

Chapter 19: Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi Maqtul

By Seyyed Hossein Nasr

The intellectual life of Islam and that of Christianity – the two sister civilizations in the Middle Ages can be compared with each other to a large extent through the role that Aristotelian philosophy played in them. Peripatetic science and philosophy entered the Western world through translations from Arabic in the seventh/thirteenth century and eventually became dominant to such an extent as to replace the Augustinian and Platonic wisdom of the earlier period only to be overthrown itself by the humanistic rationalism of the Renaissance.

In Islam the attack of Sufis and theologians upon the rationalistic aspect of Aristotelian philosophy weakened its hold at the very time when that philosophy was gaining strength in the Christian West and was replaced in the Muslim world by two elements, the doctrinal Sufism of Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi and the *Hikmat al-Ishraq*¹ or illuminative wisdom of Shaikh al-Ishraq Shihab al-Din Yahya ibn Habash ibn Amirak Suhrawardi,² both of which aimed at an effective realization of the “truth” and replaced the rationalism of Peripatetic philosophy by intellectual intuition (*dhawq*).

Life, Works and Sources of Doctrines

Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, whose *ishraqi* wisdom has played such a great role in the intellectual and spiritual life of Islam and especially of Shi'ism, was born in Suhraward, a village near the present city of Zinjan in northern Persia, in 549/1153. He studied at first with Majd al-Din Jili at Maraghah and later with Zahir al-Din Qari at Ispahan. Having finished his formal studies, he began to travel through Persia, meeting various Sufi masters and benefiting from their presence and teachings. During this period he spent much time in meditation and invocation in spiritual retreats. He also journeyed during the same period through the regions of Anatolia and Syria and acquired great love for the cities of these countries.

On one of his journeys, he went from Damascus to Aleppo and met Malik Zahir, the son of Salah al-Din Ayyubi, the celebrated Muslim ruler. Malik Zahir became much devoted to Shihab al-Din and asked him to stay at his Court. It was here that the master of *ishraq* fell into disgrace with the religious authorities in

the city who considered some of his statements dangerous to Islam. They asked for his death, and when Malik Zahir refused, they petitioned Salah al-Din himself who threatened his son with abdication unless he followed the ruling of the religious leaders. Shihab al-Din was thereby imprisoned and in the year 587/1191, at the age of 38, he was either suffocated to death or died of starvation.³

Many miraculous features have been connected with the life of Suhrawardi and many stories told of his unusual powers. His countenance was striking to all his contemporaries. His illuminated and ruddy face and dishevelled hair, his handsome beard and piercing eyes reminded all who met him of his keen intelligence. He paid as little attention to his dress as he did to his words. Sometimes he wore the woollen garb of the Sufis, sometimes the silk dress of the courtiers. His short and tragic life contains many similarities to the life of Hallaj, whom he quoted so often, and to that of the Sufi poet 'Ain al-Qudat Hamadani who was to follow a similar career a few years later.

The writings of Suhrawardi are numerous despite his short and turbulent life. Some of them have been lost, a few published, and the rest remain in manuscript form in the libraries of Persia, India, and Turkey.⁴ Unlike his predecessors, Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali, he was never translated into Latin and, therefore, never became well known in the Western world. Yet, his influence in the East can almost match that of Ibn Sina, and any history of Islamic philosophy written without mentioning him and the school of *Ishraq* is, to say the least, incomplete.

Histories of Muslim philosophy written by Westerners, like Munk and de Boer, usually end with Ibn Rushd because the authors have considered only that aspect of Muslim philosophy which influenced Latin scholasticism. Actually, the seventh/thirteenth century, far from being the end of speculative thought in Islam, is really the beginning of this most important school of *Ishraq*. Suhrawardi's writings came to the East at the same time as Peripatetic philosophy was journeying westward to Andalusia and from there through the influence of Ibn Rushd and others to Europe.

There are altogether about fifty titles of Suhrawardi's writings which have come down to us in the various histories and biographies.⁵ They may be divided into five categories as follows: ⁶

1. The four large doctrinal treatises, the first three dealing with Aristotelian (*masha'i*) philosophy with certain modifications and the last with *ishraqi* wisdom proper. These works, all in Arabic, include the *Talwihat*, *Muqawwamat*, *Mutarahat*, and the *Hikmat al-Ishraq*.⁷
2. Shorter doctrinal treatises like *Hayakil al-Nur*, *al-Alwah al-Imadiyyah*, *Partau-Nameh*, *I'tiqad al-Hukama'*, *al-Lamahat*, *Yazdan Shinakht*, and *Bustan al-Qulub* ⁸ all of which explain further the subject-matter of the larger treatises. These works are partly in Arabic and partly in Persian.
3. Initiatory narratives written in symbolic language to depict the journey of the initiate towards gnosis (*ma'rifah*) and illumination (*ishraq*). These short treatises, all written in Persian, include *'Aql-i Surkh*, *Awaz-i Par-i Jibra'il*, *al-Ghurbat al-Gharbiyyah* (also in Arabic), *Lughat-i Muran*, *Risalah fi Halat al-Tufuliyyah*, *Ruzi ba Jama'at-i Sufiyan*, *Risalah fi al-Mi'raj*, and *Safir-i Simurgh*.

4. Commentaries and transcriptions of earlier philosophic and initiatic texts and sacred Scripture like the translation into Persian of the *Risalat al-Ta'ir* of Ibn Sina, the commentary in Persian upon Ibn Sina's *Isharat wa Tanbihat*, and the treatise *Risalah fi Haqiqat al-'Ishq* which last is based on Ibn Sina's *Risalat al-'Ishq* and his commentary upon the verses of the Qur'an and on the Hadith.⁹

5. Prayers, litanies, invocations, and what may be called books of the hour, all of which Shahrazuri calls *al-Waridat w-al-Taqdisat*.

These works and the large number of commentaries written upon them during the last seven centuries form the main corpus of the tradition of *ishraq* and are a treasure of traditional doctrines and symbols combining in them the wisdom of Sufism with Hermeticism, and Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Zoroastrian philosophies together with some other diverse elements. There is little doubt that Suhrawardi is greatly indebted to the Muslim philosophers, especially Ibn Sina, for the formulation of many of his ideas.

Moreover, inasmuch as he is a Sufi as well as a philosopher or, more properly speaking, a theosophist, ¹⁰ he is in debt, both for spiritual inspiration and for his doctrines, to the great chain of Sufi masters before him. More specifically he is indebted to Hallaj whom he quotes so often and to al-Ghazali whose *Mishkat al-Anwar* played so important a role in his doctrine of the relation of light to the Imam.

Suhrawardi came also under the influence of Zoroastrian teaching, particularly in angelology and the symbolism of light and darkness.¹¹ He identified the wisdom of the ancient Zoroastrian sages with that of Hermes and, therefore, with the pre-Aristotelian philosophers, especially Pythagoras and Plato, whose doctrines he sought to revive.

Finally, he was influenced directly by the vast tradition of Hermeticism which is itself the remains of ancient Egyptian, Chaldaean and Sabaeen doctrines metamorphosed within the matrix of Hellenism and is based on the primordial symbolism of alchemy. Suhrawardi considered himself to be the reviver of the perennial wisdom, *philosophia perennis*, or what he calls *Hikmat al-Ladunniyyah* or *Hikmat al-'Atiqah* which existed always among the Hindus, Persians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and the ancient Greeks up to the time of Plato.¹²

The concept of the history of philosophy for Suhrawardi and his school is itself of great interest. This school identifies philosophy with wisdom rather than with rational systematization. Philosophy for it does not begin with Plato and Aristotle; rather, it ends with them. Aristotle, by putting wisdom in a rationalistic dress, limited its perspective and separated it from the unitive wisdom of the earlier sages.¹³

From the *Ishraqi* point of view, Hermes or the Prophet Idris is the father of philosophy, having received it as revelation from heaven. He was followed by a chain of sages in Greece and in ancient Persia and later in Islam which unified the wisdom of previous civilizations in its milieu. The chain of transmission of *ishraqi* doctrines, which must be understood symbolically rather than only historically, may be schematized as follows:

In the introduction to his *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, Suhrawardi states explicitly the nature of *ishraqi* wisdom and its relation to ancient doctrines. As he writes: “Although before the composition of this book I composed several summary treatises on Aristotelian philosophy, this book differs from them and has a method peculiar to itself. All of its material has not been assembled by thought and reasoning; rather, intellectual intuition, contemplation, and ascetic practices have played an important role in it.

Since our sayings have not come by means of rational demonstration but by inner vision and contemplation, they cannot be destroyed by the doubts and temptations of the sceptics. Whoever is a traveller (*salik*) on the way to truth is my companion and a help on this Path. The procedure of the master of philosophy, the divine Plato, was the same, and the sages who preceded Plato in time like Hermes, the father of philosophy, followed the same path.

