



SUHRAWARDI
AND THE
SCHOOL OF
ILLUMINATION
MEHDI
AMIN RAZAVI

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ور باد نبودى که سر زلف ربودى
رخساره معشوق بعاشق که نمودى

Were there no love nor pain of yearning for love
Who would speak and who would hear such lofty words?

Were there no wind to steal the curl of her lock
Who would unveil the face of the Beloved to her lover?

Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination

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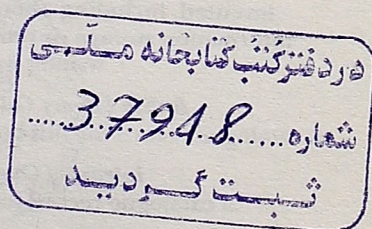
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by
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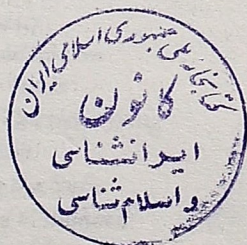
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To
Marylynn, Mitra and Arya



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NOTE

1. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
2. Diacritic marks are not placed on the following words since they are repeated throughout the work: Suhrawardi, Ishraq, Sufi. Diacritic marks have not been placed on the name of cities, countries and dynasties.
3. All dates are given first in the Islamic calendar year followed by the common era.

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Introduction

This work discusses the mystical dimension of Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī, the philosopher-mystic and the founder of the School of Illumination (*ishraq*) in the tradition of Islamic philosophy.

Suhrawardī is one of the most influential figures in the history of Islamic philosophy, because of the significance of his intellectual contributions and because of the impact he had on his successors, in particular later Islamic philosophy which culminated in the "School of Isfahan".

Despite the existing diversity of intellectual inquiries within Islam which range from the rationalistic philosophy of the peripatetics (*mashshā'īs*) and the intellectual intuition of the illuminationists (*ishrāqīyyūn*) to the ascetic and inner journey of the Sufis, there have been few philosophers who have made an attempt to synthesize these diverse schools of thought into a unified philosophical paradigm.

Amīrak Muḥammad ibn Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, the Persian philosopher of the 6/12 century and an advocate of what he called "ancient wisdom" (*ḥikmat al-'atīq*), made an attempt to unify various schools of wisdom in order to demonstrate the universal truth that lies at the heart of all divinely revealed religions. Unlike earlier Sufis and gnostics in Islam, Suhrawardī maintained that philosophical discourse was a necessary training for those seeking to pursue the path of illumination. This was quite revolutionary since Sufis rejected rationalistic philosophy as exemplified by the Peripatetics who in turn rejected Sufism. The significance of Suhrawardī becomes more clear when he is viewed as a gnostic who advocates both philosophical discourse and asceticism as an essential part of the path of illumination. He also incorporates various elements from such traditions of wisdom as the Egyptians, Greeks and Persians in order

to bring a rapprochement between rationalistic philosophy, intellectual intuition and practical wisdom.

The foremost difficulty in writing on Suhrawardi's school of illumination, as with any visionary mystic/philosopher, is to find the qualified person who can comment from an insider's point of view. The heart of the visionary's brand of mysticism, is to have an intuitive knowledge of or an inner experience of, truth. By definition, then, commentators and authors of such a work would be qualified to explain this inner experience if they can relate to this message on an experiential basis and therefore can speak as an insider.

The above poses a problem for this author since on one hand I am to comment on a philosopher/mystic whose thoughts have drawn and engaged me for a number of years, while on the other hand I do not stand within the illuminationist tradition of the luminous world of lights, angels, archetypes and the interconnected web of ideas that Suhrawardi puts forward. In fact, Suhrawardi goes so far as to tell us that unless one has fasted for forty days, he will not understand his major work, *Hikmat al-ishrāq* (*The Philosophy of Illumination*). An insight of the luminous world of Suhrawardi therefore, is not a "live option" for me, to use William James' term.

This volume presents not so much a discussion concerning the validity or soundness of Suhrawardi's specific ideas but an exposition of the mystical dimension of his rather broad and varied school of thought. As an outsider to a school of thought whose thrust remains the attainment of truth through a special mode of cognition, all an author can do is to engage himself in a close textual analysis and attempt to put them in coherent and well defined concepts. It is towards this aim which I have embarked upon an exegesis of various symbols used in Suhrawardi's mystical narratives as well as the decoding of the dense language which he uses to keep the esoteric secrets from those who are not among the "brothers in purity".

