes the agential competences of epistemic subjects in an effort to balance accessibility and reliability, but this approach also leaves unresolved tensions (Greco, 2010, p 71–74).

Within this context, the Transcendent Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrāzī, through the theory of presential knowledge (*‘ilm ḥuḍūrī*), offers an alternative framework capable of preserving both epistemic accessibility and connection to reality simultaneously.

2.2. Metaphysical Foundations of Transcendent Theosophy

2.2.1. Primacy of Existence (Aṣālat al-Wujūd)

Mullā Ṣadrā's doctrine of the primacy of existence (aṣālat al-wujūd) represents a major turning point in Islamic philosophy. According to this principle, existence, not essence, is the only true objective reality, while essences are merely conceptual abstractions formed in the mind (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 1, p 43–47). This metaphysical shift profoundly reshapes

epistemology as well. Ṣadrā famously states that “knowledge is a luminous mode of existence for the soul” (al-‘ilm wujūd nūrī li'l-nafs), meaning that knowledge is not an accidental quality added to the soul, but an existential mode of the soul itself (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 3, p 310). Knowledge, therefore, is understood as an ontological reality rather than a mere mental representation (Kamal, 2006, p 87–89). Within this framework, knowing is grounded in existential presence rather than representational mediation. The soul’s knowledge of an object is identical with the existence of the known form within the soul itself (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 3, p 286). In presential knowledge (‘ilm ḥuḍūrī), the ontological gap between subject and object disappears, thereby challenging the representationalist assumptions that dominate much of Western epistemology (Rahman, 1975, p 211–14; Rizvi, 2009, p 112–15). Because existence is gradational (tashkīk), unfolding through varying degrees of intensity, knowledge also assumes a hierarchical ontological structure (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 2, p 15–22). Higher and more perfect modes of existence correspond to deeper forms of self-knowledge and knowledge of reality (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 1983, vol. 5, p 198). Accordingly, epistemic justification varies according to the existential intensity of the soul itself (Jambet, 2006, p 134–38). Ṣadrā regards the soul’s presential awareness of its own essence as “the most self-evident of all self-evidencies,” representing the most immediate and foundational level of knowledge (Ṣadrā, 1982, p 96; Kamal, 2006, p 104–7). This ontological conception also redefines epistemic justification. In much of Western epistemology, justification is typically understood in terms of logical or evidential relations between beliefs (Bonjour, 1985, p 18–24; Feldman, 2003, p 78–82). In Transcendent Theosophy, however, justification is rooted in the existential perfection of the soul itself (Rizvi, 2009, p 127). Knowledge is justified not through correspondence or coherence alone, but through its degree of existential intensity and presential immediacy (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 1983, vol. 3, p 67–71). As Legenhausen notes, justification in presential knowledge is intrinsic rather than externally conferred; it belongs to the very nature of knowledge itself (Legenhausen, 2009, p 125).

2.2.2. Substantial Motion (al-Ḥaraka al-Jawhariyya)

Mullā Ṣadrā’s theory of substantial motion represents one of the most innovative doctrines in his philosophical system. Unlike earlier philosophers who limited change to accidental qualities, Ṣadrā argues that change occurs within substance itself. In al-Asfār, he maintains that all qualitative and quantitative transformations ultimately rest upon substantial motion (Ṣadrā,

1981, vol. 7, p 298–305). The human soul, therefore, undergoes continuous existential development, transforming inwardly rather than merely acquiring external attributes (Rahman, 1975, p 87–93). This principle has significant epistemological implications, since the soul's cognitive and perceptual capacities evolve alongside its existential growth (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 6, p 234–39).

According to Transcendent Theosophy, the soul begins as corporeal in origin (*jismāniyyat al-ḥudūth*) and existentially weak, yet gradually ascends through substantial motion toward spiritual permanence (*rūḥāniyyat al-baqā'*), attaining increasingly higher levels of perfection (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 8, p 364–71). Rizvi describes this process as a form of “ontological becoming,” emphasizing that knowledge depends upon the soul's existential development rather than remaining fixed and static (Rizvi, 2009, p 204–7). Jawādī Āmulī similarly explains that at each stage of ascent, the soul becomes a different knower with access to different objects of knowledge, since cognition is determined by the ontological rank of the knower (Jawādī Āmulī, 2007, p 298). As the soul advances through different existential levels, its epistemic capacities deepen accordingly, enabling access to more profound and certain forms of knowledge (Kamal, 2006, p 172–76).

The relationship between substantial motion and presential knowledge follows naturally from this framework. Every existent possesses a degree of self-knowledge (*'ilm bi'l-dhāt*) proportionate to its existential intensity (Ṣadrā, 1982, p 204). Epistemic justification, therefore, depends not merely on logical demonstration or external evidence, but on the existential perfection of the knower. Jambet observes that knowledge in Transcendent Theosophy is not passive reflection but an active mode of becoming, driven by the soul's movement toward intellectual and spiritual perfection (Jambet, 2006, p 245–49). Justification thus becomes dynamic and developmental, deepening alongside the soul's existential growth (Muṭahharī, 1989, p 417–23). In this way, Ṣadrā offers a distinctive alternative to both internalism and externalism: justification depends neither solely on reflective accessibility nor merely on external causal reliability, but on the existential perfection of the knowing subject (Nasr, 1997, p 276–80).

2.2.3. Unity of Knower and Known (Ittiḥād al-'Āqil wa'l-Ma'qūl)

The doctrine of the unity of knower and known constitutes one of the central epistemological principles of Transcendent Theosophy. Building upon and transforming Avicennan metaphysics, Mullā Ṣadrā argues that in presential knowledge (*'ilm ḥudūrī*), the knower (*'āqil*) and the known (*ma'qūl*) are

