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Illumination (*ishrāq*)

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Abstract:

Illumination (*ishrāq*) is a term of art in the philosophical system introduced by Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191). It usually occurs in adjectival form (*ishrāqī*), characterising immediate knowledge as well as arguments and principles that are grounded in immediate knowledge and that depart from the Peripatetic philosophy of Avicenna. In this form, it became the name for Suhrawardī's philosophy in the subsequent tradition.

Article:

Illumination (*ishrāq*) is a term of art in the philosophical system introduced by Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191). It usually occurs in adjectival form (*ishrāqī*), characterising immediate knowledge as well as arguments and principles that are grounded in immediate knowledge and that depart from the Peripatetic philosophy of Avicenna. In this form, it became the name for Suhrawardī's philosophy in the subsequent tradition.

In his preface to the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* ('The Philosophy of Illumination'), the foundational work of illuminationist philosophy, al-Suhrawardī sketches a mythical Greek and Persian lineage, as a representative of which he distinguishes himself from the Aristotelian mainstream of the philosophy of his time. He presents illuminationism as superior to the Aristotelian method of rational investigation (*baḥth*), for the illuminationist philosopher is proficient at both *baḥth* and intuitive knowledge (*dhawq*) (al-Suhrawardī, 2:10-3). This term suggests a connection to Sufism, which is corroborated by the stringent requirements (solitary retreat, ascetic diet, extended vigil) set for the student of illuminationist philosophy as well as al-Suhrawardī's naming of celebrated Sufis, instead of philosophers, as his Islamic predecessors (al-Suhrawardī, 1:74).

Despite arguments for taking al-Suhrawardī's self-styled lineage as historical reality (Walbridge, *Leaven*), close analysis indicates that his philosophy emerges as a product of the sixth/twelfth-century critical reception of Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037). Indeed, al-Suhrawardī

founded all his new ideas on a sustained critique of Avicennian metaphysics and theory of science.

In metaphysics al-Suhrawardī introduced a novel system based on the idea of light (*nūr*) emanating in diminishing degrees of luminosity from God, the Light of Lights. In this technical sense, light is synonymous with manifestation or appearance (*zuhūr*), which allows al-Suhrawardī to include a wide range of phenomena, from sense-data through self-awareness to intelligible content, under the same concept. Thus, at the heart of Suhrawardī's illuminationism there is an attempt to identify being with being known or perceived, which is further accentuated by his adoption of the contested Platonic theory of forms (Rüdiger Arnzen, *Platonische Ideen in der arabischen Philosophie*, Berlin & Boston 2011, 119–50), according to which the essences of concrete things exist as immaterial entities, independently of those concrete things. Al-Suhrawardī conceives of the world of forms as an elaborate hierarchy of lights that comes to be through a complex series of reflections, refractions and fusions of the light emanating from the Light of Lights.

An important complement of al-Suhrawardī's new metaphysics is his sustained critique of the central concepts of Avicennian metaphysics, such as existence, unity, substantiality and accidentality, or the modal concepts (necessity, impossibility, and possibility or contingency). The central point is that these are mind-dependent concepts (*i'tibārāt 'aqlīya*), which do not correspond to metaphysically distinct constituents of concrete reality. This critique emerges out of the twelfth-century debate concerning Ibn Sīnā's distinction between the essence and existence of created things (Fedor Benevich, The Essence-existence distinction: Four elements of the post-Avicennian metaphysical dispute (11th–13th centuries), *Oriens* 45 [2017], 203–258), but al-Suhrawardī expands the arguments to cover a much wider variety of concepts.

Apart from his emphasis on intuitive knowledge, al-Suhrawardī's most important epistemological contribution was the concept of presential knowledge (*'ilm ḥuḍūrī*). In this technical sense, the concept of presence focuses on the cognitive subject's experience of perceiving or knowing an object, thus treating as secondary the question of whether that experience truthfully corresponds to something real. Although al-Suhrawardī introduced the concept as a solution to the specific problem of God's knowledge of particular things (Jari Kaukua, Suhrawardī's knowledge as presence in context, *Studia Orientalia* 114 [2013], 309–24), it subsequently became a general alternative to Ibn Sīnā's epistemology. Another important piece of al-Suhrawardī's heritage was the theory of a world of image (*'ālam al-mithāl*) situated between the world of material bodies and the world of incorporeal

intelligibles. This made room for the possibility of spatially extended but immaterial entities, which enabled a novel explanation of visions and eschatological experiences.

Al-Suhrawardī's immediate following seems to have been scarce, but in the latter half of the seventh/thirteenth century his work aroused the interest of two important commentators. The first to cease the task was 'Izz al-Dawla Ṣa'īd b. Maṣṣūr b. Kammūna (d. 683/1284), who commented on *al-Talwīḥāt al-lawḥīya wa'l-'arshīya* ('Intimations of the Tablet and the Throne'), a work that presents a critical epitome of Avicennian philosophy but only hints at the illuminationist doctrine of the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*. Ibn Kammūna's contemporary Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī (d. after 683/1284) commented on both *al-Talwīḥāt* and the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, in addition to compiling a philosophical summa, *al-Shajara al-ilāhīya* ('The Divine Tree'), which elaborates on a number of al-Suhrawardī's doctrines, such as the world of image, and thus provided an important source of illuminationist ideas for subsequent centuries. Bearing in mind the fact that Qutb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī's (d. 710/1311) widely read commentary on the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, as well as the same author's Persian compilation *Durrat al-tāj* ('The Pearl of the Crown'), is largely derived from al-Shahrazūrī, the latter can duly be attributed a seminal role in the crystallisation of the illuminationist doctrine as an independent alternative to Peripatetic philosophy and *kalām*.

Later on, important commentaries on al-Suhrawardī's works were written in Ṣafavid Iran by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī (d. 908/1502), Ghiyāth al-Dīn al-Dashtakī (d. 949/1542), and Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1045/1635–6). Finally, an early eleventh/seventeenth century Persian translation and commentary of selected sections of the second part of the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, called *al-Anwārīya* and composed by a certain Niẓām al-Dīn al-Harawī, was instrumental in transmitting a mystical interpretation of illuminationism to the Indian subcontinent. In addition to the commentary tradition, individual doctrines of al-Suhrawardī's philosophy figured prominently in independent philosophical and theological texts, particularly ones written by Shī'ite authors. His arguments for the mind-dependence of the concept of existence were crucial for Mīr Dāmād's (d. 1041/1631) doctrine of the metaphysical primacy of quiddity to existence (*aṣālat al-māhīya*), and thereby had a significant influence on later Iranian philosophy.

Although al-Suhrawardī's philosophy was developed in close relation to Avicennian Peripateticism, the differences are sufficient for characterising illuminationism as a genuinely new philosophical system. However, it is a vexed question whether its reception amounts to a distinct school tradition of fully committed representatives (for a concise assessment of the various views, see van Lit, *The Commentary Tradition*). There is plenty of evidence that al-

Suhrawardī's works were frequently read and commented upon, but apart from a few exceptions, such as al-Shahrazūrī, it is less clear to what extent his recipients endorsed his philosophy as a system. However, the term 'illuminationist' (*ishrāqī*) is used to characterise individual thinkers or ideas to this day, especially in Iran, usually in reference to specific doctrines, such as presential knowledge or the metaphysical primacy of quiddity.

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