Since sages of the past, because of the ignorance of the masses, expressed their sayings in secret symbols (*rumuz*), the refutations which have been made against them have concerned the exterior of these sayings and not their real intentions. And the *ishraqi* wisdom the foundation and basis of which are the two principles of light and darkness as established by the Persian sages like Jamasp, Farshadshur, and Buzarjumihir is among these hidden, secret symbols. One must never think that the light and darkness which appear in our expressions are the same as those used by the infidel Magi, or the heretical Manichaeans for they finally involve us in idolatry (*shirk*) and dualism.”¹⁴

The Meaning of Ishraq

The Arabic words *ishraq* meaning illumination and *mashriq* meaning the east are both derived etymologically from the root *sharq* meaning the rising of the sun. Moreover, the adjective illuminative, *mushriqiyyah*, and Oriental, *mashriqiyyah*, are written in exactly the same way in Arabic. This symbolic identification of the Orient with light which is inherent in the Arabic language and is employed often by the *Ishraqi* sages, has given rise to many difficulties in the interpretations of that wisdom which is both illuminative and Oriental.

Already in his *Mantiq al-Mashriqiyyin* most of which is lost, Ibn Sina refers to an Oriental wisdom which is superior to the commonly accepted Peripatetic (*masha'i*) philosophy.¹⁵ Due to the fact that the word *mashriqiyyun* could also be read as *mushriqiyyin* in Arabic, the latter meaning illuminative, one could interpret the esoteric teachings which Ibn Sina proposes as being illuminative as well as Oriental.

Since the famous article of Nallino,¹⁶ it has become common opinion that the reading is Oriental and has nothing to do with illumination. Yet, this opinion, however correct it may be linguistically, is essentially limited in that it does not take into account the profound symbolism inherent in the language and does not consider the great debt which Suhrawardi and *ishraqi* wisdom owe to Ibn Sina.

Suhrawardi writes that Ibn Sina wanted to recapture Oriental philosophy but did not have access to the necessary sources.¹⁷ Yet, if we consider how the sacred geography of the Orient of light and the

Occident of darkness in the initiatory trilogy of Ibn Sina, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, *Risalat al-Ta'ir*, and *Salaman wa Absal*, is followed by Suhrawardi, how the Shaikh al-Ishraq translated several of the treatises of Ibn Sina into Persian, and how parts of *Hikmat al-Ishraq* resemble closely the commentary of Ibn Sina upon the *Theology of Aristotle*, it will become clear how profoundly the roots of Ishraqi philosophy lie in certain of the later non-Aristotelian works of Ibn Sina and how illumination and the Orient are united in this form of wisdom.

The unification of the meaning of illumination and the Orient in the term *ishraq* is connected with the symbolism of the sun which rises in the Orient and which illuminates all things so that the land of light is identified with that of gnosis and illumination. [18](#)

Inasmuch as the Occident is where the sun sets, where darkness reigns, it is the land of matter, ignorance, or discursive thought, entangled in the mesh of its own logical constructions. The Orient is, on the contrary, the world of light, of being, the land of knowledge, and of illumination which transcends mere discursive thought and rationalism. It is the land of knowledge which liberates man from himself and from the world, knowledge which is combined with purification and sanctity. [19](#)

It is for this reason that Suhrawardi connects *ishraqi* wisdom with the ancient priest-kings of Persia like Kai Khusrau and with the Greek sages like Asclepius, Pythagoras, and Plato whose wisdom was based on inner purification and intellectual intuition rather than on discursive logic. [20](#)

In a historical sense, *ishraqi* wisdom is connected with pre-Aristotelian metaphysics. Jurjani in his *Ta'rifat* calls the Ishraqis "the philosophers whose master is Plato." 'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani, the celebrated Sufi, in his commentary upon the *Fusus al-Hikam* of Ibn 'Arabi writes that the Ishraqis derive their chain from Seth, often identified with Agathodemon, from whom craft initiations and Hermetic orders also derive their origin. Ibn Wahshiyyah in his *Nabataean Agriculture* mentions a class of Egyptian priests who were the children of the sister of Hermes and who were called *Ishraqiyyun*. [21](#)

Suhrawardi himself writes in his *Mutarahat* that the wisdom of Ishraq was possessed by the mythological priest-kings of ancient Persia, Kiumarsh, Faridun, and Kai Khusrau and then passed on to Pythagoras and Plato, the latter being the last among the Greeks to possess it, and was finally inherited by the Muslim Sufis like Dhu al-Nun Misri and Bayazid Bistami. [22](#)

Both metaphysically and historically, *ishraqi* wisdom means the ancient pre-discursive mode of thought which is intuitive (*dhauqi*) rather than discursive (*bahthi*) and which seeks to reach illumination by asceticism and purification. In the hands of Suhrawardi it becomes a new school of wisdom integrating Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy with Zoroastrian angelology and Hermetic ideas and placing the whole structure within the context of Sufism.

In reading the texts of Suhrawardi one is particularly struck by the large number of quotations from the Qur'an, Hadith, and the sayings of earlier Sufis and by the profound transformation into the Islamic mould of all the diverse ideas which Suhrawardi employs. It is by virtue of such an integration and

transformation that the *ishraqi* wisdom could come to play such a major role in Shi'ism.

In the introduction to *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, Suhrawardi outlines the hierarchy of those who know in a manner which demonstrates how he integrates ancient wisdom into the perspective of Islam. There are, according to this scheme, four major types of “knowers”: –

1. The *hakim ilahi*, or *theosophos*, who knows both discursive philosophy, i.e., Aristotelianism, and gnosis (*ta'alluh*). Suhrawardi considers Pythagoras, Plato, and himself among this group.
2. The sage who does not involve himself with discursive philosophy but remains content with gnosis, like Hallaj, Bistami, and Tustari.
3. The philosopher who is acquainted with discursive philosophy but is a stranger to gnosis like Farabi or Ibn Sina.[23](#)
4. He who still seeks knowledge (*talib*) but has not yet reached a station of knowledge.

Above all these degrees is that of the Pole (*Qutb*) or Leader (*Imam*) who is the head of the spiritual hierarchy and of his representatives (*khulafa'*).[24](#)

The stations of wisdom are also described in a purely Sufi fashion as degrees of penetration into the divine unity expressed by the *shahadah*. In his initiatory treatise, *Safir-i Simurgh* (Song of the Griffin), Suhrawardi enumerates five degrees of unity [25](#): *la ilaha il-Allah*, none is worthy of worship but God, which is the common acceptance of the oneness of God and rejection of any other divinity; *la huwa illa huwa*, there is no he but He, which is the negation of any otherness than God, i.e., only God can be called “He”; *la anta illa anta*, there is no thou but Thou, which is the negation of all thouness outside of God; *la ana illa ana*, there is no “I” but the divine “I”, which means that only God can say “I”; finally, the highest station of unity which is that of those who say *wa kullu shai'-in halikun illa wajhahu*, i.e., all things perish except His face (essence) [26](#).

The formulations of Sufism become, therefore, the framework of his classification of knowledge into which he tries to place the heritage of universal gnosis and philosophy inherited by Islam.

[The Orient and Occident in Sacred Geography](#)

As already mentioned, the term *ishraq* is closely connected with the symbolism of directions and sacred geography which are essential elements of the traditional sciences. In the trilogy of Ibn Sina to which we have already referred, the disciple passes from the Occident which is the world of matter, through intermediate Occidents and Orients which are the heavens and separate substances, to the Orient proper which symbolizes the world of archangels.

A similar division of the cosmos occurs in the writings of Suhrawardi. The Occident is the world of

matter, the prison into which man's soul has fallen and from which he must escape. The Orient of lights is the world of archangels above the visible cosmos which is the origin of his soul (*ruh*). The middle Occident is the heavens which also correspond to the various inner faculties of man.

It is important to note that, contrary to Peripatetic philosophy, the Ishraqis hold that the boundary between the Occident and the Orient is set at the *primum mobile*; all that is visible in the cosmos including the celestial spheres is a part of the Occident, because it is still connected with matter, however subtle it may be. The Orient, properly speaking, is above the visible cosmos; it is the world of informal manifestation with its boundary at the heaven of the fixed stars.