united existentially rather than existing as separate entities (Rahman, 1975, p 219–25). In *al-Asfār*, Ṣadrā states that intellect and intelligible are one in essence and existence, differing only conceptually (*iʿtibār*) (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 3, p 310–15). Knowledge thus ceases to be a representational relation and becomes an ontological reality in which truth is directly present within the soul itself rather than mediated through correspondence between ideas and external objects (Kamal, 2006, p 185–89; Jambet, 2006, p 256–60). This principle is grounded in the primacy and gradation of existence. Knowledge consists in the presence of the known within the knower as a mode of existence, not as something externally added to it (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1983, vol. 3, p 48–52). Even mental forms possess their own degree of existence, though weaker than external reality (Ṣadrā, 1985, p 152–57). Rizvi interprets this to mean that the known becomes integrated into the very being of the knower at a particular existential level, making knowledge an ontological event in which the soul internalizes the known within its own existential structure (Rizvi, 2009, p 178–82; Morris, 1981, p 94–98). The epistemological consequences of this doctrine are profound. In most analytic theories, justification depends either on logical relations between propositions or on causal relations linking beliefs to reality (Goldman, 1986, p 42–45). In Ṣadrā's framework, however, justification ultimately derives from the ontological rank and unity of knower and known. The certainty of presential knowledge stems precisely from this existential identity, which removes the possibility of error by eliminating any intermediary between subject and object (Muṭahharī, 1989, p 429–33; Nasr, 1997, p 286–90). Justification is therefore transferred from the sphere of formal logic to that of metaphysics. Presential knowledge is neither merely reflective access to internal reasons nor merely reliable causal connection with external reality; rather, it is existential union with the known itself (Jawādī Āmulī, 2008, p 142–46). Justification depends neither on accessible evidence (Feldman and Conee, 1985, p 15–18) nor on reliable cognitive processes (Goldman, 1979, p 1–10), but on the ontological status of the soul within the hierarchy of being (Sabzawārī, 2004, p 247–51; Black, 2008, p 71–75).

3. Presential Knowledge: Definition and Degrees (ʿIlm al-Ḥuḍūrī: al-Taʾrīf wa'l-Marātib)

3.1. Definition and Distinction from Acquired Knowledge

One of the foundational distinctions in Transcendent Theosophy is the distinction between presential knowledge (*ʿilm ḥuḍūrī*) and acquired knowledge (*ʿilm ḥuṣūlī*). Although the distinction originates in Avicennan

philosophy, Mullā Ṣadrā reformulates it in a fundamentally new way (Rahman, 1975, p 210–15). In *al-Asfār*, Ṣadrā defines presential knowledge as the direct perception of a thing in itself, without mediation through concepts or representations (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 3, p 310). For example, when a person experiences pain, they do not encounter a representation of pain; rather, the pain itself is immediately present within consciousness. Such knowledge is direct, immediate, and free from inferential mediation (Kamal, 2006, p 172–78). Acquired knowledge, by contrast, occurs through the reception of a mental form representing the object within the mind (Ibn Sīnā, 1983, p 257–60). The distinction therefore reflects two fundamentally different modes of cognition rather than a simple difference in terminology. Acquired knowledge functions through concepts and mental representations that stand in for external reality. Ṭabāṭabā'ī explains that in this form of knowledge, the external object itself is absent, while only its mental image is present within the mind. This creates a tripartite structure consisting of the knower, the mental representation, and the external object (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 48–52; Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 1999, vol. 1, p 233–37). As a result, the enduring problem of correspondence between mental representation and external reality inevitably gives rise to the possibility of doubt and error (Rizvi, 2009, p 165–70). Ṭūsī similarly argues that because knowledge occurs through forms, the possibility of mismatch between representation and reality always remains (Ṭūsī, 1425 AH, vol. 3, p 42–45). Presential knowledge, by contrast, involves the direct presence of the known before the knower without any mediating form. In *al-Shawāhid al-Rubūbiyya*, Ṣadrā argues that the soul knows itself through itself and not through any additional representation (Ṣadrā, 2004, p 152–57). Such knowledge entails an ontological unity between knower and known (Jambet, 2006, p 245–50). Jawādī Āmulī emphasizes that in presential knowledge, presence itself is knowledge; being and knowing are simply two expressions of one existential reality (Jawādī Āmulī, 2008, vol. 1, p 142–46; Morris, 1981, p 94–98). The epistemological consequences of this distinction are far-reaching. Because presential knowledge lacks any intermediary and rests upon the unity of knower and known, it excludes the possibility of error altogether (Nasr, 1997, p 283–87). Muṭahharī captures this point clearly when he asks: “How can one err concerning one’s own self? The soul’s knowledge of itself is entirely immune from error” (Muṭahharī, 1989, vol. 6, p 429–33). Acquired knowledge, however, remains vulnerable to error precisely because it depends on representation and form (Goldman, 1986, p 42–45).

Sabzawārī therefore describes presential knowledge as apodeictic and certain by nature, whereas acquired knowledge remains conjectural unless ultimately grounded in presential awareness (Sabzawārī, 2004, p 247–51). For this reason, many thinkers within the Islamic philosophical tradition regard presential knowledge as the ultimate foundation of certainty (Black, 2008, p 71–75). ‘Allāma al-Ḥillī likewise maintains that acquired knowledge derives its validity from presential knowledge at its deepest level (‘Allāma al-Ḥillī, 2004, p 89–93). This distinction has important implications for epistemic justification. If presential knowledge underlies all other forms of cognition, then justification cannot depend solely on internally accessible evidence or on the reliability of cognitive mechanisms. Rather, it depends on the ontological condition of the soul and its mode of existential relation to the known (Legenhausen, 2009, p 112–18). In this way, Transcendent Theosophy offers an epistemological framework in which knowledge is understood not merely as a propositional relation but as a mode of being itself (Ardabili, 2020, p 981–87).

3.2. The Degrees of Presential Knowledge

a) The Soul’s Knowledge of Its Own Essence

The soul’s knowledge of itself (‘ilm al-naḥs bi-naḥsihā) represents the most fundamental level of presential knowledge in Mullā Ṣadrā’s philosophy (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 3, p 308–12). At this level, the knower and the known are completely united existentially: the soul is present to itself directly, without any intermediary, representation, or conceptual mediation. In *al-Asfār*, Ṣadrā argues that the soul’s awareness of itself arises from its very existence rather than from mental forms or inferential reasoning (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 3, p 310; Kamal, 2006, p 85–89). Because of this existential unity, self-knowledge is entirely immune from error. The soul’s existence-for-itself is identical with its knowledge of itself; therefore, categories such as truth and falsity do not apply here. Such categories belong to propositional judgments involving a relation between mental representation and external reality, whereas no such representational relation exists in immediate self-awareness (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 52–55; Rizvi, 2009, p 187–90). Jawādī Āmulī emphasizes that this presential self-awareness precedes all conceptual and propositional knowledge. Its infallibility does not stem from successfully avoiding error but from the fact that error is simply impossible at this existential level (Jawādī Āmulī, 2007, vol. 1, p 145–48; Morris, 1981, p 97–101).