The present work, therefore, undertakes a study of the mystical dimension of Suhrawardi's thought. It is imperative to note that while mysticism remains one of the salient features of Suhrawardi's philosophical school, he was not only a Sufi nor was his school of thought only mystical. Suhrawardi was a system builder and like many others of the same stature (i.e. Ibn Sīnā), he comments on various traditional philosophical topics, i.e. metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, logic, etc.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a discussion among the scholars of Suhrawardi as to the true nature of his teachings and the nature of his specific contributions to Islamic philosophy. These discussions have led to the emergence of three distinct interpretations of Suhrawardian philosophy. Before embarking on an exposition and analysis of Suhrawardi's mystical ideas, it is necessary to briefly discuss these trends since it will enable us to place the mystical thoughts of Suhrawardi in an appropriate context.

I. SUHRAWARDI THE LOGICIAN:

This view, primarily held by H. Zia'i,¹ argues that the salient feature of Suhrawardi's philosophy is his Peripatetic writings and in particular his commentaries on logic and his critique of the peripatetic view of definition as a means of cognition. Zia'i, who considers the non-Peripatetic writings of Suhrawardi to be of secondary value hardly ever refers to his mystical narratives.

Zia'i's interpretation of Suhrawardi's thought is rather narrow and does not present the comprehensive nature of Suhrawardi's philosophy of illumination as one that is inclusive of rationalistic philosophy but is not limited to peripatetic philosophy. I do not wish to provide an extensive response to the above view but this much should suffice, that even a brief examination of the corpus of Suhrawardi's writings reveals the extent to which he went beyond the fashionable philosophical school of his time, namely the sort of logical analysis that was carried out by the Peripatetics. Furthermore, to ignore the vast body of Suhrawardi's mystical narratives also ignores the reason he wrote these mystical treatises. If Suhrawardi did not consider them to be necessary, he would not have composed them with such care or given repeated instructions to his companions to safeguard them. The mystical narratives of Suhrawardi should be regarded as part and parcel of the doctrine of illumination and it is in such treatises that he offers the second component of the *ishraqi* school of thought, namely practical wisdom, something that the above interpretation completely ignores.

II. SUHRAWARDI THE NEO-AVICENNIAN:

The view held by some of the prominent scholars of Islamic philosophy such as Mehdi Hā'iri and Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyāni, regards Suhrawardi as a philosopher who remains essentially

within the Ibn Sinian philosophical domain despite his innovations and deviations from the Peripatetic view.

A neo-Ibn Sinian reading of Suhrawardi takes a broader look at his philosophy and considers both Suhrawardi's commentaries on logic and metaphysics and his *ishraqi* writings to be of great philosophical significance. Suhrawardi accordingly is regarded as one who by drawing from various sources, interprets Ibn Sinā from a Neoplatonic view point, thereby synthesizing Aristotle, Plato, Pythagoreans and Hermeticism.

The above view in my opinion is more valid than the previous one but it too lacks emphasis on the mystical writings of Suhrawardi. Such notions as the attainment of knowledge through mystical experience and Suhrawardi's explicit emphasis on asceticism as a necessary component of pursuing the wisdom of illumination is too often ignored by a neo-Ibn Sinian interpretation of Suhrawardi. Proponents of this interpretation, too do not pay the attention that the Persian writings of Suhrawardi deserve, often regarding them only as fine works of literature. The mystical narratives of Suhrawardi present in a metaphorical language that which the language of rationalistic philosophy often fails to achieve. Even Ibn Sinā himself relies on the use of a symbolic language in his visionary recitals to propogate certain philosophical notions that ordinary language of peripatetic philosophy can not convey.

III. SUHRAWARDI THE THEOSOPHIST:

This interpretation of Suhrawardi as a theosophist (*hakim*) is also advocated by a number of prominent Suhrawardi scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Naṣr and Henry Corbin. The thrust of this interpretation is the multidimensional aspect of the Suhrawardian philosophy. According to this interpretation, rationalistic philosophy is prerequisite to the study of *ishraqi* philosophy and an integral component of it.

Unlike the former two interpretations, however, Naṣr and Corbin argue that the role of rationalistic philosophy is a limited one according to Suhrawardi because it demonstrates the limitations of reason to bring about knowledge of an existential nature. The intellect that yearns towards the absolute, transcends reason and through intellectual intuition (*dawq*) embraces the Divine truth. The faculty of intellectual intuition which exists potentially

Introduction

in man can be actualized if one is engaged in inner cleansing and purification which makes one receptive to divine wisdom. In one of his lengthiest treatises, Suhrawardi himself alludes to the practical as well as the theoretical dimension of *hikmah* and states:

He [God] is *hikmah* in that *hikmah* is of two divisions: one is pure knowledge and the other one is practical. Knowledge is to conceptualize the reality of the existent beings but praxis is the structure of action emanating from the essence of the doer.¹

In numerous places throughout his treatises, Suhrawardi explicitly addresses the role and place of the practical dimension of the *ishraqi* school by discussing in great detail specific Sufi rituals, components of an ascetic path and their spiritual consequence for the *sālik* (he who is on the path).