In his treatise *al-Qissat al-Ghubat al-Gharbiyyah*, “the Story of the Occidental Exile,” in which Suhrawardi seeks to reveal the secrets of the trilogy of Ibn Sina, the universe becomes a crypt through which the seeker after truth must journey, beginning with this world of matter and darkness into which he has fallen and ending in the Orient of lights, the original home of the soul, which symbolizes illumination and spiritual realization.[27](#)

The journey begins at the city of Qairawan in present-day Tunis, located west of the main part of the Islamic world.[28](#) The disciple and his brother are imprisoned in the city at the bottom of a well which means the depth of matter. They are the sons of Shaikh Hadi ibn al-Khair al-Yamani, i. e., from the Yaman, which in Arabic means also the right hand and, therefore, symbolically the Orient, and is connected traditionally with the wisdom of the Prophet Solomon and the ancient sages as the left is connected with matter and darkness.[29](#)

Above the well is a great castle with many towers, i. e., the world of the elements and the heavens or the faculties of the soul. They will be able to escape only at night and not during the day which means that man reaches the intelligible or spiritual world only in death, whether this be natural or initiatory, and in dream which is a second death. In the well there is such darkness that one cannot see even one's own hands, i. e., matter is so opaque that rarely does light shine through it. Occasionally they receive news from the Yaman which makes them homesick, meaning that they see the intelligible world during contemplation or in dreams. And so, they set out for their original home.

One clear night an order is brought by the hoopoe from the Governor of the Yaman telling them to begin their journey to their homeland, meaning the reception of a revelation from the intelligible world and the beginning of asceticism. The order also asks them to let go the hem of their dress, i. e., become free from attachment, when they reach the valley of ants, which is the passion of avidity. They are to kill their wives, i. e., passions, and then sit in a ship and begin their journey in the name of God.[30](#) Having made their preparation they set out for their pilgrimage to Mount Sinai.

A wave comes between the disciple and the son, meaning that the animal soul is sacrificed. Morning is near, that is, the union of the particular soul with the universal soul is approaching. The hero discovers that the world in which evil takes place, meaning this world, will be overturned and rain and stones, i. e.,

diseases and moral evils, will descend upon it. Upon reaching a stormy sea he throws in his foster-mother and drowns her, meaning that he even sacrifices his natural soul.

As he travels on still in storm, i, e., in the body, he has to cast away his ship in fear of the king above him who collects taxes, meaning death which all mortals must taste. He reaches the Mount of Gog and Magog, i, e., evil thoughts and love of this world enter his imagination. The jinn, the powers of imagination and meditation, are also before him as well as a spring of running copper which symbolizes wisdom. The hero asks the jinn to blow upon the copper which thus becomes fiery, and from it he builds a dam before Gog and Magog.

He takes the carnal soul (*nafs ammarah*) and places it in a cave, or the brain which is the source of this soul. He then cuts the “streams from the liver of the sky,” i. e., he stops the power of motion from the brain which is located in the head, the sky of the body. He throws the empyrean heaven so that it covers all the stars, the sun, and the moon, meaning all powers of the soul become of one colour, and passes by fourteen coffins, the fourteen powers of *ishraqi* psychology,³¹ and ten tombs, the five external and the five internal senses. Having passed through these stages he discovers the path of God and realizes that it is the right path.

The hero passes beyond the world of matter and reaches a light, the active intellect which is the governor of this world. He places the light in the mouth of a dragon, the world of the elements, and passes by it to reach the heavens and beyond them to the signs of the Zodiac which mark the limit of the visible cosmos. But his journey is not yet at an end; he continues even beyond them to the upper heavens. Music is heard from far away, and the initiate emerges from the cavern of limitation to the spring of life³² flowing from a great mountain which is Mount Sinai. In the spring he sees fish that are his brothers; they are those who have reached the end of the spiritual journey.

He begins to climb the mountain and eventually reaches his father, the archangel of humanity, who shines with a blinding light which nearly burns him. The father congratulates him for having escaped from the prison of Qairawan, but tells him that he must return because he has not yet cast away all bonds. When he returns a second time, he will be able to stay. The father tells him that above them is his father, the universal intellect, and beyond him their relatives going back to the Great Ancestor who is pure light. “All perishes except His essence.”³³

From this brief summary we see how *ishraqi* wisdom implies essentially a spiritual realization above and beyond discursive thought. The cosmos becomes transparent before the traveller and interiorized within his being. The degrees of realization from the state of the soul of fallen man to the centre of the soul freed from all limitation corresponds “horizontally” to the journey from the Occident of matter to the Orient of lights, and “vertically” to the ascent from the earth to the limits of the visible universe and from there, through the world of formless manifestation, to the divine essence.

Hikmat al-Ishraq

Ishraqi wisdom is not a systematic philosophy so that its exposition in a systematic fashion is hardly possible. What Suhrawardi says in one text seems at first sight to be contradicted in another work, and one has to discover the point of view in each case in order to overcome the external contradictions. In expounding the major points of *ishraqi* wisdom we will, therefore, follow the outlines of *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, the most important text in which this wisdom is, expounded, drawing also from the shorter treatises which Suhrawardi wrote as further explanations of his major work.

Hikmat al-Ishraq is the fourth of the great doctrinal works of Suhrawardi, the first three dealing with Aristotelian philosophy which is the necessary prerequisite and foundation for illuminative wisdom. It deals with the philosophy of *Ishraq* itself which is written for those who are not satisfied with theoretical philosophy alone but search for the light of gnosis. The book which in the beauty of style is a masterpiece among Arabic philosophical texts was composed during a few months in 582/1186, and, as Suhrawardi himself writes at the end of the book, revealed to him suddenly by the Spirit;³⁴ he adds that only a person illuminated by the Spirit can hope to understand it.³⁵

The work consists of a prologue and two sections: the first concerning logic and the criticism of certain points of Peripatetic philosophy, and the second composed of five chapters (*maqalat*), dealing with light, ontology, angelology, physics, psychology and, finally, eschatology and spiritual union.

In the section on logic he follows mostly the teaching of Aristotle but criticizes the Aristotelian definition. According to the Stagirite, a logical definition consists of genus plus differentia. Suhrawardi remarks that the distinctive attribute of the object which is defined will give us no knowledge of that thing if that attribute cannot be predicated of any other thing. A definition in *ishraqi* wisdom is the summation of the qualities in a particular thing which when added together exist only in that thing.

Suhrawardi criticizes the ten categories of Aristotle as being limited and confined only to this universe. Beyond this world there is an indefinite number of other categories which the Aristotelian classification does not include. As for the nine categories of accidents, he reduces them to four by considering relation, time, posture, place, action, and passivity as the one single category of relation (*nisbah*) to which are added the three categories of quality, quantity, and motion.

Suhrawardi alters several points of Aristotelian philosophy in order to make it a worthy basis for the doctrine of illumination.³⁶ A major point of difference between the *Ishraqis* and the Muslim followers of Aristotle (*Masha'is*), also a central issue of Islamic philosophy, is that of the priority of Being or existence (*wujud*) to essence (*mahiyyah*).³⁷

The *Masha'is* like the Sufis consider Being to be principal and *mahiyyah* or essence to be accidental with respect to it. Suhrawardi objects to this view and writes that existence does not have any external reality outside the intellect which abstracts it from objects. For example, the existence of iron is precisely its

essence and not a separate reality. The Masha'is consider existence to have an external reality and believe that the intellect abstracts the limitation of a being which then becomes its essence.[38](#)

The argument of Suhrawardi against this view is that existence can be neither substance nor accident and, therefore, has no external reality. For if it is an accident, it needs something to which it is an accident. If this something is other than existence, it proves what we sought, i.e., this something is without existence. If existence is a substance, then it cannot be accident, although we say accidents "are." Therefore, existence is neither substance nor accident and consequently can exist only in the intellect.

The issue involved, which is essential to the understanding of all medieval and ancient philosophy, is the relation between Being and existence, on the one hand, and the archetypes and limitations on the other. The Masha'is and Sufis consider the universe to consist of degrees of Being and limitations which distinguish various beings from one another. The Sufis, particularly those of the school of Ibn 'Arabi who are concerned essentially with metaphysical doctrines, transpose these limitations into the principal domain and consider them the same as the archetypes or the Platonic ideas.

The traditional interpreters of Shaikh al-Ishraq interpret his doctrine in a way which does not destroy the principiality of Being [39](#) but rather subordinates the existence of a thing which is temporary and "accidental" to its archetype which with respect to the terrestrial existence of the thing is principal. In other words, essence (*mahiyyah*) is subordinated to Being (*wujud*), if we understand by this term Being *qua* Being; but as archetype, it is superior to particular existence which is an "exteriorization" of Being.

