The Illuminationist Philosophy

Author: Hossein Ziai - Introduction of his book Hikmat al-Ishraq, The Philosophy of Illumination

The nature of the 'Illuminationist philosophy' has long been a matter of controversy. As early as the thirteenth century, Shams al-Din Shahrazuri (d. after 1288) could write, 'The philosophy of Illumination (Hikmat al-ishraq) is the philosophy based upon illumination (ishraq), which is unveiling (kaslif), or the philosophy of the easterners, which is to say, the Persians.' He adds, helpfully, 'It amounts to the same thing since their philosophy is based on unveiling and intuition (al-kashf wa al-dhawq) and so is related to the illumination that is the manifestation of the intelligible lights, of their first principles, and their emanation of illuminations upon the perfected souls when they are abstracted from bodily matter. The Persians relied in their philosophy upon intuition and unveiling. The ancient philosophers of Greece did the same, with the exception of Aristotle and his school, who relied only upon reasoning and syllogism.'

Shahrazuri captures both the essential features of the Illuminationist philosophy and the most important controversy concerning its nature. Suhrawardi’s philosophy differs from that of the Islamic Peripatetics like Avicenna in giving a fundamental epistemological role to immediate and atemporal intuition. Intuition plays an essential role, both on the basic level of sensation and in the form of direct mystical awareness of the supersensible entities that Suhrawardi in the present book calls "immaterial lights." His philosophy is explicitly-often stridently-anti. Peripatetic and is identified with the pre-Aristotelian sages, particularly Plato. Like the Neoplatonists of Roman times, he is convinced that this wisdom was also expressed, though generally in symbolic form, by the ancient sages of other nations, notably the Egyptians, as represented by Hermes Trismegistus, and the ancient Persian sages and righteous kings. Controversy, already prefigured in the passage just quoted, exists concerning the degree to which Suhrawardi’s philosophy should be seen as Persian. Considered another way, the dispute concerns whether Suhrawardi’s thought should be looked at primarily as an attempt to construct a philosophical system or as mysticism and gnosticism.

Suhrawardi himself identifies two periods in his thought, divided by the dream of Aristotle revealing the key doctrine of knowledge by presence and by his acceptance of the reality of the Platonic Forms. Works written before that time were Peripatetic in doctrine; later works reflected his Illuminationist thought. For our purposes, Suhrawardi’s works can be divided into four classes - a system that can be supported from the analysis of his works given in the introduction to The Philosophy of Illumination.

1. Juvenilia. Suhrawardi wrote a number of philosophical works prior to the development of his distinctive philosophical views, perhaps as exercises.
2. Persian and mystical works. He also wrote a large number of shorter works in Arabic and Persian dealing with mystical topics. The best known are the allegories, mostly in Persian prose. There are also prayers.
3. The mature "Peripatetic" works. These are three medium to large philosophical compendia: Al-talwihat (Intimations), Al-muqawamat (Apposites), and Al-mashari wa al-mutarahat (Paths and havens). They are written in the conventional Avicennan philosophical language but criticize the Peripatetics on many points.

The interrelations among these works have been a subject of some controversy, reflecting differing interpretations of the nature of Suhrawardi's philosophical project. Among Western scholars there have been two major approaches. The great French orientalist Henry Corbin saw Suhrawardi's project as an "Oriental theosophy." The "Peripatetic" works were thus either purely propredeutic or a middle phase of his thought. Among the philosophical works, The Philosophy of Illumination stands alone as representative of Suhrawardi's mature thought. What is important in that work is the metaphysics of light and darkness and, in general, the mythological elements of Suhrawardi's thought. The allegories and the mystical works are likewise seen as representative of the final and highest stage of his thought. Suhrawardi's primary cultural identification is with ancient Iran. Insofar as Corbin's interpretation has premodern roots, they are in the Zoroastrian-oriented philosophy of the Illuminationists of Mughal India. Corbin's interpretation is expressed not just in his studies of Suhrawardi but also in his translations and even his critical editions of Suhrawardi's works. The use of renderings like "theosophy" and "oriental" indicate the fundamentally mythological focus of Corbin's interests and interpretations. His translation of The Philosophy of Illumination omits the logic, and his editions of the three "Peripatetic" (or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, anti-Peripatetic) works omit the logic and physics of each work and contain only the sections on metaphysics. Such methods inevitably downplay the strictly philosophical aspects of Suhrawardi's thought.