Nevertheless, Ṣadrā maintains that self-knowledge is not entirely uniform. Like existence itself, it admits degrees of intensity (*tashkīk*) corresponding

to the soul's ontological perfection (Ṣadrā, 1984, p 156–59). In *al-Mabda' wa'l-Ma'ād*, he explains that self-awareness becomes clearer and more comprehensive as the soul advances existentially. Souls that attain higher degrees of perfection possess deeper and more complete awareness of themselves than souls at lower ontological levels (Ṣadrā, 1981, p 289–92; Rahman, 1975, p 218–21). This gradual intensification is directly connected to the doctrine of substantial motion, according to which the soul undergoes continuous existential transformation (Jawādī Āmulī, 2008, p 178–81; Jambet, 2006, p 252–56). Ṣadrā also extends presential self-awareness beyond mere awareness of existence to include awareness of psychological states. Thoughts, emotions, and experiences such as pain are known immediately and directly rather than through representation (Ṣadrā, 1975, p 254–57; Muṭahharī, 1989, vol. 6, p 431–34). Contemporary scholars, however, have refined this distinction. Ardabili, for example, differentiates between the soul's awareness of its essential existential reality and its awareness of mental states, arguing that such states are accidental rather than essential features of the soul (Ardabili, 2020, p 987–91; Nasr, 1997, p 285–88). This debate shows that even within Transcendent Theosophy, the precise limits of presential knowledge remain philosophically significant.

b) The Soul's Knowledge of Its Powers and Acts

The second degree of presential knowledge concerns the soul's awareness of its faculties and activities. Mullā Ṣadrā argues that the soul knows its rational, imaginative, and sensory powers immediately, not through inference or conceptual reflection, but through their existential presence within the soul itself (Ṣadr, 1981, vol. 3, p 312; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 1, p 98; Jawādī Āmulī, 2007, p 145). An important feature of this degree is that the soul perceives not only the content of an act but also the act itself. For example, in visual perception, the soul is aware not only of what is seen but also of the very act of seeing (Muṭahharī, 1989, p 274). This point becomes especially important in explaining hallucination. Even if the perceived object does not actually exist, the soul still possesses certainty regarding the occurrence of the perceptual act itself. A person undergoing hallucination may be mistaken about the external object, but not about the fact that they are experiencing perception (Kamal, 2006, p 91; Rizvi, 2009, p 195). This analysis gives presential knowledge a clear advantage over many internalist theories of justification. Internalists such as Bonjour maintain that reflective access is required in order to distinguish hallucination from reality (Bonjour 1985, p 32–41). Ṣadrā, by contrast, argues that the soul directly knows which

faculty is active through existential union with its acts rather than through reflective reasoning (Ṣadr, 1984, vol. 8, p 227; Ardabili, 2014, p 158; Jambet, 2006, p 112). At the same time, this level of presential knowledge does not possess the absolute infallibility found in self-knowledge of essence. Although the soul knows its acts directly, determining the exact type or source of those acts may still require acquired knowledge. Distinguishing, for instance, between imagination and memory may involve conceptual interpretation and therefore remains open to error (Morris, 1992, p 204).

c) Knowledge of Intelligible Forms

The third degree of presential knowledge concerns the soul's apprehension of intelligible forms (*ṣuwar 'aqliyya*) through existential union. Mullā Ṣadrā states that in the act of intellection, the intellect becomes identical with the intelligible object itself (Ṣadr, 1981, vol. 3, p 332). This unity is not merely representational or symbolic; rather, it is an ontological identity in which knower and known become one existential reality (Rahman, 1975, p 219–21). The intelligible form is therefore not something externally represented within the intellect but constitutes the intellect's own mode of existence (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 115; Kamal, 2006, p 108).

Although Ibn Sīnā had earlier discussed the union of intellect and intelligible, Mullā Ṣadrā's doctrine of the primacy of existence transforms this idea into a fully ontological theory (Black, 2008, p 72–74; Morris, 1981, p 94). Peripatetic philosophy generally interpreted this union as a kind of mental coexistence, whereas Transcendent Theosophy understands it as genuine existential identity (Rizvi, 2009, p 202). Intellect and intelligible are therefore not two distinct realities standing in relation to one another; they are one and the same existent (Ṣadra, 1984, p 287). This framework removes the gap between mind and reality in intellectual cognition. Internalist philosophers such as Bonjour maintain that conceptual error always remains possible because concepts may fail to correspond adequately to reality (Bonjour, 1985, p 62–68). Ṣadrā rejects this possibility in genuine presential intellectual knowledge because the intelligible is not represented by the intellect, it is identical with the intellect's existential state (Muṭahharī, 1989, 312). When the intellect understands unity, for example, unity itself becomes existentially present within the intellect (Jawādī Āmulī, 2007, p 167–69). Still, this degree also admits gradation (*tashkīk*). The depth and clarity of intellectual apprehension depend upon the existential perfection of the intellect itself (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 8, p 189; Jambet, 2006, p 127–30). Moreover, Ṣadrā distinguishes between primary intelligibles that are grasped

immediately and secondary intelligibles that require discursive reasoning, indicating varying levels of presential immediacy (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 3, p 44–47). Error arises primarily when presential intelligibles are translated into propositions and language, since this translation belongs to the realm of acquired knowledge (Ardabili, 2020, p 996–98). This theory differs significantly from Bertrand Russell's notion of acquaintance with universals (Russell, 1912, p 52). Russell maintains that universals such as whiteness can be directly apprehended without mediation, but this apprehension does not involve existential union (Legenhausen, 2009, p 122–24). For Mullā Ṣadrā, however, true intellectual knowledge means that the intellect becomes whiteness itself rather than merely observing it as an external object (Nasr, 1997, p 273–76). The contrast reflects two fundamentally different epistemological paradigms: the representational approach dominant in modern analytic philosophy and the unitive ontology of Transcendent Theosophy.

d) Knowledge through Existential Extension in Sense Perception

The fourth degree of presential knowledge concerns the soul's existential extension toward external objects. This theory forms Mullā Ṣadrā's distinctive account of sense perception and differs fundamentally from representational theories in Western epistemology (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 8, p 208–12; Rahman, 1975, p 222). Instead of understanding perception as the reception of mental representations, Ṣadrā interprets it as a form of existential expansion through which the soul reaches outward toward the perceived object (Rizvi, 2009, p 174–78). This theory depends on Ṣadrā's doctrine that the soul is present to the body. In Transcendent Theosophy, the soul is not a separate substance inhabiting the body; rather, it is the body's existential form and reality (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 8, p 125). Consequently, the soul's awareness of the body is itself a form of presential knowledge because the soul and body are existentially identical (*al-naḥs 'ayn al-badan bi'l-huwiyya*) (Ibid, vol. 8, p 142). From this basis, Ṣadrā explains perception as a chain of existential presence: the soul is present to the hand through the body, the hand becomes present to the pen through physical contact, and thus the soul gains presential knowledge of the pen through bodily mediation (Kamal, 2006, p 89–92). Importantly, the body functions as a medium only in the occurrence of perception, not in its final epistemic structure. Once perception takes place, the external object itself becomes present to the soul rather than merely a mental image of it (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 3, p 310). This understanding differs sharply from representational theories of perception.