The Ishraqis believe in fact that it is useless to discuss about the principiality of *wujud* and *mahiyyah*, of Being and essence, because the essence or *mahiyyah* is itself a degree of Being. The Ishraqis differ from the Masha'is in that the former considers the world to be actual in its being and potential in its qualities and attributes, and the latter believes, on the contrary, that the world is potential in its being and actual in its qualities and perfections.[40](#)

Another important criticism of the Aristotelians by Suhrawardi is that of the doctrine of hylomorphism, of form and matter, which is the foundation of Aristotle's philosophy. As we shall see later, Suhrawardi considers bodies to be darkness and transforms the Aristotelian forms into the guardian lights or angels which govern each being. He defines a body as an external, simple substance (*jauhar basit*) which is capable of accepting conjunction and separation.[41](#) This substance in itself, in its own essence, is called body (*jism*), but from the aspect of accepting the form of species (*surah nau'iyyah*) it is called the *materia prima* or *hyle* (*hayula*).

He also differs from the Aristotelians in defining the place (*makan*) of the body not as the internal surface of the body which contains it but as the abstract dimension (*bu'd mujarrad*) in which the body is placed. Suhrawardi follows Ibn Sina and other Masha'is in rejecting the possibility of a void and an indivisible particle or atom, and in considering the body to be indefinitely divisible even if this division cannot be

carried out physically.

Other elements of Peripatetic philosophy which Suhrawardi condemns include its doctrine of the soul and arguments for its subsistence which he believes to be weak and insufficient;⁴² its rejection of the Platonic ideas which are the cornerstone of *ishraqi* wisdom and upon the reality of which Suhrawardi insists in nearly every doctrinal work; and its theory of vision.

This last criticism is of interest in that Suhrawardi rejects both of the theories of vision commonly held during the Middle Ages. Regarding the Aristotelian theory that forms of objects are imprinted upon the pupil of the eye and then reach the senses communis and finally the soul, Suhrawardi asks how the imprinting of large objects like the sky upon this small pupil in the eye is possible. Since man does not reason at the time of vision which is an immediate act, even if large objects were imprinted in smaller proportions, one could not know of the size of the object from its image.

The mathematicians and students of optics usually accepted another theory according to which a conic ray of light leaves the eye with the head of the cone in the eye and the base at the object to be seen. Suhrawardi attacks this view also by saying that this light is either an accident or a substance. If it is an accident it cannot be transmitted; therefore, it must be a substance. As a substance, its motion is dependent either on our will or it is natural. If dependent on our will, we should be able to gaze at an object and not see it, which is contrary to experience; or if it has natural motion, it should move only in one direction like vapour which moves upward, or stone which moves downward, and we should be able to see only in one direction which is also contrary to experience. Therefore, he rejects both views.

According to Suhrawardi, vision can occur only of a lighted object. When man sees this object, his soul surrounds it and is illuminated by its light. This illumination (*ishraq*) of the soul (*nafs*) in presence of the object is vision. Therefore, even sensible vision partakes of the illuminative character of all knowledge.

With this criticism of the Aristotelian (*masha'i*) philosophy, Suhrawardi turns to the exposition of the essential elements of *ishraqi* wisdom itself beginning with a chapter on light, or one might say the theophany of light, which is the most characteristic and essential element of the teachings of this school.⁴³

Light (*nur*), the essence of which lies above comprehension, needs no definition because it is the most obvious of all things. Its nature is to manifest itself; it is being, as its absence, darkness (*zulmah*), is nothingness. All reality consists of degrees of light and darkness.⁴⁴ Suhrawardi calls the Absolute Reality the infinite and limitless divine essence, the Light of lights (*Nur al-anwar*).⁴⁵ The whole universe, the 18,000 worlds of light and darkness which Suhrawardi mentions in his *Bustan al-Qulub*, are degrees of irradiation and effusion of this Primordial Light which shines everywhere while remaining immutable and for ever the same.⁴⁶

Suhrawardi “divides” reality according to the types of light and darkness. If light is subsistent by itself, it is called substantial light (*nur jauhari*) or incorporeal light (*nur mujarrad*); if it depends for its subsistence

on other than itself, it is called accidental light (*nur `ardi*). Likewise, if darkness is subsistent by itself it is called obscurity (*ghasaq*) and if it depends on other than itself for its subsistence it is called form (*hai'ah*).

This division is also based on the degrees of comprehension.⁴⁷ A being is either aware of itself or ignorant of it. If it is aware of itself and subsists by itself it is incorporeal light, God, the angels, archetypes, and the human soul. If a thing has need of a being other than itself to become aware of itself, it is accidental light like the stars and fire. If it is ignorant of itself but subsists by itself, it is obscurity like all natural bodies, and if it is ignorant by itself and subsists by other than itself, it is form like colours and smells.

All beings are the illumination (*ishraq*) of the Supreme Light which leaves its vicegerent in each domain, the sun in the heavens, fire among the elements, and the lordly light (*nur ispahbad*) in the human soul. The soul of man is essentially composed of light; that is why man becomes joyous at the sight of the light of the sun or fire and fears darkness. All the causes of the universe return ultimately to light; all motion in the world, whether it be of the heaven, or of the elements, is caused by various regent lights (*nur mudabbir*) which are ultimately nothing but illuminations of the Light of lights.

Between the Supreme Light and the obscurity of bodies there must be various stages in which the Supreme Light weakens gradually to reach the darkness of this world. These stages are the orders of angels, personal and universal at the same time, who govern all things.⁴⁸ In enumerating these angelic orders Suhrawardi relies largely upon Zoroastrian angelology and departs completely from the Aristotelian and Avicennian schemes which limit the intelligences or angels to ten to correspond to the celestial spheres of Ptolemaic astronomy.

Moreover, in the Avicennian scheme, the angels or intellects are limited to three intelligible “dimensions” which constitute their being, namely, the intellection of their principle, of the necessity of their existence, and of the contingency of their essence (*mahiyyah*).⁴⁹ Suhrawardi begins with this scheme as a point of departure but adds many other “dimensions” such as domination (*qahr*) and love (*mahabbah*), independence and dependence, illumination (*ishraq*) and contemplation (*shuhud*) which open a new horizon beyond the Aristotelian universe of the medieval philosophers.

Suhrawardi calls the first effusion of the Light of lights (*nur al-anwar* or *nur al-a`zam*) the archangel *Bahman* or the nearest light (*nur al-aqrab*). This light contemplates the Light of lights and, since no veil exists in between, receives direct illumination from it. Through this illumination, a new triumphal light (*nur al-qahir*) comes into being which receives two illuminations, one directly from the Supreme Light and the other from the first light.

The process of effusion continues in the same manner with the third light receiving illumination four times, twice from the light preceding it, once from the first light and once from the Supreme Light; and the fourth light eight times, four times from the light preceding it, twice from the second light, once from the first light, and once from the Light of lights or Supreme Light.⁵⁰ In this manner the order of

archangels, which Suhrawardi calls the longitudinal order (*tabaqat al-tul*) or “world of mothers” (*al-ummahat*) and in which the number of archangels far exceeds the number of intelligences in Aristotelian cosmology, comes into being.⁵¹

Each higher light has domination (*qahr*) over the lower and each lower light, love (*mahabbah*) for the higher. Moreover, each light is a purgatory or veil (*barzakh*) between the light above and the light below. In this manner the supreme order of angels is illuminated from the Light of lights which has love only for itself because the beauty and perfection of its essence are evident to itself.

The supreme hierarchy of being or the “longitudinal” order gives rise to a new polarization of Being. Its positive or masculine aspect such as dominance, contemplation, and independence gives rise to a new order of angels called the latitudinal order (*tabaqat al-'ard*) the members of which are no longer generators of one another; rather, each is integral in itself and is, therefore, called *mutakafiyah*. Suhrawardi identifies these angels with the Platonic ideas and refers to them as the lords of the species (*arbab al-anwa'*) or the species of light (*anwa' nuriyyah*).

Each species in the world has as its archetype one of these angels, or to express it in another manner, each being in this world is the theurgy (*tilism*) of one of these angels which are, therefore, called the lords of theurgy (*arbab al-tilism*). Water is the theurgy of its angel *khurdad*, minerals of *shahrwar*, vegetables of *murdad*, fire of *urdibihisht*, etc. ⁵²

Suhrawardi uses the names of the *Amshaspands* (*Amesha Spentas*), the separate powers of Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrianism, to designate these archetypes, and in this way unites Zoroastrian angelology with the Platonic ideas. These longitudinal angels are not, however, in any way abstract or mental objects, as sometimes the Platonic ideas are interpreted to be. They are, on the contrary, concrete as angelic hypostases and appear abstract only from man's point of view who, because of his imprisonment in the cage of his senses, considers only the object of the senses to be concrete. These angels are the real governors of this world who guide all of its movements and direct all of its changes. They are at once the intelligences and principles of the being of things.

From the negative and feminine aspect of the longitudinal order of archangels, that is, love, dependence, and reception of illumination, there comes into being the heaven of fixed stars which these angels share in common. The stars are the crystallization into subtle matter of that aspect of the archangels which is “Non-Being” or removal from the Light of lights. This “materialization” marks the boundary between the Orient of pure lights or the archangelic world which lies beyond the visible heavens and the Occident which is comprised of increasing condensations of matter from the luminous heavens to the dense earthly bodies.

