



A Critical Analysis of the Neo-Sadrianism: Epistemological Challenges and Future Prospects

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The Neo-Sadrianism, as the dominant school of contemporary Islamic philosophy, has played a decisive role in the education and research of Islamic philosophy and rational theology. Relying on the heritage of Transcendental Wisdom (al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah) and its rereading by thinkers such as Allameh Tabataba'i, Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, and Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, this movement has attempted to reconstruct philosophical reason in the face of Modernity and contemporary atheistic challenges. Adopting an analytical-critical approach, the present article engages in a constructive internal evaluation of this movement; a judgment that aims not to negate its achievements, but to identify structural challenges and outline its future prospects. Finally, by mapping future scenarios, the article emphasizes the necessity of methodological rethinking, critical dialogue with rivals both within and outside the tradition, and a deeper engagement of philosophy with the issues facing contemporary humanity.

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Introduction

The analysis of intellectual currents (genealogy of thought) within Islamic seminaries, particularly in the field of philosophy, is of great importance. It not only maps the current epistemic landscape but also orients the future path of religious thought. Among the contemporary philosophical currents in the Qom Seminary, the “Philosophical-Oriented Movement,” which is itself divided into two main sub-branches—Sadrianism and Neo-Sadrianism—occupies a central position. In this context, the Neo-Sadrianism, led intellectually by figures such as Allameh Tabataba’i, Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, and Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, is recognized as the pioneer and dominant school. It has significantly influenced the educational and research systems of both seminaries and universities and has played a role in various intellectual and political arenas as the theoretical backing of the Islamic Republic.

However, any living intellectual movement requires internal evaluation and critique for its dynamism and continued survival. This article aims to provide a “constructive judgment” by analyzing and critiquing the Neo-Sadrianism. The purpose of this judgment is not destruction or the negation of achievements, but rather the strengthening of strong points and assistance in resolving weaknesses that could confront this movement with serious challenges in the long term. Therefore, the present research seeks to answer these fundamental questions:

1. What are the most important challenges facing the Neo-Sadrianism in the epistemological, methodological, and functional realms?
2. What scenarios are envisioned for the future of this intellectual movement, and what strategies can help strengthen and dynamize it?

To answer these questions, the relationship of this movement with dominant discourses (Qur’an and Hadith) is first examined. Then, after enumerating its strengths, fundamental critiques are raised in four areas:

epistemological, methodological, functional, and genealogical. Finally, by outlining future scenarios, strategies for strengthening this movement will be proposed.

1. Assessing the Relationship of the Neo-Sadrianism with Dominant Discourses

The Neo-Sadrianism has defined and stabilized its intellectual identity through a dual relationship: with revealed texts on the one hand, and with the intellectual legacy of Imam Khomeini on the other. Analyzing these two relationships is an appropriate entry point for understanding the foundations of this movement.

1.1. Relation to the Qur'an and Hadith: Interpretive Dominance and the Independence of Philosophical Reason

One of the most prominent features of the Neo-Sadrianism is its dominance over the field of Qur'anic exegesis in the contemporary Shi'a world. Most prominent figures of this movement have produced major Qur'anic works: *Al-Mizan* and *Al-Bayan fi al-Muwafaqa bayn al-Hadith wa al-Qur'an* (both in Arabic) by Allameh Tabataba'i are recognized as the premier contemporary Shi'a exegeses. The dominance of *Al-Mizan* is such that its critics, even when offering noteworthy critiques, often remain on the margins of exegetical scholarship and go unnoticed (Maleki Mianji, 1404 AH). Other works include *Thematic Exegesis* and *Tasnim* (both in Persian) by Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, *Ma'arif Qur'an* (in Persian) by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, and the thematic exegeses *Mafahim al-Qur'an* (Arabic) and *Manshur-e Javid* (Persian) by Ayatollah Subhani.