In representationalism, the mind perceives intermediary forms corresponding to external objects, and these forms mediate between subject and object (Bonjour, 1985, p 56–58). Ṣadrā instead argues that perception is itself a mode of existence. At the moment of perception, the soul existentially expands toward the object within the hierarchy of being (Jambet, 2006, p 198–201). His statement in *al-Mashāʿir* that “perception is a mode of existence” (al-idrāk nahw min al-wujūd) captures this essential idea (Ṣadra, 1984, p 85). This account has important epistemological implications. First, if the soul truly extends toward external reality, then the traditional gap between mind and world no longer requires mediation through representations (Legenhausen, 2009, p 125–27). Second, if human beings can become existentially present to one another through bodily relations, then awareness of other minds may arise through indirect existential presence rather than merely through analogical inference (Morris, 1981, p 92–95). Third, Ṣadrā’s theory bears interesting similarities to contemporary theories of embodied cognition and enactivism, both of which emphasize the constitutive role of bodily engagement in cognition (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012, p 151–55). Although these contemporary approaches do not share Ṣadrā’s metaphysical assumptions, they similarly reject the idea that cognition occurs solely within the confines of the brain.

Despite these strengths, Ṣadrā regards sensory presential knowledge as the weakest degree of presential awareness because it remains closely tied to matter (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 3, p 322). The closer the soul remains to materiality, the weaker its existential perfection and epistemic certainty become (Rahman, 1975, p 228–30). Furthermore, this form of knowledge is limited to sensible objects and cannot ground knowledge of abstract intelligibles such as mathematical truths, which require higher degrees of presential knowledge (Jawādī Āmulī, 2007, vol. 1, p 145–48). Sense perception therefore occupies only one level within the broader hierarchy of knowledge in Transcendent Theosophy.

4. Comparative Analysis: The Third Way

4.1. The Internalist Requirement: Presential Knowledge and the Cessation of Infinite Regress

Contemporary internalism insists that justification requires access to justificatory reasons, yet this requirement generates the classic problem of infinite regress: if every justification depends on another accessible reason, then each reason itself seems to require further justification, leading to an endless chain (Bonjour, 2003, p 20). Mullā Ṣadrā’s theory of presential

knowledge (‘ilm ḥuḍūrī) offers a fundamentally different response by reconceiving the very structure of justification. The key point is that presential knowledge removes the separation between knower and known instead of attempting to connect them through justification. Ṭabāṭabā’ī explains that in the primary form of presential knowledge, the union between knower and known is existential rather than merely conceptual, and therefore requires no additional justificatory process (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 1983, p 89). Internalist theories generally presuppose a duality between subject and object that necessitates mediation and thus initiates regress. Presential knowledge eliminates this mediation altogether: the soul’s knowledge of itself is simply the soul’s immediate existential presence to itself (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 3, p 45). For this reason, such knowledge is self-grounding not because it satisfies logical criteria but because existence itself functions as justification (Jawādī Āmulī, 2007, p 62). Mullā Ṣadrā extends this structure across different levels of presential knowledge, from self-awareness to knowledge of faculties and ultimately divine knowledge, all of which are rooted in the soul’s primordial self-presence (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 6, p 89–90). The problem of regress is therefore dissolved through existential unity rather than solved through logical argument. The example of pain illustrates this clearly. One does not require reflective access to justify awareness of pain because pain itself is immediately present within consciousness. As Miṣbāḥ Yazdī states, “In presential knowledge, awareness of the thing is the very presence of the thing; no separate access is needed” (Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 1999, vol. 1, p 234). The same applies to the soul’s awareness of itself: no gap exists between subject and object that would require mediation or justification. Jawādī Āmulī therefore argues that classical internalism applies only to acquired (ḥuṣūlī) knowledge, whereas presential knowledge operates prior to the duality of knower and known (Jawādī Āmulī, 2008, p 121).

Accordingly, infinite regress never truly begins within presential knowledge. Internalism assumes that belief P requires reason R, which in turn requires another justificatory reason. Presential knowledge interrupts this chain at its root by showing that certain forms of knowledge involve no distinction between knower and known and therefore require neither separate access nor additional evidence. Justification arises directly from existential presence itself.

4.2. The Externalist Requirement: Existential Extension and Connection to Reality

While presential knowledge resolves infinite regress internally, it must demonstrate a genuine connection to external reality. Epistemological externalists emphasize causal or reliable relationships between belief and world as justification criteria. Goldman locates justification in reliable cognitive processes producing true beliefs, independent of the knower's conscious access (Goldman, 1979, p 10). Plantinga similarly argues that beliefs possess warrant when originating from properly functioning cognitive faculties in appropriate environments (Plantinga, 1993, p 46-47). Both approaches shift justification outside mental accessibility, promising to bridge the mind-world gap. However, Western externalism confronts a fundamental limitation: how can probabilistic causal relations guarantee epistemic necessity? If reliability remains merely statistical, justification inevitably remains provisional and defeasible. Goldman presumes reliability when processes produce true beliefs in most cases, yet statistical majorities never attain necessity. Even ordinarily reliable processes might fail without violating empirical patterns. Transcendent Theosophy satisfies externalist requirements through the soul's existential extension (*inbisāṭ wujūdī*), establishing necessary metaphysical union rather than probabilistic causation. Mullā Ṣadrā maintains that when the soul perceives something, its existence extends toward that object, becoming in a manner that very thing (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 8, p 174). This claim derives from two fundamental principles: the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*) and gradation (*tashkīk*) within it. Existence constitutes a single reality possessing degrees; different existents represent diverse manifestations of the same existential reality rather than separate substances (Jawādī Āmulī, 2008, p 98). Consequently, the soul's connection to the known object constitutes existential congruence rather than external relation. This framework fundamentally differs from Western externalism by rendering subject-reality relations necessary rather than probabilistic. Ṭabāṭabā'ī highlights this distinction: Western reliability rests upon empirical expectation, whereas existential union possesses metaphysical necessity (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 112). The soul's extension toward the known object constitutes internal union, fundamentally eliminating error possibilities rather than probabilistic causation. Moreover, presential knowledge resolves externalism's inaccessibility problem. Bergmann argues subjects need no awareness of justifying factors (Bergmann, 2006, p 12-13), yet this position faces internalist criticism regarding how invisible justification can play epistemic roles (Bonjour, 2003, p 20). Presential knowledge resolves this tension: in existential