The latitudinal order of angels or the archetypes gives rise to another order of angels through which they govern the species. Suhrawardi calls this intermediary order the regent lights (*anwar al-mudabbirah*) or sometimes *anwar ispahbad* using a term from ancient Persian chivalry. It is this intermediary order which

moves the heavenly spheres the motion of which is by love rather than by nature,⁵³ and which governs the species as the agent of the archetypes for which the species are theurgies (*tilismat*) or “icons” (*asnam*).

The *ispahbad* lights are also the centres of men's souls, each light being the angel of some individual person.⁵⁴ As for mankind itself, its angel is Gabriel. Humanity is an image of this archangel who is the mediator between man and the angelic world and the focus in which the lights of the Orient are concentrated. It is also the instrument of all knowledge inasmuch as it is the means by which man's soul is illuminated.⁵⁵

This archangel as the Holy Spirit is also the first and supreme intelligence and the first as well as the last prophet, Muhammad (upon whom be peace), the archetype of man (*rabb al-nau' al-insan*) and the supreme revealer of divine knowledge.

The physics and psychology of *Hikmat al-Ishraq* treat of the world of bodies and the world of souls which, along with the world of the intelligences or angels, comprise the totality of this universe.⁵⁶ As already mentioned, Suhrawardi does not divide bodies into form and matter. Rather, his division of bodies is based on the degree in which they accept light.

All physical bodies are either simple or compound; the simple bodies are divided into three classes: those that prevent light from entering (*hajiz*), those which permit the entrance of light (*latif*), and those which permit light to enter in various degrees (*muqtasid*) and which are themselves divided into several stages.⁵⁷

The heavens are made of the first category in the luminous state. As for the elements below the heavens, they consist of earth belonging to the first category, water to the second, and air to the third.⁵⁸ Compound bodies belong likewise to one of the above categories, depending on which element predominates in them. All bodies are essentially purgatories or isthmus (*barzakh*) between various degrees of light by which they are illuminated and which they in turn reflect.

Suhrawardi rejects the view that the change of bodies is due to particles of one element entering into those of another. As a reason against this view he cites the example of a jug full of water that has been heated, i. e., according to this view particles of fire have entered into it. The volume of the water, however, does not change since it does not spill over; therefore, particles of fire cannot have entered into it.

Qualitative change is due rather to the coming into being of a quality which is intermediate between the qualities of the original bodies and which is shared by all the particles of the new compound. For example, when water is heated a new quality between the cold of the water and the heat of the fire is brought into being by the light governing the change.

In the explanation of meteorological phenomena, Suhrawardi follows closely the teachings of Ibn Sina and Aristotle in accepting the exhalation and vapour theory. He differs, however, from them in the

importance he attaches to light as the cause of all these changes. For example, the heat which is responsible for evaporation is nothing but one of the effects of reflected light. All changes in fact which one observes in the world are caused by various hierarchies of light. [59](#)

The elements are powerless before the heavens, the heavens are dominated by the souls, the souls by the intelligences, the intelligences by the universal intellect, and the universal intellect by the Light of lights.

The elements or simple bodies combine to form compounds which comprise the mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms, each of which is dominated by a particular light or angel. All that exists in the mineral kingdom is “lighted body” (*barzakh nuriyyah*) the permanence of which is like that of the heavens.[60](#) Gold and various jewels like rubies make man happy because of the light within them which is akin to the soul of man. This light within the minerals is governed by *isfandarmudh* which is the master of theurgy for earthy substances.

With greater refinement of the mixture of the elements, plants and animals come into being having their own faculties and powers which are so many “organs” of the light governing them. In higher animals and in man who is the most complete terrestrial being these faculties appear in their perfection. Man as the microcosm contains in himself the complete image of the universe, and his body is the gate of life of all elemental bodies. This body in turn is the theurgy for the *ispahbad* light which governs each man.

All the faculties of the soul are aspects of the light which shines upon all elements of the body and illuminates the powers of imagination and memory for which it is the source. This light is connected with the body by means of the animal soul (*ruh hayawaniyyah*) the seat of which is in the liver and leaves the body for its original home in the angelic world as soon as death destroys the equilibrium of the bodily elements. It is the love (*mahabbah*) of the light which creates the power of desire as it is its domination (*qahr*) which brings about anger.[61](#)

Suhrawardi draws heavily upon the psychology of Ibn Sina for the enumeration of the faculties of the various souls.[62](#) It may be said in fact that with a few changes his classification is the same as that of his famous predecessor, despite the different role which the intellect or light plays in governing and illuminating the various faculties in each case.

The classification of the various faculties of the soul by Suhrawardi may be outlined as follows:[63](#)

Vegetative soul (*al-nafs al-nabatiyyah*):

feeding (*ghadhiyyah*), growth (*namiyah*), reproduction (*muwallidah*), attraction (*jadhibah*), retention (*masikah*), digestion (*hadimah*), repulsion (*dafi'ah*)

Animal soul (*al-nafs al-hayawaniyyah*):

power of motion (*muharikah*), power of desire (*nuzu'iyyah*), power of lust (*shahwah*), power of anger (*ghadb*).

Man, besides the above faculties and the five external senses, possesses five internal senses which serve as a bridge between the physical and the intelligible worlds and have their counterpart in the macrocosmic order. These senses consist of:

Sensus communis (hiss mushtarik): The centre in which all the data of the external senses are collected. It is located in the front of the frontal cavity of the brain.

Fantasy (*khayal*): The place of storage for the *sensus communis*. It is located in the back of the frontal cavity.

Apprehension (*wahm*): Governs sensible things by what does not belong to the senses. It is located in the middle cavity.

Imagination (*mutakhayyilah*): Analyses, synthesizes, and governs forms and is sometimes identified with apprehension. It is located in the middle cavity.

Memory (*hafizah*): The place of storage for apprehension. It is located in the back of the middle cavity.

These faculties are crowned by the intellectual soul (*nafs natiqah*) which belongs to the spiritual world and which, through the network of these faculties, becomes for a period attached to the body and imprisoned in the fortress of nature. Often it is so lost in this new and temporary habitat that it forgets its original home and can be re-awakened only by death or ascetic practices. [64](#)

The last section of the *Hikmat al-Ishraq* concerning eschatology and spiritual union outlines precisely the way by which the spirit returns to its original abode, the way by which the catharsis of the intellect is achieved. Every soul, in whatever degree of perfection it might be, seeks the Light of lights, and its joy is in being illuminated by it. Suhrawardi goes so far as to say that he who has not tasted the joy of the illumination of the victorial lights has tasted no joy at all.[65](#) Every joy in the world is a reflection of the joy of gnosis, and the ultimate felicity of the soul is to reach toward the angelic lights by purification and ascetic practices.

After death the soul of those who have reached some measure of purity departs to the world of archetypes above the visible heavens and participates in the sounds, sights, and tastes of that world which are the principles of terrestrial forms. On the contrary, those whose soul has been tarnished by the darkness of evil and ignorance (*ashab al-shaqawah*) depart for the world of inverted forms (*suwar mu`allaqah*) which lies in the labyrinth of fantasy, the dark world of the devils and the *jinn*.[66](#) As for the gnostics or the *theosophos (muta'allihin)* who have already reached the degree of sanctity in this life, their soul departs to a world above the angels.

After leaving the body, the soul may be in several states which Suhrawardi outlines as follows:[67](#)

Either the soul is simple and pure like that of children and fools who are attracted neither to this world nor to the next.

Or it is simple but impure and as such is attracted more to this world, so that upon death it suffers greatly by being separated from the object of its desire; gradually, however, it forgets its worldly love and becomes simple as in the first case.

Or it is not simple but perfect and pure and upon death joins the intelligible world to which it is similar and has an undescrivable joy in the contemplation of God.

Or it is complete but impure, so that upon death it suffers greatly both for separation from the body and from the First Source; gradually, however, the pains caused by alienation from this world cease and the soul enjoys spiritual delights.

Or the soul is incomplete but pure, i.e., it has a love for perfection but has not yet realized it; upon death, therefore, it suffers ceaselessly, although the love of this world gradually dies away. Finally, the soul is incomplete and impure, so that it suffers the greatest pain.

Man should, therefore, spend the few days he has here on earth to transform the precious jewel of his soul into the image of an angel and not into that of an animal.

The highest station to be reached by the soul is that of the prophets (*nafs qudsiyyah*) who perceive the forms of the universals or archetypes naturally. They know all things without the assistance of teachers or books. They hear the sounds of the heavens, i. e., the archetypes of earthly sounds, and not just vibrations of the air, and see the intelligible forms. Their souls and those of great saints also reach such degree of purity that they can influence the world of the elements as the ordinary soul influences the body.⁶⁸ They can even make the archetypes subsist by will, that is, give them existence.