Others - and we are among them - see Suhrawardi's program as fundamentally philosophical and consider the "mature Peripatetic" works to be part of the same philosophical program as The Philosophy of Illumination. In such an interpretation, Suhrawardi's logical and metaphysical critique of the Peripatetics is central to his philosophical enterprise. Suhrawardi is presenting what is fundamentally a philosophy - albeit one with a place provided for the use of allegory and mystical experience - and is thus to be interpreted and judged in philosophical terms. The corpus of texts on The Philosophy of Illumination are thus ordered in the following manner: the Intimations; the Apposites; the Paths and Havens; and finally the best-known, which also bears the name of the new system as its title, The Philosophy of Illumination. This same order - as well as the necessity of studying every part of each text (logic, physics, and metaphysics) for a complete understanding of the philosophy of illumination - is corroborated by Shahrazuri in his comprehensive Illuminationist commentary, Sharh hikmat al-ishraq. The allegorical works, though of literary interest, are seen as primarily elementary and semipopular works and not central to the Illuminationist philosophy.

This approach to Suhrawardi, in which the major "Peripatetic" works and The Philosophy of Illumination are seen as a coherent interdependent corpus, is endorsed by the example of the later Iranian philosophical tradition, which almost always discusses Suhrawardi using conventional Avicennan terminology and takes as its point of departure precisely those points where Suhrawardi attacks Avicenna and the Islamic Peripatetics: the primacy of quiddity, the Platonic Forms, the epistemology of presence, the rejection of Aristotelian definition, and related issues. In terms of The Philosophy of Illumination, these are issues that derive from the section on logic and the "discursive philosophy" that Corbin and his followers have tended to ignore. Suhrawardi referred to discursive philosophy, one of two constituents of "perfect" philosophy, in terms such as baith, al-hikma al-baithiyya, tariq al-mash'īn, and madhhab al-mashsha'īn. "Intuitive
philosophy," the other half, has priority in establishing the principles of philosophy. The terms used - such as dhawq, al-hikma al-dhawqiyya, and al-‘ilm al-huduri, al-‘ilm al-shuhud - all indicate intuitive philosophy but differ when used in a technical context. The distinction is made by Aristotle in Posterior Analytics, 1.1-2, where he gives priority to "primary immediately known premises" in science. All too often, intuitive philosophy is interpreted as a "mystical experience." The combination of discursive and intuitive philosophy into one consistent system-the philosophy of Illumination-was Suhrawardi's major achievement in the eyes of the medieval biographers and commentators on Illuminationist texts.

The argument of The Philosophy of Illumination will be summarized below, but it is appropriate to say something here about the principal distinctive doctrines of Suhrawardi and his school.

First is the doctrine of knowledge by presence. Suhrawardi stressed that all knowledge involves some sort of direct, unmediated confrontation of the knower and the known. In general, he rejected intermediary mechanisms as ways of explaining various sorts of knowledge. At the lowest level, this involved a rejection of both the extramission and intramission theories of vision and of similar theories to explain the other senses. At the level of logic, he rejected Peripatetic essential definition, arguing that essences could only be known through direct acquaintance. At the highest level, intuition was the means by which supersensible entities could be known. Knowledge by presence was also invoked to solve the notorious Peripatetic difficulty of God's knowledge of particulars.

Second is the doctrine of primacy of quiddity. Though Suhrawardi himself apparently did not use the term, later interpreters categorized his ontology as "primacy of quiddity" (asalat al-mahiya), in contrast to Mulla-Sadra's assertion of the "primacy of existence" (asalat al-wujud). This issue arises from Avicenna's famous distinction of the quiddity and the existence of a real thing. Suhrawardi argued that the existence of a valid mental distinction did not imply the corresponding existence of a real distinction in concrete things. In other words, such metaphysical entities as existence, necessity, unity, and so on were I'tibarat aqliya, "beings of reason," and only concrete individual entities really existed.

Finally, it is clear that Suhrawardi himself saw the question of the Platonic Forms as being the issue that united him and the Ancients against the Peripatetics. Since he saw the forms not as (epistemological entities but as metaphysical explanations for order in the world, he framed the issue in terms of the number of immaterial intellects. The Peripatetics, by whom he mainly meant Avicenna, accepted a hierarchy of only ten such intellects. The Illuminationists believed there were a great many more, many of them equal in rank but different in kind.