extension, subjects are necessarily aware of their relation to the known through direct presence rather than mental reflection. Miṣbāḥ Yazdī specifies that awareness of the thing constitutes the very presence of the thing, requiring no separate access (Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 1999, vol. 1, p 234). The externalist requirement, real and effective relation to external reality, is not merely satisfied but elevated from probability to necessity grounded in reality's existential structure rather than conceptual relations. This theory operates concretely at the level of sense perception. Vision involves not merely receiving mental images but establishing an existential connection. Mullā Ṣadrā explains that in sense perception, the soul extends through external senses toward external objects, producing their forms as existential presence rather than separate images (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 8, p 180-182). The soul renders the object's form existentially present within itself without literal transformation. Fāzil Lankarānī clarifies that existential extension means the soul expands its existential boundaries to encompass the known object without exiting itself (Lankarānī, 1996, p 156). Recent embodied cognition theories provide illuminating parallels. Noë argues perception constitutes skillful activity in interaction with the world rather than mental representation (Noë, 2004, p 1-2). Though lacking Mullā Ṣadrā's metaphysical framework, both perspectives reject cognition as separation from the world. The distinction lies in understanding this connection as existential rather than merely practical. Western externalism secures belief-reality relations through causal reliability, yet can never render this relation necessary. Existential extension resolves this problem: the soul-known relation is existential-internal rather than causal-external. Error signifies not a causal process failure but a deficiency in existential extension. Mullā Ṣadrā specifies that perceptual error occurs when the soul, due to existential weakness or material obstacles, cannot completely extend to the object (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 3, p 322). Error represents a deficiency in metaphysical necessity's realization rather than its violation.

4.3. Dissolution of the Gap: From Relation to Existential Union

The internalism-externalism dichotomy rests upon a fundamental assumption of separation between the knowing mind and the external world that presential knowledge dissolves entirely. Both traditions share this presupposition, generating their respective difficulties. Internalists emphasize mental access and reflective awareness, confining knowledge to the subject's interior and confronting infinite regress, as every belief requires justification through another belief (Bonjour, 1985, p 18). Externalists accept

external factors such as reliability or proper function, generating inaccessibility problems: how can justifying factors invisible to the subject play epistemic roles (Bergmann, 2006, p 12)? Chisholm articulates this impasse: if justification remains inaccessible, how can it serve as a knowledge criterion? Yet if merely accessible, how does it connect with external reality (Chisholm, 1977, p 17)? This gap is rooted in representationalism, construing the mind as an intermediary between the subject and reality. Presential knowledge resolves this divide not by selecting one pole but by dissolving the foundational assumption itself. Through the theory of unity between knower and known, Mullā Ṣadrā demonstrates that in presential knowledge, mind-world duality is fundamentally irreducible. In presential cognition, knower and known are existentially one, not that two separate entities have been joined, but rather that they were never separate (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 3, p 310). This existential union constitutes metaphysical analysis rather than mysticism: in the soul's knowledge of its own essence, the soul's awareness of itself is identical with the soul's existence. Ṭabāṭabā'ī clarifies that in presential knowledge, awareness of the thing is the very existence of the thing in the soul; consequently, neither a mental intermediary is needed nor does the problem of causal relation with the external arise (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 83). This dissolution carries profound epistemological implications. Presential knowledge satisfies both internalist and externalist requirements simultaneously. The internalist requirement is satisfied because the subject possesses direct, unmediated access to the known; the externalist requirement is satisfied because this access is established through an existential relation with reality rather than mental representation. Jambet emphasizes this convergence: Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy is ontology before epistemology; knowledge is not a relation between two existents but rather a mode of existence itself (Jambet, 2006, p 87). The fundamental error of both internalism and externalism lies in their shared assumption that knowledge constitutes a relation, internalists taking it as a relation between subject and mental reasons, externalists as a relation between belief and reliable process. Presential knowledge reveals that knowledge at the foundational level is not relation but identity. This dissolution necessitates reconceptualizing epistemic justification. In both analytic traditions, justification is construed as a relation between belief and something else, another belief in internalism or a cognitive process in externalism. In presential knowledge, however, justification is not relation but presence itself; the known is justified precisely insofar as it exists

(Mişbāḥ Yazdī, 1999, vol. 1, p 239). Justification becomes the internal structure of presential knowledge rather than an external property. Legenhausen, comparing this with Russell's acquaintance theory, highlights the distinction: Russell understands acquaintance as an epistemic relation between subject and thing, whereas Mullā Ṣadrā understands presence as existential union wherein relation transforms into identity (Legenhausen, 2009, p 118). Pain serves as an illustration. When experiencing pain, questions such as "How can I be certain I truly have pain?" or "Does my belief have reflective access to reasons?" or "Is my pain-perception process reliable?" become meaningless. Pain is itself present. One cannot have pain without being aware of it, not through inference, mental reflection, or causal process, but because pain is identical with awareness. Jawādī Āmulī specifies that classical internalism is meaningful only for acquired knowledge; presential knowledge is from the outset a constituent not presupposing knower-known duality (Jawādī Āmulī, 2008, p 121). Extending this to the soul's knowledge of its own essence, the soul is present to its own existence not as a distant epistemic object requiring access, but as that presence itself. Epistemological questions concerning justification at this level become meaningless, not that justification is absent, but that justification and knowledge are identical. Neither reflective access is needed, since presence is direct, nor reliable processes, since existential union is infallible. However, this dissolution does not eliminate internalism or externalism but rather establishes their scope of validity. Mullā Ṣadrā explicitly states that presential knowledge is the foundation of acquired knowledge; all mediated knowledge ultimately returns to presential knowledge (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 6, p 165). For acquired knowledge, beliefs about the external world formed through mental representation, internalism and externalism remain meaningful. Yet these forms of knowledge are justified insofar as connected to presential knowledge. Mişbāḥ Yazdī clarifies that the ultimate justification criterion is neither reflective access nor reliability but connection to presential knowledge (Mişbāḥ Yazdī, 1999, vol. 1, p 245). The dissolution of this divide thus constitutes not a complete rejection of internalism or externalism but a transformation of the fundamental framework. The question shifts from "reflective access or reliability?" to "how is this belief connected to presential knowledge?" This framework transformation moves the divide from resolution to dissolution, not by finding solutions within existing assumptions, but by demonstrating their incompleteness. Presential knowledge is therefore not a third alternative alongside internalism and