The knowledge of the prophets is the archetype of all knowledge. In his nocturnal Ascension (*mi`raj*) the Prophet Muhammad – upon whom be peace – journeyed through all the states of being beyond the universe to the Divine Presence or microcosmically through his soul and intellect to the Divine Self.⁶⁹ This journey through the hierarchy of Being symbolizes the degrees of knowledge which the initiate gains as he travels on the Path in imitation of the bringer of revelation who has opened the way for him. A prophet is absolutely necessary as a guide for the gnostic and as a bringer of Law for society.

Man needs a society in order to survive and society needs law and order and, therefore, prophets to bring news of the other world and to establish harmony among men. The best man is he who knows, and the best of those who know are the prophets, and the best prophets are those who have brought a revelation (*mursilin*), and the best of them are the prophets whose revelation has spread over the face of the earth, and the completion and perfection of the prophetic cycle is the Prophet Muhammad – upon whom be peace – who is the seal of prophethood.⁷⁰

The Initiatory Narratives

In a series of treatises written in beautiful Persian prose, Suhrawardi expounds another aspect of *ishraqi* wisdom which is the complement of the metaphysical doctrine. These works which we have called initiatory narratives are symbolic stories depicting the journey of the soul to God much like certain medieval European romances and poems such as *Parsifal* and the *Divine Comedy* although of shorter length. Unfortunately, in this limited space we cannot deal with all of these narratives each of which treats of a different aspect of the spiritual journey using various traditional symbols such as the cosmic

mountain, the griffin, the fountain of life, and the lover and the beloved.

Some of the more important of these narratives are the *Risalah fi al-Mi'raj* (The Treatise on the Nocturnal Journey), *Risalah fi Halat al-Tufuliyyah* (Treatise on the State of Childhood), *Ruzi ba Jama'at-i Sufiyan* (A Day with the Community of Sufis), *Awaz-i Par-i Jibra'il* (The Chant of the Wing of Gabriel), *'Aql-i Surkh* (The Red Intellect), *Safir-i Simurgh* (The Song of the Griffin), *Lughat-i Muran* (The Language of Termites), *Risalah al-Tair* (The Treatise on the Birds), and *Risalah fi Haqiqat al-'Ishq* (Treatise on the Reality of Love).

The titles alone indicate some of the rich symbolism which Suhrawardi uses to describe the spiritual journey. Each narrative depicts a certain aspect of the spiritual life as lived and practised by sages and saints. Sometimes theory and spiritual experience are combined as in the *Awaz-i Par-i-Jibra'il* [71](#) where in the first part of the vision the disciple meets the active intellect, the sage who symbolizes the "prophet" within himself who comes from the "land of nowhere" (*na-kuja-abad*), and asks certain questions about various aspects of the doctrine.

In the second part, however, the tone changes; the hero asks to be taught the Word of God and after being instructed in the esoteric meaning of letters and words, i. e., *jafr*, he learns that God has certain major words like the angels, as well as the supreme Word which is to other words as the sun is to the stars. He learns furthermore that man is himself a Word of God, and it is through His Word that man returns to the Creator. He, like other creatures of this world, is a chant of the wing of Gabriel which spreads from the world of light to that of darkness. This world is a shadow of his left wing as the world of light is a reflection of his right wing. It is by the Word, by the sound of the wing of Gabriel, that man has come into existence, and it is by the Word that he can return to the principal state, the divine origin, from which he issued forth.

[The Ishraqi Tradition](#)

The influence of Suhrawardi has been as great in the Islamic world, particularly in Shi'ism, as it has been small in the West. His works were not translated into Latin so that his name hardly ever appears along with those of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd as masters of philosophy. But in the East from the moment of his death, his genius in establishing a new school of traditional wisdom was recognized and he was to exercise the greatest influence in Shi'ism. With the weakening of Aristotelianism in the sixth/twelfth century the element that came to replace it and to dominate Islamic intellectual life was a combination of the intellectual Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi and the *ishraqi* wisdom of Suhrawardi.

These two masters who lived within a generation of each other came from the two ends of the Islamic world to Syria, one to die in Damascus and the other in Aleppo, and it was from this central province of Islam that their doctrines were to spread throughout the Muslim East, particularly in Persia. The main link between these two great masters of gnosis was Qutb al-Din Shirazi who was, on the one hand, the disciple of Sadr al-Din Qunawi, himself a disciple and the main expositor of the teachings of Ibn 'Arabi in

the East, and, on the other, the commentator of *Hikmat al-Ishraq*.⁷²

Throughout the last seven centuries the tradition of *Ishraq* has continued especially in Persia where it played a major role in the survival of Shi'ism during the Safawid period. Among the most important commentaries written on Suhrawardi's works are those of Shams al-Din Shahrazuri and Qutb al-Din Shirazi in the seventh/thirteenth century, Wudud Tabrizi in the tenth/ sixteenth century, and Mulla Sadra in the eleventh/seventeenth century on the *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, the commentaries of Shahrazuri, Ibn Kammunah, and `Allamah Hilli in the seventh and eighth/thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on the *Talwihat*, and the commentaries of Jalal al-Din Dawwani in the ninth/ fifteenth century and Maula 'Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji in the eleventh/seventeenth century on the *Hayakil al-Nur*.

These commentaries and many others which we have not been able to mention here present a veritable treasure of *ishraqi* wisdom which has influenced so many philosophers, theologians, and gnostics from Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi and Dawwani to Mir Damad, Mulla Sadra, Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i, and Haji Mulla Hadi Sabziwari. Some of the works of Suhrawardi were also to influence the sages and philosophers in the Mughul Court in India where parts of his writings were even translated into Sanskrit,⁷³ as they were translated into Hebrew some time earlier.

Ishraqi wisdom has, therefore, been one of the universal elements of Eastern intellectuality during the past centuries and, as it is a version of the perennial philosophy, it is touched by the breath of eternity which, as in the case of all expressions of truth, gives it a freshness and actuality that make this wisdom as essential today as it has been through the ages.

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1. The Arabic word hikmah is neither philosophy as currently understood in modern European language, i.e., one form or another of rationalism, nor theology. It is, properly speaking, theosophy as understood in its original Greek sense and not in any way connected with the pseudo-spiritualistic movements of this century.

It is also sapiential inasmuch as the Latin root Sapere, like the Arabic word dhauq by which this wisdom is known, means taste. Moreover, it can be designated as speculative wisdom because speculum means mirror and this wisdom seeks to make man's soul a mirror in which divine knowledge is reflected.

2. Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi is often called al-Maqtul, meaning he who was killed, since he was put to death for certain indiscreet formulations. We, however, refer to him as Shaikh al-Ishraq by which name he is universally known among his disciples.

3. The best source for the biography of Shihab al-Din is the *Nuzhat al-Arwah wa Raudat al-Afrah* of his disciple and commentator Shams al-Din Shahrazuri. See also O. Spies and S. K. Khattak, *Three Treatises on Mysticism*, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1935, pp. 90–101; H. Corbin, *Suhrawardi d'Alep fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishraqi)*, G. P. Maisonneuve, Paris, 1939.

4. We are most grateful to Prof. M. Minovi and Mr. M. Daneshpazhuh of the University of Teheran and to Dr. M. Bayani, the head of the Teheran National Library, for making these manuscripts available to us.

5. See the introduction in M. Bayani, *Dau Risaleh-i Farsi-i Suhrawardi*, Teheran 1925.

6. We follow in part the classification of H. Corbin, however, with some modifications. See Suhrawardi, *Opera Metaphysica et Mystica*, ed. H. Corbin, Vol. I, Ma`arif Mathaasi, Bibliotheca Islamica, Istanbul, 1945, "Prolegomene," pp. xvi ff.

7. The metaphysical sections of the first three treatises have been published in the first volume of the *Opera* by Corbin and the complete *Hikmat al-Ishraq* in the second volume entitled *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques (Opera Metaphysica et Mystica, II)*, Institut Franco-Iranien, Teheran, and Andrien Maisonneuve, Paris, 1952. Henceforth we shall refer to the two volumes as *Opera*, Volumes I and II.

8. The treatise *Yazdan Shinakht* has often been attributed to Ain al-Quddat Hamadani and its authorship remains in any case doubtful. *Bustan al-Qulub* has also appeared under the name *Raudat al-Qulub* and has been occasionally attributed to Sayyid Sharif Jurjani.