I adhere to the third interpretation since it does not negate or exclude the first two alternative interpretations but gives appropriate credit to Suhrawardi's mystical dimension as well. Since this study will focus on the Sufi aspects of Suhrawardi's school of illumination, emphasis is placed on the mystical elements of his thoughts.

It is obvious that Suhrawardi has written a variety of mystical narratives deliberately using the traditional Sufi symbolism and metaphors. Furthermore, the number of these treatises, the use of Sufi language and expressions, as well as explicit emphasis on such notions as the spiritual path, the need for a master and ascetic practices, all indicate one thing, namely Suhrawardi's desire to disclose the place and significance of the Sufi component of the school of *ishraq*.

It is therefore our view that disregarding the Sufi elements of the Suhrawardian thoughts leads to a misinterpretation of the school of *Ishraq* which is often followed by an attempt to place Suhrawardi in one of the traditional schools of Islamic philosophy i.e. peripatetics. It is the opinion of this author that Suhrawardi did not rely on one methodology for the understanding of truth but that he made full use of the possibilities that exist in the philosophical as well as the practical aspects of wisdom.

A more comprehensive study of Suhrawardi includes an extensive discussion of his ontology, epistemology, angelology and logic. Since this study will focus on the Sufi aspect of Suhrawardi and the school of illumination, our treatment of the peripatetic aspects of

his thoughts are necessarily rather brief. However, certain aspects of his angelology and ontology that serve as the background for both practical and philosophical Sufism have been treated more extensively than others.

In the first chapter, the life and works of Suhrawardi have been discussed. Both Suhrawardi's philosophical and Sufi writings are briefly analyzed, particularly the structure of his philosophical works. In the second chapter, the intellectual context of Suhrawardi's thought in his historical period has been alluded to before a broad survey of the central themes and the essential components of his school of *ishraq* are discussed. Finally, we have presented the distinction Suhrawardi makes between philosophy in its rationalistic sense and *hikmah*. A thorough understanding of this distinction is crucial for placing the Suhrawardian thought in its proper context.

In the third chapter, Suhrawardi's views concerning practical wisdom are discussed. Sufism on a practical level remains an integral part of Suhrawardi's philosophy and he describes the various elements of the spiritual path in great detail. In this chapter such topics as mystical visions, the nature of man and carnal desires, the role of the Sufi master and the spiritual journey of the soul as well as the role of asceticism have been discussed. Finally, unity as the ultimate goal of Sufis has been treated as the final stage of the spiritual path.

In the fourth chapter, philosophical Sufism is extensively treated. The subject of emanation and the hierarchy of light and their relationship with one another as well as angelology, a derivative of Suhrawardi's ontology, have been discussed. Angelology in Suhrawardi represents an important aspect of his thought in that he introduces various elements from other traditions, in particular the Zoroastrian religion. Through angelology, Suhrawardi discusses the archetypal world as well as the imaginal world as realities that stand opposite to the world of imagination. Subsequently, Suhrawardi's theory of vision in its physical and spiritual sense as well as the relationship between knowledge, presence, light and self have been discussed.

At the heart of Suhrawardi's school of illumination is a particular theory of knowledge known as "knowledge by presence". To offer an exposition of this theory, a critique of the more conventional theories of knowledge such as knowledge by definition, sense perception and innate concepts has first been offered in the

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second part of this chapter. Having presented Suhrawardi's critique of the inadequacies of these modes of knowing, his theory of knowledge by presence has been discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion concerning the practical consequences of this theory and a critique of knowledge by presence.

In the fifth chapter, the influence of Suhrawardi on Islamic philosophy in various parts of the Islamic world as well as the West has been presented. Among the topics discussed are the influence of Suhrawardi's *ishraqi* thought in bringing about such schools of philosophy as the "School of Isfahan". We have noted Suhrawardi's influence in India and Pakistan and the extent to which his ideas were instrumental in making the intellectual milieu of this region receptive to the philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā. Finally, the possible influence of Suhrawardi in such regions as Syria and Turkey have been alluded to and the limited influence of Suhrawardi in the west, in particular in France, was briefly discussed.

I have brought the volume to a conclusion by examining a possible relationship between Suhrawardi and the Persian nationalistic movement known as Shu'ūbiyyah.

In the appendix, my translation into English of a partial commentary of a 7/13 Indian author on *The Chant of Gabriel's Wing*, one of the most important esoteric works of Suhrawardi has been included. This translation is important: first, it represents a sample of Suhrawardi's esoteric writing; second, the commentary elaborates on some of the more complex symbolism in this treatise; and finally, it signifies the historical importance of Suhrawardi as it demonstrates how his writings have traveled from Syria to India only two centuries after him.