Some Characteristics of Suhrawardi’s Illuminationist Philosophy

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Abstract

Perhaps one of the most distinctive features of Suhrawardi’s school of thinking is the belief that anyone who does not grasp onto the divine string would necessarily have gone astray. In fact, one would find out that reconciling neo-Platonic ideas with pre-Platonic ideas and incorporating Peripatetic philosophy into the religious foundations of Islam and Iran, Suhrawardi has successfully pursued a very ambitious objective. For Suhrawardi, the followers of the Eternal Wisdom deal with revelation and intuition rather than argumentation and philosophizing. It is important to note that the key to resolving ambiguities in understanding the ideas of philosophers such as Suhrawardi is in clarifying the corresponding terminology in another language. From the point of view of Suhrawardi, all the levels of existence and wisdom as well as the beginning and the continuity of the world, and the bliss and salvation of human beings are parts of the evolution of the Light. Unlike the Peripatetic philosophers, Shaikh al-‘Ishraq (Suhrawardi, master of Illumination) considers the Most High God’s knowledge of objects in an inclusively illuminated manner. Here, we will investigate some characteristics of the Illuminationist philosophy of Suhrawardi; some of which are heeding the scripture and Sunnah, reconciliation of ideas, language networks, expressions of mystery, Perennialism, illumination metaphysics, sympathetic encounters with the ancestors, revelation/intuition and gradation/skepticism.

Keywords: Shaikh al-‘Ishraq (Suhrawardi), Light, Darkness, Mystery, Perennialism, Intuitionism.
1- Scripture and Sunnah as the criteria

Suhrawardi, known as Shaikh al-‘Ishraq, considers the scripture and Sunnah as the touchstone for the truthfulness of ideas. Sharia is the god’s whip; a whip which leads people to the truth. Any claim which is not consistent with the scripture and Sunnah is an aimless effort, an arrow shot in ignorance. Anyone who does not grasp onto Quran would lose his way and would eventually become a slave to self-interest and conceit. “Don’t you know that just like how people are incapable of your creation, they will not be able to guide you and it is God who creates everything and then leads it onto its path? (Quran, Taha, 58). It is the will of God that brought you into existence and it is his saying which guided you. (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 4, p. 102).

One may find frequent textual references to Quran’s ayat and the prophet’s hadith (teachings and sayings) in all Suhrawardi’s writings. Therefore, its practical suggestions for human life are evident (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 3, pp. 40-41). The influence of Quran on Suhrawardi’s writings is so much so that similar to Hafiz he says: anything I did and everything I found, all was form the commandments of Quran (Corbin, 2014, vol. 2, p. 11). In Suhrawardi’s opinion, one should study Quran only when he is filled with the feeling of joy and euphoria and with a luminous solicitude and perceptive thinking. Further, he should encounter Quran as if it is written for him (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 4, p. 139). In fact, Suhrawardi establishes his eminent taavil (interpretation) principle for studying and understanding canonic texts, religious or philosophical, based on the fact that wisdom and prophecy both emerge from a single resource. As mentioned earlier, according to this principle, he emphasizes two significant points; first, Quran or any other scripture requires creativity and responsiveness of the addressee to be understood truthfully (a gloomy existence would not take anything from it), and secondly, one should consider himself as the addressee of the scripture and seek its taavil only through his own reflections. Suhrawardi follows this path for encountering Quran and hadith as well as Greek and Iranian philosophical texts (Corbin, 2014, vol. 2, p. 14).

Shaikh al-‘Ishraq claims that the doors to the realm of reality would not open just to the rational and the so-called systematic thinker. Rather, prayers and innovations are also required to open these doors. In other words, the relation of the prayer to one’s aim for the mystic quester is like the relation of antecedent to consequent in reasoning (Ebrahimi-Dinani, 2014 b, p. 127).

2- Integration of different ideas

One of the foundations of Shaikh al-‘Ishraq’s philosophy is that reality is singular and the differences between various sects and schools of thought arise from the differences in their interpretations. In other words, some have expressed themselves symbolically or allegorically while others in terms of allusions and ironies. Still a group of others who were incapable of connecting to these metaphors and indications, have attached themselves to the surface of these sayings and eventually were lost (Hemati, 2014, p. 38). Shaikh al-‘Ishraq has expressed this conflict clearly: “Lest, you let the difference of the words play with you. When those buried arise

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1 An interpretation, reflection or infer from an entangled and connected structure which tries to reconcile all aspects of the connections and be consistent with the expressed conceptual constructions and intentions to the highest level.
from their graves in the resurrection day in front of their God, nine hundred ninety nine from one thousand would be the ones who were killed by the words and by the swords of indication [...] They are unaware of the intent and they have destroyed the pillars of reality. There is a singular sun and through the enumeration of constellations, it won’t multiply. Reality is a single town which possesses countless entrance gates” (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 4, p. 102).