externalism, but rather the foundation upon which both rest and without which they remain epistemically meaningless.

5. Responses to Principal Objections

Four major objections may be raised against presential knowledge (*‘ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*) as an alternative epistemological framework. These objections emerge both from analytic epistemology and from tensions internal to the theory itself. Addressing them helps clarify the explanatory strength of presential knowledge.

5.1. The Problem of Logical Circularity

The first objection claims that presential knowledge cannot justify itself because any appeal to self-justification already presupposes the truth of what must be proven. Fumerton raises a similar concern in his critique of classical foundationalism, arguing that claims of self-evidence rely on the very self-evidence they seek to establish (Fumerton, 1995, p 74). Presential knowledge appears vulnerable to the same criticism: if the soul is immediately present to itself and this presence is said to be self-justifying, does not that claim itself require justification? This objection, however, misunderstands the structure of justification in presential knowledge. A crucial distinction must be made between logical circularity and existential grounding. Logical circularity occurs when proposition A depends on proposition B, while B ultimately depends on A, leaving neither independently grounded. Presential knowledge operates differently. Mullā Ṣadrā explains that the soul is directly present to its own essence; it does not infer itself through another belief or argument (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 3, p 287). Presential knowledge is therefore not inferential but existential. Ṭabāṭabā’ī clarifies that presential knowledge is the very presupposition of all justification. Asking how it is justified is like asking how existence itself becomes existent (Ṭabāṭabā’ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 91). Presential knowledge is not a belief about the self but the soul’s immediate awareness of its own reality. Chisholm similarly speaks of “self-presenting states,” whose mere occurrence is sufficient for awareness (Chisholm, 1977, p 22). Mullā Ṣadrā, however, interprets this not merely as a psychological feature but as an ontological structure: the soul exists for itself rather than appearing before itself (Jawādī Āmulī, 2008, p 105). The relation between the soul and itself is not a cognitive relation between two distinct entities but an existential identity in which knower and known are one. The charge of circularity therefore arises from conflating logical dependence with existential presence.

5.2. The Problem of Limited Scope

The second objection argues that presential knowledge can justify only self-knowledge and therefore says little about knowledge of the external world. Since most human knowledge concerns external objects rather than inner mental states, presential knowledge may seem too narrow to function as a comprehensive epistemological framework. Goldman, for example, insists that any adequate epistemology must explain perceptual and external-world knowledge, not merely self-awareness (Goldman, 1979, p 360).

The response to this objection has two dimensions. First, presential knowledge does not claim to encompass all forms of knowledge directly. Mullā Ṣadrā explicitly distinguishes between presential knowledge and acquired knowledge, maintaining that knowledge of external objects ordinarily belongs to the latter category (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 3, p 310). Yet acquired knowledge itself requires a foundation, and that foundation is presential knowledge. Miṣbāḥ Yazdī explains that all mediated knowledge ultimately returns to presential awareness, because every belief about the external world presupposes awareness of holding that belief, and such awareness is itself presential (Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 1999, vol. 1, p 239). When someone believes that “this table is red,” the propositional content is acquired knowledge, but the awareness of possessing the belief is immediate and present. Without this presential awareness, no belief could be justified, because the subject would not even recognize having it. Second, presential knowledge is not confined strictly to self-awareness. Through the theory of existential extension, Mullā Ṣadrā argues that the soul can attain forms of presential access to external realities at higher ontological levels, not through ordinary sensory representation but through existential union (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 6, p 165). Although this idea may appear unfamiliar within analytic epistemology, its central claim is clear: presential knowledge functions as the ultimate ground of justification rather than as a replacement for every type of cognition. In this respect, it resembles foundationalist basic beliefs, with the important difference that its foundations are existential rather than propositional.

5.3. The Problem of Cultural Specificity and Non-Generalizability

A third objection questions whether Mullā Ṣadrā’s concepts can meaningfully translate into the language of analytic epistemology. MacIntyre argues that distinct philosophical traditions often employ incompatible conceptual frameworks that resist direct comparison (MacIntyre, 1988, p 350). A related objection, raised by Sosa, maintains that an epistemological

theory must apply broadly across epistemic cases rather than merely explain isolated examples (Sosa, 1991, p 149). These criticisms depend on assumptions that are themselves contestable. A distinction must be made between conceptual language and philosophical problems. Although Mullā Ṣadrā employs concepts such as the unity of intellect and intelligible, the gradation of existence, and existential extension, terms without precise analytic equivalents, the problems he addresses are strikingly familiar: What grounds justification? Must justification involve reflective access? How is knowledge connected to reality? How can infinite regress be avoided? Legenhausen notes that conceptual differences should not obscure deeper structural similarities between traditions (Legenhausen, 2009, p 118).

Moreover, analytic philosophy itself is characterized by conceptual diversity. Ideas once considered foreign or unintuitive can later become established parts of philosophical discourse. Plantinga's notion of proper function, for example, initially appeared unconventional but is now widely discussed in contemporary epistemology (Plantinga, 1993, p 89). The purpose of engaging Transcendent Theosophy is therefore not to replace existing epistemological models but to introduce alternative conceptual resources capable of enriching current debates.

The concern about generalizability can also be addressed from within Mullā Ṣadrā's own framework. Presential knowledge is not a single isolated phenomenon but a graded reality extending from basic self-awareness to intellectual intuition (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 3, p 287). At its lowest level, the soul is present to its own essence; at higher levels, it becomes present to its faculties, acts, and intelligible realities. Ṭabāṭabā'ī even argues that mathematical knowledge ultimately involves presential awareness of intelligible forms (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 83). Presential knowledge therefore extends far beyond simple introspection.

