

al-Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Maqtūl

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Abstract

Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. Aleppo, c. 1191) is a mystical philosopher who founded a new tradition in Islamic thought, that of Ishrāq (“Illuminationism”). This term applies first to a new method: Suhrawardī introduces illumination or knowledge by presence as the foundation of a sounder way to apprehend the universe and ourselves. Ishrāq is also a new understanding of what is, conceived of as the participation of all that is in one fundamental reality, Light. Suhrawardī’s thought had lasting influence on later Islamic speculative tradition, especially in the East, as an alternative trend to the “Peripatetic” tradition represented by thinkers such as Avicenna.

Biographical Information

Born in Suhraward near Zanjān (NW Iran) in the middle of the sixth/twelfth century (probably c. 549/1155), Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā b. Ḥabash b. Amīrak al-Suhrawardī received his first education in Maragha. After a few years of travel in quest of knowledge in Anatolia, Syria, and possibly Isfahan, he arrived in Aleppo, probably in 579/1183. There he gained the favor of the court, then ruled by al-Malik al-Ẓāhir Ḡāzī, the son of Saladin. This short period of favor was followed by a dramatic reverse of fortune, instigated by local religious scholars, which resulted in Suhrawardī’s condemnation to death by the order of Saladin. The earliest account known, ‘Imād al-Dīn’s *Bustān al-jāmi‘*, a chronicle contemporary with the event, mentions Suhrawardī’s death in the year 588/1192. One century later, Shahrāzūrī speaks of the end of 586 or of 588/1191 or 1192. In the same thirteenth century, Ibn Khallikān rejects the date 588 and gives precise dates according to two different accounts: Suhrawardī was incarcerated and then strangled on 5 Rajab 587/July 29,

1191; his dead body was carried out of the citadel of Aleppo on Friday, end of Dhū al-Ḥijja 587/January 17, 1192. Suhrawardī was then 38 in lunar years, or 36, or even 50 according to another version related by Shahrāzūrī. The accounts are no more precise regarding the manner in which Suhrawardī died (starvation to death, strangulation, execution followed by crucifixion for several days), and the ultimate reasons for his condemnation, probably a mix of religious and political factors.

During his short life, Suhrawardī produced an impressive number of writings both in Arabic and Persian, some very brief, others lengthy, written in various styles, from allegoric tales to scholastic treatises very much in the manner of the writings typical of Islamic philosophers in the Peripatetic tradition. His works comprise four major philosophical treatises written in Arabic: *al-Talwīḥāt* (*The Intimations*), *al-Muqāwamāt* (*The Oppositions*), *al-Mashārī' wa-l-muṭārahāt* (*The Paths and Havens or Conversations*), and *Kitāb Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* (*The Philosophy of Illumination or Book of Illuminationist Wisdom*), his masterpiece completed in 582/1186 (*Ḥikma* § 279). These treatises are accompanied by shorter texts of different types: mystical allegories such as the *Qiṣṣat al-ġurba al-ġarbiya* (*The Story of the Occidental Exile*), epitomes of philosophy such as the *Hayākil al-nūr* (*Temples of light*), and prayers and invocations.

Thought

Suhrawardī's thought represents a profound change in Avicennan philosophy on which it is founded. The main points of divergence have to do with epistemology and with the conception of the structure of reality. Suhrawardī's writings denote a strong dissatisfaction with discursive rationality and the will to find an alternative ground on which to build a sounder system to apprehend the universe and ourselves. This ground is found in intuitive knowledge, the kind of knowledge experienced by mystics in their visions, but also in the experience of self-knowledge. This "presential knowledge" or "knowledge by presence" (*'ilm ḥuḍūrī*), which is thus for Suhrawardī the only way to truly access what is, is characterized by the fact that it is not mediated through any image or representation. It allows for a direct vision, an intuition, providing the principles of a new comprehension of reality. As stated in the introduction of *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, beside the sciences drawn from the observation of phenomena perceived by our senses, such as geometry, there are sciences built on principles known from our experience of the spiritual: "Those who do not proceed according to this method have no share in wisdom; doubts will toy with them!" (*Ḥikma* § 6).