The history of the Illuminationist School

A comprehensive history of the Illuminationist school has yet to be written. Except for the few years of Suhrawardi's stay in Aleppo, the school never existed as an organized, institutionalized group comparable to the pythagoreans, the early Platonists, or the Ismaili philosophers. Suhrawardi stresses in The Philosophy of Illumination that proper understanding of the book is dependent on al-qa'im bi al-kitab, "he who arises with the
Book," Suhrawardi's designated successor and interpreter. That there should have been such a person is implicit in his system. Shahrazuri comments that Suhrawardi's wanderings were motivated by a search for such an intellectual peer but adds that he never found one. However, Suhrawardi's disciples were scattered with his death and we seem to know the names of none of them -with, of course, the exception of al-Malik al-Zshjr. Suhrawardi's books circulated widely after his death, but without an accompanying oral tradition of interpretation.

The first prominent advocate of Suhrawardi's philosophy was Shahrazuri, who flourished in the mid-thirteenth century. Though he was the author of several widely read works, he remains a rather mysterious figure. Contrary to some reports, he certainly was not a direct student of Suhrawardi, nor was he taught by one; apart from the disparity of dates, he makes clear in the introduction to his commentary on The Philosophy of Illumination that his knowledge of Suhrawardi came from books. Shahrazuri is best known for three works: the commentary just referred to; a widely read but unpublished philosophical encyclopedia entitled Al-shajara al-ilahiya (The divine tree); and a biographical dictionary of ancient and Islamic philosophers on Illuminationist principles, Nuzhat al-arwah (The consolation of spirits).

Shahrazuri's commentary on The Philosophy of Illumination was the basis of the commentary by Qutb al-Din Shirazi (d. 1311), a well-known scientist who was a student of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi. His commentary incorporated and superseded that of Shahrazuri and came to be the vehicle through which The Philosophy of Illumination was understood in later Islamic philosophy. Suhrawardi's influence is also predominant in Qutb al-Din's popular Persian philosophical encyclopedia, Durrat al-taj (The pearly crown).

Another early expounder of the Illuminationist philosophy was the Jewish convert to Islam, Ibn Kammuna, whose Al-jadid fi al-hikma (The new philosophy) is a version of the Illuminationist philosophy and who wrote a commentary on another of Suhrawardi's works, Al-talwi̇-āt. The next two centuries are something of a blank. Although commentaries were written on Suhrawardi's works by Ghiyãth al-Din Dashtaki and Jalal al-Din Dawwani around the beginning of the sixteenth century, little is known about the philosophy of this period.

The major revival of the Illuminationist philosophy is associated with the so-called "School of Isfahan" of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and a curious revival of interest in Zoroastrian lore in Mughal India at about the same time. The interest in Suhrawardi shown by the members of the School of Isfahan was largely philosophical. The great exponent of Suhrawardi's views was Mir Damad (d. 1040 A.H./1631 C.E.). His student Mulla Sadra, generally considered the most significant Islamic philosopher of the later period, broke with Mir Damad and the Illuminationist tradition on certain significant points, the most important issue being the reality and primacy of existence. Whereas Suhrawardi and his followers had considered existence to be I'tibari, a "being of reason" produced by the mind's activity, Mulla Sadra held that there was a deeper sort of existence to which Suhrawardi's critique of Avicenna did not apply. Thus, in the later tradition of Iranian philosophy, it may fairly be said that there are two wings of the Illuminationist tradition: one faithful to Suhrawardi on the issue of the primacy of quiddity; and the other, led by Mulla Sadra, that criticized Suhrawardi on major points but still defined itself in terms of issues that Suhrawardi had first set out. Since Mulla
Sadra, Iranian philosophers have largely been divided into those who supported and those who rejected Mulla Sadra's critique of Suhrawardi, with the supporters of Mulla Sadra generally in the ascendant. Both schools exist in Irall to this day, and The Philosophy of Illumination is still taught in the theological academies. In Mughal India, the mythological aspects of Suhrawardi's writings appealed to a group of Iranian and Parsi intellectuals led by one Adhar Kaywan, a Zoroastrian priest. For them, Suhrawardi, with his allusions to the doctrines of light and darkness among the ancient Persians, provided an intellectually respectable form of Zoroastrian wisdom - one that was expressed in such productions of this school as the Dasatir and the Dabistan al-madhahib. A more philosophical expression of the Indian school is found in Hirawi's Persian commentary on The Philosophy of Illumination.

In the Western parts of the Islamic world, however, Suhrawardi's philosophy had little influence, though a paraphrase of parts of The Philosophy of Illumination is found in a work of the Nasrid vizier Lisan al-Din ibn al-Khatib (d. 776 A.H./1375 C.E.). On medieval European philosophy, it probably had no influence at all.