The common interpretive method in this movement is the method of "interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an." These commentaries have distanced themselves both from traditional commentaries, which considered Hadith authoritative in interpreting the Qur'an, and from traditional Sadrian commentaries. The interpretive literature of the traditional Sadrian current was precisely philosophical literature, and their

method was interpreting the Qur'an via philosophical reason. However, the Neo-Sadrianism, while maintaining interpretive literature, interprets Qur'anic verses in harmony with philosophical doctrines and attempts to derive appropriate support from the Holy Qur'an for philosophical teachings. In any case, this school is one of the most successful currents in demonstrating the harmony of its foundational doctrines with the Holy Qur'an.

On the other hand, this movement has utilized Qur'anic doctrines to expand its school in the formulation of Islamic humanities; works such as *Society and History in the Qur'an* and *Law and Politics in the Qur'an* by Ayatollah Mesbah, and *The Form and Character of Man in the Qur'an* and *Fitra in the Qur'an* by Ayatollah Javadi Amoli are efforts of this kind.

Of course, grounding fundamental doctrines upon the Qur'an is not the primary issue for Neo-Sadrians; they are more concerned with showing that fundamental doctrines are found through reason, and understanding the Qur'an is possible within the framework of those findings. As Aboudiat writes: "Revelation and Islamic scriptural doctrines cannot have an influence in philosophy in the position of judgment; that is, to replace arguments and philosophical principles from which philosophy is extracted" (Aboudiat, 2003, p. 29). He enumerates various uses for revelation in *Transcendental Wisdom*, including:

- revelation poses the philosophical problem;

- it is effective in constructing the argument (though not as a substitute for the argument);

- it is effective in guiding reason;

- it is useful in detecting fallacies; the compatibility between reason and transmission becomes clear by attributing demonstrative findings to revelation; and citation and confirmation of rational results, as well as psychological reassurance, are achieved through revelation.

Aboudiat emphasizes that although it is famous that *Transcendental Wisdom*, unlike the Peripatetic school, relies not only on rational power

but also on revelation and intuition (*Kashf*), this does not mean that revelation and intuition stand alongside reason as rivals or are valid as two alternative methods for judging the truth or falsehood of philosophical propositions; rather, it only means they are involved outside the position of judgment and assist reason linearly (Aboudiat, 2006, Vol. 1, pp. 67-68).

Based on this, Neo-Sadrian philosophers do not base their arguments on revelation, and their commitment to revelation in fundamental doctrines remains largely at the level of “compatibility in results,” achieved through a hermeneutic system posterior to philosophical reasoning. Although this view is not entirely universal—thinkers like Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, by considering the authority of the Qur’an as intrinsic, leave the way open for grounding fundamental doctrines in the Qur’an (Javadi Amoli, 1999, Vol. 1, pp. 63-64)—the dominant approach remains the independence of reason in the position of establishment and judgment.

1.2. Relation to the Discourse of Imam Khomeini: Convergence in Origin, Divergence in Path

Although Imam Khomeini was himself a great figure of Sadrian wisdom, categorizing him under the Neo-Sadrianism does not seem correct. The main difference is traceable in two areas:

First, in intellectual orientation; the Neo-Sadrianism is a Sadrian current with “Peripatetic tendencies” emphasizing rational precision and demonstration, whereas Imam Khomeini was a Sadrian with “deep mystical tendencies,” even though he possessed a critical view of some figures of theoretical mysticism like Ibn Arabi (Khomeini, 1410 AH, p. 55).

The second difference lies in the confrontation with the modern world; Neo-Sadrians engaged *Transcendental Wisdom* with the challenges of modernity in the “theoretical realm,” but Imam Khomeini confronted the modern world in the “practical realm” using the practical and political

capacities of Sadrian philosophy. Nevertheless, the general relationship of this movement with Imam Khomeini is one of follower and leader, and their deep commitment to his political philosophy, especially the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, counts as one of the main characteristics of this movement (with the exception of a minority like Dr. Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi).