Even in ordinary perceptual knowledge, presential awareness retains an indirect justificatory role. When someone sees that a tree is green, the perceptual judgment itself is acquired knowledge, yet awareness of undergoing that perceptual experience is presential. Miṣbāḥ Yazdī emphasizes that without immediate awareness of experience, no perceptual judgment could become epistemically justified (Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 1999, vol. 1, p 245). Presential knowledge thus serves not as a total substitute for other forms of cognition, but as the foundational ground upon which all justification ultimately depends.

6. Conclusion

In recent decades, analytic epistemology has faced a serious impasse. Classical foundationalism has been challenged by powerful critiques that question its ability to provide an adequate account of justification, while coherentism continues to struggle with the problem of connecting belief to reality. As a result, some philosophers have moved toward epistemic skepticism or concluded that complete justification is ultimately unattainable. Yet other philosophical traditions may offer conceptual resources capable of moving beyond this deadlock.

One such resource is Mullā Ṣadrā's theory of presential knowledge (*'ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*), which has received relatively little attention in contemporary epistemological discussions. The theory distinguishes between two fundamentally different modes of cognition. Acquired knowledge (*'ilm al-ḥuṣūlī*), the form of knowledge most often discussed in analytic epistemology, depends on conceptual mediation and establishes a relation between subject and object through mental representations (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 3, p 310). Presential knowledge, by contrast, refers to the soul's immediate awareness of its own reality, in which knower and known are not separated by any existential distance but are united in existential identity (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 79). This distinction is not merely classificatory; it reflects two different existential modes of cognition, each with its own conditions and implications. The most important contribution of presential knowledge lies in its response to the problem of infinite regress, a problem that challenges both foundationalism and coherence theory. Whereas foundationalism encounters the problem of circularity and coherentism risks losing contact with reality, presential knowledge proposes a different structure of justification altogether. Here, justification is grounded not in propositional inference but in existential identity. The soul's presence to itself is identical with awareness itself and therefore does not require a second-order act of justification. Mullā Ṣadrā writes that "in presential knowledge, knowledge is existence itself, and existence is knowledge itself" (Ṣadra, 1981, vol. 3, p 287). If epistemic justification ultimately requires an indubitable foundation, presential knowledge claims to provide such a foundation intrinsically, without dependence on further propositions or reflective mediation. Its infallibility therefore should not be understood as immunity from cognitive error in the ordinary sense, but as the impossibility of error at the existential level (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1983, vol. 2, p 91). At the same time, presential knowledge satisfies a central demand of internalist epistemology by granting the subject direct access to itself and to its own

awareness. As Jawādī Āmulī explains, “The soul has knowledge of its own essence, and this knowledge is also knowledge of having knowledge” (Jawādī Āmulī, 2008, p 105). This self-transparency functions both as a condition of epistemic access and as a basis for self-justification, thereby avoiding the gap between consciousness and awareness that troubles many modern epistemological theories.

The broader significance of this theory, however, lies in the way it transcends the limits of mentalism. Through the doctrine of existential expansion, Mullā Ṣadrā argues that knowledge is not merely representational. In the act of knowing, the soul extends its own existence toward the reality of the known object: “when the soul perceives something, its existence extends toward that thing, and it itself becomes, in a manner, that very thing” (Ṣadrā, 1981, vol. 8, p 174). This view replaces the probabilistic causal relations emphasized by externalist theories such as reliabilism with an existential relation between knower and known. Presential knowledge is therefore neither internalist in the strictly reflective sense nor externalist in the empirical-causal sense. Rather, it offers a third epistemological path grounded in existential unity, a path that seeks not merely to solve the epistemic gap but to dissolve it altogether. This dissolution directly addresses the underlying assumptions of analytic epistemology. If the central problem arises from presupposing a strict duality between subject and object, presential knowledge challenges that assumption at its root. Knowledge, in this framework, is not fundamentally a relation between mind and world but a mode of being in which conscious existence becomes united with reality itself. Consequently, distinctions such as appearance versus reality, subject versus object, and justification versus truth belong primarily to the level of acquired knowledge and lose their force at the level of presential awareness.

The implications of this reinterpretation for contemporary epistemology are considerable. First, it suggests the possibility of moving beyond representational models of cognition toward a non-representational account grounded in existential presence. Second, it demonstrates that Islamic philosophy can contribute substantive conceptual resources to contemporary philosophical debates rather than merely offering historical or cultural perspectives. Third, it opens new directions for future research, particularly regarding perception, intellectual intuition, and phenomenological consciousness.

In conclusion, Mullā Ṣadrā’s theory of presential knowledge reorients epistemology by shifting the basis of justification from the logical to the

existential domain. Through existential infallibility, immediate self-awareness, and the metaphysical unity of knower and known, it challenges the assumption that an unbridgeable gap exists between consciousness and reality. From the perspective of presential knowledge, what modern epistemology describes as the “epistemic gap” may ultimately be a product of representational thinking itself. Knowledge and existence are therefore not two separate realities but two dimensions of a single existential truth. In this way, Mullā Ṣadrā’s epistemology provides fertile ground for a renewed dialogue between Islamic philosophy and analytic epistemology, a dialogue concerned less with bridging the gap between mind and world than with understanding why such a gap appears in the first place.