The integration of presential experience as a source for knowledge does not entail a complete dismissal of discursive rationality. The recommendation made at the end of the *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* states unequivocally that this book should not be made available "except to whom has mastered the Peripatetic method," which is precisely the method using discursive argumentation (*Ḥikma* § 279). However, discursive rationality alone cannot lead to true knowledge because it lacks the validity given by mystical experience. Only the speculative mystic who brings together mystical vision and excellence of reasoning can reach certainty. Hence the end of the quotation just given: "... and who is enamored of the Light of God." Mystical experience is still more important than reasoning skills however: in a hierarchy of sages given in the same book, second to the speculative mystic are sages who follow the mystical path

with no attempt at speculation, followed by those who are skilled in discursive rationality without mystical experience (*Hikma* § 5).

In metaphysics, Suhrawardī builds an elaborate system centered on Light. From the Light of lights emanates a vertical hierarchy of pure immaterial lights, paralleled by a horizontal order of lights, and from these emanations and the interactions between the different orders, further entities are produced. There is thus a gradual unfolding of Pure immaterial lights – triumphant (only concerned with themselves and the higher realms) and regent (i.e., those ruling over the bodies) – of accidental lights, and obstacles to light (*barzakh*), that is, the bodies.

The main characteristics of Suhrawardī's metaphysical system are as follows. Everything is conceived of as participating in one fundamental reality, Light. Even that which is an obstacle to light is caused by light and defined by its relationship to light. Lights are primarily differentiated by their degree of intensity: the level of their share in light makes them what they are and is the very principle of individuation, even if other elements are also included the further one gets from the higher levels. Intensity is also understood in dynamic terms: a reality can be more or less what it is, says Suhrawardī, thus introducing movement in the category of substance. A corollary of this principle is the ontological weight given to the lowest degrees of light: this is a metaphysics attentive to the multiple instances of light, a metaphysics of lights rather than of Light. Finally, Suhrawardī reintroduces Platonic Ideas of some sort, the "Lords of species," and maintains the reality of a separate World of images.

On human nature and destiny, Suhrawardī considers human soul as an immaterial light imprisoned in this world and using the body as a tool to perfect itself, in order to escape from its exile in the material world and reach the world of Lights. Some passages in the *Hikmat al-Ishrāq* showing sympathy toward the affirmation of transmigration of souls (*tanāsukh*) have led to discussions by later Ishrāqīs and opponents as to how this should be understood (*Hikma* § 229–236). Questions of conscience of self and personal identity are also of special interest for Ishrāqī thought.

Suhrawardī presents his system as a break from the views of the "Peripatetic" (*mashshā'ī*) philosophers of Islam (even though some of his writings are written in their manner, see *Mashhārī* § 208), and many of his theories are introduced as an alternative to their erroneous conception (e.g., on definition, syllogism, hylomorphism, metempsychosis, Platonic Ideas, and "being" conceived as anything beyond a mental attribute). This break is presented as a return to the doctrines of the first sages – Greeks, Persians, Indians, etc. – with tutelary figures such as Hermes, Plato, and Zoroaster.

Suhrawardī's writings had a lasting influence in Islamic thought, not only through a line of commentators and disciples such as Ibn Kammūna (d. 683/1284), Shahrāzūrī (thirteenth century), and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 710 or 716/1311 or 1316), but also as a method, considered as a distinct trend in contrast with the *mashshā'ī* tradition, and as a set of questions and problems. To mention just one example, Suhrawardī's insistence on the purely mental character of universals, especially of being, had a profound impact on later debates on the essence/existence distinction.

Modern scholarship is divided on how to interpret the different aspects of Suhrawardī's thought. This debate, which has consequences on the classification of Suhrawardī's writings, is doubled by an interrogation on the importance of Suhrawardī's departure from Avicenna, itself depending greatly on the manner Avicenna's thought is understood. Some scholars stress the mystical aspects, others the Iranian heritage, yet others, the philosophical aspects, with a will to fully acknowledge the scholastic elements in Suhrawardī's writings. This last approach led to a better grasp of the importance of Suhrawardī's logical theories (it is interesting to note that only the parts on metaphysics were included in Corbin's edition of the *Talwīḥāt*, *Muqāwamāt*, and *Mashāri'*, and that his translation of the *Kitāb Hikmat al-Ishrāq* skips over the first part on general questions regarding logic and epistemology). A few scholars have also pointed to other intellectual traditions, which may have contributed to Suhrawardī's system, such as Ismā'īlī thought, opening new perspectives still to be explored.

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