9. A commentary upon the *Fusus* of Farabi of which no trace has as yet been found is also attributed to him.

10. The hakim muta'allih which Suhrawardi considers himself and other sages before him to be is exactly theosophos by which the Greek sages were designated. See the *Prolegomene* by H. Corbin to Suhrawardi's *Opera*, Vol. II, p. xxiv.

11. Suhrawardi is careful in distinguishing between exoteric Zoroastrians and the sages among Zoroastrians whom he follows. As he writes in *Kalimat al-Tasawwuf*: "There were among the ancient Persians a community of men who were guides towards the Truth and were guided by Him in the Right Path, ancient sages unlike those who are called the Magi. It is their high and illuminated wisdom, to which the spiritual experiences of Plato and his predecessors are also witness, and which we have brought to life again in our book called *Hikmat al-Ishraq*." MS., Ragip, 1480, fol. 407b, Istanbul, cited in H. Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Suhrawardi*, Editions du Courrier, Teheran, 1946, p. 24. Also Teheran University Library MS. 1079, pp. 34ff

12. *Mutarahat*, *Physics*, Book VI, cited by H. Corbin in Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. I, p. x1i.

13. Originally, philosophy like all forms of wisdom consisted of a doctrine, a rite, and a "spiritual alchemy." In Greek civilization the first element gradually separated from the others and became reduced to a theoretical form of knowledge which came to be known as philosophy. In the 55th section of *Talwihat*, Suhrawardi writes how he saw Aristotle, who is

most likely Plotinus, the author of the Theology of Aristotle, in a dream and asked if the Islamic Peripatetics were the real philosophers. Aristotle answered, "No, a degree in a thousand." Rather the Sufis, Bistami and Tustari, are the real philosophers. Aristotle told Suhrawardi to wake into himself and to pass beyond theoretical knowledge ('ilm suri) to effective realization or the "knowledge of presence" ('ilm huduri or shuhudi). See the Prolegomene of H Corbin in Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. I, p. lxx.

[14.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 10–11. Some modern interpreters of Suhrawardi have considered him to be anti-Islamic and of Zoroastrian sympathy. A. von Kremer in his *Geschichte der Herrschenden Ideen des Islam*, Leipzig, 1868, pp. 89ff., writes that Suhrawardi was part of the current directed against Islam. On the other hand, the scholarly and sympathetic interpreter of Suhrawardi, H. Corbin, insists on the role of Shaikh al-Ishraq in reviving the philosophy of Zoroastrian Persia and on his sympathy for Zoroastrian and Manichaean ideas, although he does not consider this revival to be a movement against Islam but rather an integration of ancient Persian myths in "the prism of Islamic spirituality." In any case, all views which consider ishraqi wisdom to be simply a revival of Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism confuse the form with the spirit. There is no doubt that Suhrawardi makes use of Mazdaean symbols especially with regard to angelology, but that is no more reason for calling him Mazdaean than it is to call Jabir ibn Hayyan a follower of Egyptian religion, because he used Hermetic symbols. The only criterion of orthodoxy in Islam is the first shahadah (la ilaha ill-Allah) and, according to it, Suhrawardi cannot be said to lie outside the pale of Islam, no matter how strange his formulations may be. Furthermore, the disciples of the Ishraqi school consider the Persian sages of whom Suhrawardi speaks to have lived before Plato and Pythagoras and not during the Sassanid period. The genius of Islam to integrate diverse elements into itself is evident here as elsewhere and should not be interpreted as a sign of departure from the straight path (sirat al-mustaqim) or the universal orthodoxy which embraces all the perspectives within the tradition. The vocation of Islam is the re-establishment of the primordial tradition so that all the streams of the ancient religions and cultures have flowed into it without in any way destroying its purity.

[15.](#) Ibn Sina, *Mashriq al-Mantiqiyyin*, Cairo 1338/1919, pp.2–4.

[16.](#) A. Nallino, "Filosofia 'orientali' od 'illuminativa' d'Avicenna," *Rivista degli studi orientali*, Vol. X, 1925, pp. 433–67. H. Corbin rightly emphasizes the illuminative as well as the Oriental aspect of Ibn Sina's Oriental wisdom and its profound connection with the Ishraqi school of Suhrawardi. See Corbin, *Avicenne et Lericit visionnaire*, Institut Franco-Iranien, Teheran, 1952–54, Vol. I, Introduction, p. iii.

[17.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. I, p. 195

[18.](#) In European languages the word "orient" means both the east and the placing of oneself in the right direction, and refers to the same symbolism.

[19.](#) As Corbin states, "Ishraq is a knowledge which is Oriental because it is itself the Orient of knowledge." Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. I, p. xxix.

[20.](#) Throughout our writings we use the word "intellect" as the instrument of gnosis, of direct intuitive knowledge where the knower and the known become identical, and distinguish it from reason which is its passive reflection.

[21.](#) Ibn Wahshiyah, *Ancient Alphabet and Hieroglyphic Characters*, London, 1806, p. 100. These historical connections are discussed by H. Corbin in *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi*, Editions du Courier, Teheran, 1325 Solar, p. 18, and the Prolegomene to Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol.I, pp. xxv ff. We are indebted to him for drawing our attention to them.

[22.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. I, pp. 502–03.

[23.](#) Suhrawardi is considering only the Peripatetic aspect of Ibn Sina.

[24.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 10–11. Actually, the stations mentioned are more numerous; we have described only the major ones.

[25.](#) Suhrawardi, *Risaleh Safir-i Simurgh*, MS. Teheran National Library, 1758, pp. 11–12

[26.](#) In this same treatise Suhrawardi writes that the most noble knowledge is gnosis which lies above human reason. As he says, "To seek the knowledge of God through reason is like seeking the sun with a lamp." *Ibid.*, p. 14

[27.](#) There is a profound correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm in all traditional wisdom so that the inward journey of man through the centre of his being corresponds to a journey through the various stages of the universe and finally beyond it. To escape from the prison of the lower soul (nafs ammarah) is also to pass beyond the crypt of the

cosmos.

[28.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 274ff

[29.](#) It is said that when Christian. Rosenkreutz, the founder of the order of the Rosy-Cross, abandoned Europe, he retired to the Yaman.

[30.](#) Suhrawardi indicates here the main technique of Sufism which is the invocation (dhikr) of one of the names of God and which Sufi masters call the sacred barque that carries man across the ocean of the spiritual path to the shore of the spiritual world.

[31.](#) These fourteen powers are: Attraction, retention, purgation, repulsion digestion, growth, sleep, imagination, anger, lust, and the four humours

[32.](#) The inward journey beyond the carnal soul (nafs) corresponding externally to the journey beyond the visible universe is described by the Ishraqis symbolically as reaching the fountain of life in which there are found the jewels of the purely spiritual world.

[33.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, p. 296.

[34.](#) The inspiration for the book came to the author on an auspicious day when all the seven planets were in conjunction in the Sign of the Balance.

[35.](#) Suhrawardi writes that he who wishes to understand the essence of this work should spend forty days in a retreat (khalwah) occupying himself only with invocation (dhikr) under the direction of the spiritual guide whom he calls in several places qa'im bi al-Kitab.

[36.](#) For his criticism, see Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 46ff

[37.](#) The term mahiyyah in Arabic is composed of ma meaning "what" and hiyyah derived from the word huwa ("it"). It is the answer given to the question "What is it?" It is used to denote the essence of anything whether the existence of that thing is certain or doubtful, while the word dhat is used to denote the essence of something which possesses some degree of being. In Islamic philosophy reality is understood in terms of wujud and mahiyyah, the latter meaning the limitation placed upon Being and identified with the Platonic ideas. See. S. H. Nasr, "The Polarisation of Being" [Proceedings of the Sixth] Pakistan Philosophical Congress, Lahore, 1959, pp. 50-55.

[38.](#) For a general discussion of this subject in the philosophy of the master of the Masha'is, Ibn Sina, see A. M. Goichon, La distinction d l'essence et de l'existence d'apres Ibn Sina (Avicenne), de Brouwer Descles, Paris, 1937.

[39.](#) In fact, as Mulla Sadra asserts, Suhrawardi substitutes light (nur) for Being, attributing the former with all the features which the latter term possesses in other schools. We are deeply indebted for the knowledge of this interpretation and many other essential elements of ishraqi doctrines to one of the greatest masters of traditional wisdom in Persia, Sayyid Muhammad Kazim `Assar.

[40.](#) Although in his Hikmat al-Ishraq, Suhrawardi does not speak of the necessary and possible beings, in many of his other treatises like the Partau-Narneh, l'teqad al-Hukama' and Yazdan Shinakht, he speaks of the masha'i categories of Necessary Being. (wajib at-wujud), possible being (mumkin al-wujud), and impossible being (mumtani' al-wujud).