References

- ‘Abdullāhī, M. (2010), *An epistemological analysis of presential knowledge*, *Philosophy and Islamic Theology*, 43(2), 65–88.
- ‘Allāmah Ḥillī, Ḥ. ibn Y., (1984), *Al-jawhar al-naḍīd fī sharḥ mantīq al-tajrīd* [The Precious Jewel in the Commentary on the Logic of Abstraction], Qom, Bīdār.
- Ardabili, A., (2020), Mulla Sadra on immediate knowledge, *Philosophy East and West*, 70(4), 981–1004, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2020.0072>
- Bergmann, M., (2006), *Justification without awareness*, Oxford University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199275731.001.0001>
- Black, D. L., (2008), Avicenna on self-awareness and knowing that one knows, In S. Rahman, T. Street, & H. Tahiri (Eds.), *The unity of science in the Arabic tradition* (pp. 63–87), Springer, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8405-8_3
- Bonjour, L., (1980), Externalist theories of empirical knowledge, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5(1), 53–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1980.tb00396.x>
- Bonjour, L., (1985), *The structure of empirical knowledge*, Harvard University Press.
- Bonjour, L., (2003), A version of internalist foundationalism, In L. Bonjour & E. Sosa, *Epistemic justification: Internalism vs. externalism, foundations vs. virtues* (pp. 3–96), Blackwell.
- Chisholm, R. M., (1977), *Theory of knowledge* (2nd ed.), Prentice-Hall.
- Chisholm, R. M., (1989), *Theory of knowledge* (3rd ed.), Prentice-Hall.
- Conee, E., & Feldman, R., (2001), Internalism defended, In H. Kornblith (Ed.), *Epistemology: Internalism and externalism* (pp. 231–260), Blackwell.
- Dīnānī, Gh. I., (2002), *Shu‘ā’ andīshah va shuhūd dar falsafah-yi Suhrawardī* [The Ray of Thought and Intuition in Suhrawardī’s Philosophy], Tehran, Hikmat.
- Feldman, R., (2003), *Epistemology*, Prentice Hall.
- Feldman, R., & Conee, E., (1985), Evidentialism, *Philosophical Studies*, 48(1), 15–34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00372404>
- Fumerton, R. A., (1995), *Metaepistemology and skepticism*, Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gallagher, S., & Zahavi, D., (2012), *The phenomenological mind* (2nd ed.), Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203126752>
- Garfield, J., & Van Norden, B. (Eds.), (2017), *Taking back philosophy: A multicultural manifesto*, Columbia University Press, <https://doi.org/10.7312/garf17383>

- Goldman, A. I., (1979), What is justified belief?, In G. S. Pappas (Ed.), Justification and knowledge (pp. 1–23), D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Goldman, A. I., (1986), Epistemology and cognition, Harvard University Press.
- Greco, J., (2010), Achieving knowledge: A virtue-theoretic account of epistemic normativity, Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511844256>
- Ibn Sīnā, H. ibn ‘A., (1983), Al-shifā’: Al-ilāhiyyāt [The Healing: Metaphysics], Qom, Āyatullāh al-Mar‘ashī al-Najafī Library.
- Jambet, C., (2006), The act of being: The philosophy of revelation in Mullā Ṣadrā (J. Morris, Trans.), Zone Books.
- Jawādī Āmulī, A., (2007), Raḥīq makhtūm: Sharḥ ḥikmat muta‘āliyah [The Sealed Nectar: Commentary on Transcendent Theosophy] (Vol. 1), Qom, Isrā’.
- Jawādī Āmulī, A., (2008), Shinākht-shināsī dar Qur‘ān [Epistemology in the Quran], Qom, Isrā’.
- Kamal, M., (2006), Mulla Sadra’s transcendent philosophy, Ashgate Publishing.
- Kornblith, H. (Ed.). (2001). *Epistemology: Internalism and externalism*. Blackwell.
- Kornblith, H. (Ed.), (2001), Epistemology: Internalism and externalism, Blackwell.
- Legenhausen, M., (2009), Conceptual priority and presential knowledge, In S. H. Nasr & M. Aminrazavi (Eds.), An anthology of philosophy in Persia: Vol. 5, From the School of Shiraz to the twentieth century (pp. 112–138), I.B. Tauris.
- Lehrer, K., (1990), Theory of knowledge, Westview Press.
- Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, M. T., (1999), Āmūzish-i falsafah [Teachings of Philosophy] (Vol. 1), Qom, Islamic Propagation Organization.
- Morris, J. W., (1981), The wisdom of the throne: An introduction to the philosophy of Mulla Sadra, Princeton University Press.
- Muṭahharī, M., (1989), Majmū‘ah-yi āthār [Collected Works] (Vol. 6), Tehran, Ṣadrā.
- Nasr, S. H., (1997), Islamic philosophy from its origin to the present: Philosophy in the land of prophecy, State University of New York Press.
- Plantinga, A., (1993), Warrant: The current debate, Oxford University Press.
- Pollock, J. L., & Cruz, J., (1999), Contemporary theories of knowledge (2nd ed.), Rowman & Littlefield.
- Rahman, F., (1975), The philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā, State University of New York Press.
- Rahnema, H., (1998), Khirad va tajrubah-yi dīnī [Reason and Religious Experience], Tehran, Institute for Cultural Research and Studies.
- Rizvi, S. H., (2009), Mullā Ṣadrā and metaphysics: Modulation of being, Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203881590>
- Russell, B., (1912), The problems of philosophy, Oxford University Press.
- Sabzavārī, M. H., (2004), Sharḥ-i manẓūmah [Commentary on the Philosophical Poem] (J. Bīdārfar, Trans.), Qom, Bīdār.
- Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, M. ibn I., (1975), Sharḥ uṣūl al-Kāfī [Commentary on the Principles of al-Kāfī] (M. Khvājawī, Ed.), Tehran, Institute for Cultural Studies and Research.
- Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, M. ibn I., (1981), Al-ḥikmat al-muta‘āliyah fī al-asfār al-‘aqliyyah al-arba‘ah [The Transcendent Theosophy of the Four Intellectual Journeys] (Vols. 1–9), Beirut, Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī.

- Şadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, M. ibn I., (1981), *Al-mabda' wa-al-ma'ād* [The Origin and the Return], Tehran, Iranian Academy of Philosophy.
- Şadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, M. ibn I., (1984), *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* [The Keys to the Unseen], Tehran, Institute for Cultural Research.
- Sosa, E., (2007), *A virtue epistemology: Apt belief and reflective knowledge* (Vol. 1), Oxford University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199297023.001.0001>
- Sosa, E., (2015), *Judgment and agency*, Oxford University Press.
- Steup, M., (1999), A defense of internalism, In L. BonJour & E. Sosa (Eds.), *The theory of knowledge: Classical and contemporary readings* (pp. 373–384), Wadsworth.
- Ṭabāṭabā'ī, M. Ḥ., (1983), *Nihāyat al-ḥikmah* [The End of Wisdom], Qom, Islamic Publication Foundation.
- Ṭabāṭabā'ī, M. Ḥ., (1983), *Uṣūl-i falsafah va ravish-i ri'ālism* [The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism] (Vols. 2–3), Tehran, Şadrā.
- Ṭūsī, N. al-Dīn M. ibn M., (1982), *Sharḥ al-ishārāt wa-al-tanbīhāt* [Commentary on Remarks and Admonitions] (Vol. 3), Qom, Nashr al-Balāghah.