2. Strengths and Achievements

The influence and dynamism of the Neo-Sadrianism are the result of undeniable strengths:

- **First. Precise Articulation and Clear Language:** One of the most distinct services of the Neo-Sadrianism is the effort to refine arguments and present a clearer exposition of the complex issues of *Transcendental Wisdom*. By distancing itself from the obscure and sometimes scattered language of early Mull Sadra's texts, this movement has strived to provide a coherent structure and more precise language for Islamic philosophy.
- **Second. Investment in the Islamization of Humanities:** This movement has been a pioneer in investing in the project of "Islamizing the Humanities." This effort has led to the production of numerous works in fields such as economics, sociology, law, politics, and art with Qur'anic and philosophical foundations.
- **Third. Development of Genitive Philosophies (Philosophy of...):** Genitive philosophy is a rational, meta-level, second-order look at other sciences. Neo-Sadrian philosophers have taken philosophy beyond the traditional realm of Theology in the General and Specific Sense, extending it to arenas such as the philosophy of politics, philosophy of history, philosophy of society, and philosophy of logic. Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, more than others, paid serious attention to these fields.
- **Fourth. Richness of Works in Theology in the Specific Sense:** In an era where modern atheism has targeted the foundations of religion with full force, this movement has become one of the most important

bastions of rational defense of religion by presenting rich works and solid arguments for proving the existence of God.

- **Fifth: Scholarly Engagement with Western Thinkers.** The dialogues between Allameh Tabataba'i and the French scholar Henry Corbin, which began in 1957 and lasted over twenty years, are a prime example. These sessions, described by Dr. Shariati as an encounter between a "Socrates-like" figure (Tabataba'i) and a scholar seeking the depths of Shi'ite culture (Corbin), demonstrate the capacity for high-level intellectual exchange (Shariati, 2010, Vol. 4, p. 104). Additionally, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi placed the study of Western philosophy on his agenda to respond to Marxist and Western doubts.
- **Sixth. Attention to Contemporary Problems:** From Allameh Tabataba'i's *Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism* (written to counter dialectical materialism) to Ostad Motahhari's focus on solving the intellectual problems of his time, and Ayatollah Javadi Amoli's works on human rights and the environment, this movement has consistently sought to address current needs.

3. Challenges and Critiques

Despite the aforementioned achievements, this movement faces structural challenges in four areas that threaten its future.

3.1. Epistemological Critique: Neglect of Foundations and Implications

Although Allameh Tabataba'i was the first Islamic philosopher to address epistemology independently (in *The Method of Realism*), several critiques apply to Neo-Sadrian epistemology:

1. **Poverty in Sadrian Logic:** One of the deepest challenges is the systematic neglect of compiling a coherent logical system consistent with the specific principles of *Transcendental Wisdom*. While Sadrian foundations contain numerous innovations (such as Primary Essential Predication vs. Common Technical Predication, Individual

by Essence, the Gradation of Existence, etc.) that require a serious revision of logic, this movement relies mostly on traditional Peripatetic logic or textbooks like *Mantiq al-Muzzafar*, which were not designed for Sadra's philosophical system.

2. **Systematic Removal of Anthropology:** In standard textbooks like *Bidayat al-Hikmah* and *Nihayat al-Hikmah*, the key discussions of the "Soul" (Nafs) and philosophical anthropology are entirely omitted. This disconnects philosophy from concrete issues and the humanities.
3. **Residue of Ancient Natural Philosophy (Physics):** Ancient physics remains hidden in its ontology and epistemology.
 - *Dependence on the Ten Categories:* The theory of the Ten Categories relies on simple observations lacking empirical precision.
 - *Analysis of Sensory Perception:* This movement defines sensory knowledge as "connection to present matter." This definition collapses with simple counter-examples, such as seeing the light of a star that perished millions of years ago (where no "present matter" exists to connect with).
4. **Theoretical Isolationism:** A lack of critical dialogue with historical Islamic rivals (neglecting theories of "attention" or "disclosure" in other Islamic traditions) and insufficient engagement with Western philosophy (focusing mostly on refuting Marxism or older Western views rather than engaging with contemporary analytic or continental philosophy).
5. **Neglect of Cognitive Sciences:** The movement has not yet had a learned and serious encounter with cognitive science, a multidisciplinary field studying the mind, which bridges the gap between the body, mind, language, and the social world.