[41.](#) Suhrawardi defines a substance in masha'i fashion as that possible being (mumkin) which has no place (mahall), and accident as that possible being which does have a place. He also defines a body as that substance which has height, width, and depth. Partau-Nameh, MS., Teheran National Library, 1257, pp. 190ff.

[42.](#) In his works Suhrawardi insists on the perishable nature of the body and its being a prison into which the soul has fallen. In the Bustan al-Qulub, MS., Teheran Sipahsalar Library, 2911, he gives as argument for the permanence of the soul and its spiritual nature, the fact that the body of man changes its material every few years while man's identity remains unchanged. The masha'i doctrine of the soul is essentially one of defining its faculties; the ishraqi view is to find the way by which the soul can escape its bodily prison.

[43.](#) Suhrawardi, Opera, Vol. II, pp. 106-21.

[44.](#) As the quotations we have already cited demonstrate, Suhrawardi insists that he is not dealing with the dualism of the Zoroastrians. Rather, he is explaining the mysterious polarization of reality in this symbolism. The Ishraqis usually interpret light as Being and darkness as determination by ideas (mahiyyah). They say that all ancient sages taught this same truth but in different languages. Hermes spoke of Osiris and Isis; Osiris or the sun symbolizes Being and Isis or the moon, mahiyyah. They interpret the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers in the same fashion.

45. Actually this term means both the divine essence and its first determination which is the archangel or the universal intellect.
46. “The immense panorama of diversity which we call the Universe is, therefore, a vast shadow of the infinite variety in intensity of direct or indirect illuminations of rays of the Primary Light.” Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, Luzac & Co., London, 1908, p. 135.
47. In his *Risaleh Yazdan Shinakht*, Matba`-i `Ilmi, Teheran, 1316 Solar, pp. 13ff., Suhrawardi divides comprehension (idrak) into four categories: – (i) Sense of sight which perceives external forms like colours, etc. (ii) Imagination (khayal) which perceives images not depending upon external objects. (iii) Apprehension (wahm) which is stronger than the other two and which perceives the meaning of sensible things, but, like the other two, cannot be separated from the matter of bodies. (iv) Intellectual apprehension (‘aql) the seat of which is the heart, the instrument which is a bridge between the human being and the intellectual world, and perceives intellectual realities, the world of angels, and the spirit of prophets and sages.
48. Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, pp. 131–32
49. Ibn Sina, *Najat*, MS. al-Kurdi, Cairo, 1938, pp. 256–57.
50. Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, pp. 133ff. Also Prolegomene, II, pp. 42ff. In ishraqi wisdom all of the cosmic hierarchies are understood in terms of a series of illuminations (ishraqat) and contemplation (shuhud), the first being a descent and the second an ascent.
51. Usually in medieval cosmology the elements, the acceptors of form, are called the ‘mothers’ and the celestial orbits, the givers of form, the ‘fathers.’ The term ‘mothers’ used by Suhrawardi to designate the archangelic world should not, therefore, be confused with the elements.
52. Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, pp. 157ff. Also H. Corbin, *Les motifs Zoroastrien dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi*, Editions du Courier, Teheran, 1325 Solar, Chap. I.
53. The governing light of the heavens moves each heaven by means of the planet attached to it, which is like the organ of the light. Suhrawardi calls this mover hurakhsh which is the Pahlawi name for the sun, the greatest of the heavenly lights. Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, p. 149. Regarding the motion of each heaven, Suhrawardi writes, “Its illumination is the cause of its motion, and its motion is the cause of another illumination; the persistence of the illuminations is the cause of the persistence of motion, and the persistence of both the cause of the persistence of the events in this world.” Hayakil al-Nur, MS. Istanbul, Fatih, 5426, Part 5.
54. Each being in this world, including man is connected to the Supreme Light not only through the intermediary angels but also directly. This light which connects each being directly to the Divine Light and places that being in the hierarchy of beings at a place proper to it is called khurrah. In ancient Persia it was believed that when a new king was to be chosen, the royal khurrah would descend upon him and distinguish him from the other pretenders to the throne.
55. Suhrawardi describes Gabriel as one of the supreme archangels who is the archetype of the “rational species” (nau` natiq), the giver of life, knowledge, and virtue. He is also called the giver of the spirit (rawan bakhsh) and the Holy Spirit (ruh al-qudus). Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, p. 201.
56. In the *l’itiqad al-Hukama’* and *Partau-Nameh*, Suhrawardi divides the universe into the world of intelligences (‘alam al-‘uqul or ‘alam al-jabarut), the world of souls (‘alam at-nufus or ‘alam al-malakut), and the world of bodies (‘alam al-ajsam or ‘alam al-muluk). Also *ibid.*, p. 270
57. *Ibid.* p. 187.
58. Suhrawardi considers fire, the fourth of the traditional elements, to be a form of light and the theurgy of urdibihisht, and not one of the terrestrial elements.
59. Suhrawardi gives a different meaning to causality than the Aristotelians¹ whose four causes which he does not accept. For Suhrawardi all these causes are really nothing but light, i. e., everything is made of light and by light, and is given a form by the archangelic light whom he calls the “giver of forms” (wahib al-suwar) and seeks the Light of lights as its goal and end.
60. Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, pp. 199–200
61. *Ibid.*, pp. 204–09.
62. Ibn Sina, *Psychologie v Jehe dile as-Sifa*, ed. J. Bakos, Editions de l’Academie Tchecoslovaque des Sciences, Prague,

1956, Vol. I, pp. 53ff.

[63.](#) Suhrawardi, *Partau-Nameh*, pp. 190ff.

[64.](#) Suhrawardi, *Hayakil al-Nur*, Sections 6 and 7. In certain other writings Suhrawardi avers that the light of each man is created with his body but survives after it. By creation, however, Suhrawardi means essentially “individualization” and “actualization” rather than creation in the ordinary sense. There is no doubt that his basic teaching is that the spirit or soul comes from the world of light and ultimately returns to it.

[65.](#) Suhrawardi, *Opera*, Vol. II, p. 225

[66.](#) This is, properly speaking, the world of the unconscious which has become the subject of study for modern psychologists. It should be clearly distinguished from the world of archetypes which, rather than the “collective unconscious,” is the source of symbols.

[67.](#) Suhrawardi, *Risaleh Yazdan Shinakht*, pp. 53–63.

[68.](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 66ff. Since human souls are brought into being by the celestial souls they are able to acquire the knowledge which these heavenly souls possess when they are put before them as a mirror. In the dreams of ordinary men this effect occurs occasionally since the external and internal senses which are the veils of the soul are partially lifted. In the case of prophets and saints such effects occur in awakening, i.e., they always reflect the intelligible world in the mirror of their souls so that they have knowledge of the unmanifested world even when awake.

[69.](#) The journey to the spring of life which lies at the boundary of the visible heavens symbolizes the journey through the soul (*nafs*), while the journey to the cosmic mountain *Qaf* from which the spring flows and the ascent of this mountain which lies above the visible heavens symbolize the inner journey to the centre of one's being. In his *Mi'raj-Nameh*, Suhrawardi describes the symbolic meaning of the nocturnal Ascension of the Prophet which is the model that all Sufis seem to imitate.

[70.](#) Suhrawardi, *Risaleh Yazdan Shinakht*, pp. 81–82

[71.](#) For the translation into French and analysis of this work, see H. Corbin and P. Kraus, “Le bruissement de l'aile de Gabriel,” *Journal Asiatique*, July–Sept. 1935, pp. 1–82.

[72.](#) This commentary, finished in 694/1295, appears on the margin of the standard edition of *Hikmat al-Ishraq* which is studied in all the theological schools in present day Persia. It has been the means by which the doctrines of Suhrawardi have been interpreted through the centuries.

[73.](#) Corbin and certain other European scholars have also emphasized the role of *ishraqi* wisdom in the tenth/sixteenth-century Zoroastrianism and the movement connected with the name of Azar Kaiwan. This curious eclectic movement in which elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism are combined but which differs greatly from original Zoroastrian doctrines has left behind several works like the *Dabistan al-Madhahib* and the *Dasatir* some passages of which seem to be forged. Such a leading scholar of Zoroastrianism as I. Poure-Davoud considers the whole work to be purposeful falsification. See his article “*Dasatir*,” *Iran-i Imruz*, second year, No. II.

Whatever importance this syncretic movement which is so similar to the religious movements at the Court of Akbar may have had, its followers paid great attention to the writings of *Hikmat al-Ishraq*. In fact, one of the disciples of Azar Kaiwan by the name of Farzanih Bahram ibn Farshad translated several works of Suhrawardi into Persian. For a discussion of the school of Azar Kaiwan, see M. Mu`in, “Azar Kaiwan wa Pairuwan-i ,u,” *Revue de la Faculte des Letters, Teheran University*, Vol. IV, No. 3, 1336/1917, pp. 25–42.

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