3.2. Methodological Critique: Departure from Mulla Sadra and Controversy in Exegesis

- **Structural Disorder in Textbooks:** While later books like *Bidayah* tried to fix the ordering issues of older texts like *Sabzwari's Manzuma*, the dominance of the traditional commentary-writing approach prevents a comprehensive structural transformation in teaching methods.
- **Distance from Sadra's Synthetic Method:** *Transcendental Wisdom* was based on the synthesis of "Reason, Revelation, and Intuition." The Neo-Sadrianism, by emphasizing pure rationalism, has practically approached a "Neo-Peripatetic" approach, demoting revelation from an independent source of knowledge in philosophy to a mere corroborator.
- **Controversial Foundations in "Qur'an by Qur'an" Exegesis:** The insistence on the independence of the Qur'an in interpretation (advocated strongly by Ayatollah Javadi Amoli) relies on arguments such as "The Qur'an is Light and an Exposition (Tibyan) for all things" and "Internal Consistency." Critics argue that being 'Light' does not negate the need for an observer (reason/tradition), and the history of diverse interpretations challenges the claim that internal referencing alone leads to certainty for non-believers. Furthermore, the argument that Hadith is speculative (*zanni*) and cannot interpret the definitive (*qat'i*) Qur'an risks the "blockage of knowledge" (*Insidad*) and ignores the validity of the Single Report (*Khabar Wahid*).

3.3. Functional Critique: Theoretical Ivory Tower and Educational Inefficiency

- **Abstract Philosophy Unrelated to Life:** A comparative analysis of philosophy textbooks in Iran (e.g., *Bidayat, Amozesh-e Falsafeh*) versus the West (e.g., works by Stumpf or Warburton) shows a deep gap. Western texts directly address issues like "Justice," "Freedom," "Mind and Body," and "Political Philosophy," while Iranian texts remain focused on abstract discussions of "General

Matters” (*Umur 'Ammah*) and “Theology.”

- **Textbook Crisis:** The textbooks suffer from excessive terminology without precise introductory definitions, “disruptive brevity” (*Eijaz-e Mukhill*), a lack of illuminating examples, and a traditional structure devoid of modern educational creativity.

3.4. Genealogical Critique: While the movement took strong and largely correct stances against Marxism and Liberalism, it has ignored or poorly articulated non-philosophical Islamic currents (such as the *Tafkik* School or the students of Mirza Mehdi Isfahani). By dismissing them as merely “anti-rational” without deep analysis, the Neo-Sadrianism risks failing to see the growth of these rival currents, which use new tools and reasoning styles.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to evaluate the Neo-Sadrianism not merely as an established philosophical system, but as a “living intellectual project” from an internal-traditional perspective. The findings indicate that while Neo-Sadrianism has played a prominent role in reviving philosophical rationality in seminaries and defending Islamic theology, it faces serious epistemological, methodological, and functional challenges. Focusing excessively on the self-sufficiency of philosophical reason, reducing the role of revelation to confirming results, weakness in philosophical anthropology, failure to update natural philosophy foundations, and neglecting developments in cognitive science are among the obstacles limiting its civilizational capacity. However, these challenges are not signs of the inherent inefficiency of *Transcendental Wisdom*, but rather the result of how it has been received and continued historically in the contemporary Neo-Sadrian form. Accordingly, the future of this movement depends on a methodical rethinking of the relationship between reason, revelation, and intuition, critical openness to intra-philosophical and interdisciplinary dialogues, and a more active

connection of philosophy with the concrete issues of contemporary humanity. If Neo-Sadrianism from the status of “heritage protection” to “problem and theory production,” it can remain one of the strategic capacities of Islamic philosophy in facing the crises of meaning, epistemology, and civilization in the modern world.

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