A solution to these distancing allusions is a form of taavil in which one tries to reconcile the ancestors’ lines of thought with his current consciousness. Shaikh al-ʿIshraq incorporates neo-Platonic and pre-Platonic ideas as well as Peripatetic philosophy with the religious foundations of Islam and Iran. For instance, in Alvah-o Imadia (Tablets Dedicated to ʿImad al-Din), he tries to explain and illustrate his philosophical ideas by substantiating them through reasons and arguments and by also using many ayat. Therefore, he is able to integrate ideas by different Sufi mystics like Hallaj, Bayazid, and Jonayd and reconcile the assumed conflicts between intellect (reason/rationality), taste, and sharia (Hemati, 2014, p. 38). In the context of Nafs (self/psyche), having proven the immateriality of nafs through rational reasons, he cites some ayat, hadith and Sufi teachings. In Kalemot-Tasawwuf (Sophist Refutations), in addition to philosophical argumentation and citations from Quran, hadith and Sufi teachings, Shaikh al-ʿIshraq emphasizes that what we call an-nafs an-nateghah (the speaking/perceiving nafs) is what Sufists referred to as Serr (mystery), spirit/soul, Kalamah (word) and Ghalb (heart/transformation) (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 4, p. 110).

An important part of Suhrawardi’s philosophical pursuit is his drawing on Sufism; Shaikh al-ʿIshraq, in some of his writings specifically in Hikmat al-Ishraq (The Philosophy of Illumination), tries to establish philosophical foundations for the visions, karamat (miracles), and intuitions of Sufists (Kampani Zare, 2014, p. 17). Abu Rayyan claims that Shaikh al-ʿIshraq is highly influenced by Sufism; he believes that one cannot differentiate between Sufism and Shaikh al-ʿIshraq’s philosophy (Abu Rayyan, 1959, p. 303). Studying Suhrawardi’s ideas, Mussa Javan proposed that Shaikh al-ʿIshraq thoughts originated from Sufism and Pantheism (Javan, 1962, p. 141).

Shaikh al-ʿIshraq takes Malaikah (angles) and Anwar (illuminations/lights) to be Oghul (reasons and intellect); this is exactly an adoption from Peripatetic philosophy, Islamic teachings and ancient Iranian school of philosophy. He implies that the philosophers’ Oghul are in fact what we call Karroubian (those who are near) and Soradeghat-e-nour (illumination tents) in the language of Sharia and Sufism (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 4, p. 116). It seems that Shaikh al-ʿIshraq tries to demonstrate the singularity of reality by infusing words and expressions and as a consequence he noticed that the dispersions come from the concurrent inconsistencies in the corresponding reflections (Hemati, 2014, p. 40).

3- Language network
Difficulties in studying philosophical pieces such as The Philosophy of Illumination are related to the order and the style of writing and the way in which words and expressions are used and also the manner in which the reasoning is presented. In The Philosophy of Illumination, Shaikh al-ʿIshraq uses a very special and unique terminology in which he steps outside the framework of his contemporary philosophy, i.e. Peripatetic philosophy, and as a result, one would find
unorthodox and figurative contents in this book. Other problems in dealing with the conceptual configurations of the book arise from ignorant and biased encounters which are very common among schismatic groups who do it as a rule to knock down the opponent views to prove themselves (Gholami Shiri, 2014, p. 62).

The majority of conflicts in the context of the significance of essence and quiddity arise from misinterpretations of concepts in ontology and epistemology (Zabihi, 2007, p. 27).

4- **Mysterious expressions**
Shaikh al-ʿIshraq found the words of ancient philosophers very mystical and believed that we should not, under any circumstance, reject mysterious expressions because criticisms and rejections of these ancient works could only be justified if aimed at the surface of the these ideas. Since the main objectives and the core of the ideas have not been understood by such criticisms and rejections, they would not touch the substance of these expressions (Noorbakhsh, 2012, p. 4).

The philosophy of illumination, just like other forms of oriental philosophy, is mystified and not everyone would be able to break through the mystery and discover the message even if one studies and analyzes the appearance of expressions (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 3, p. 34).

The complexity of the philosophy of illumination might also add up to its mystery and mystified words and thus would bring up less attention. Shaikh al-ʾIshraq pays a great deal of attention to the mystery expressions of ancient philosophers; even he believes that the ancestors had a much more strong attachment to reality compared to late philosophers. He strongly believes that sometimes the content of concise and mystified words of these ancient philosophers could not be found in hundreds of books written by recent thinkers. This is the reason why he puts ancient myths and fictions at such high regards. Myths are origins of human thoughts and emotions and they would determine his hopes, desires, fears and loves. For twenty five hundred years, philosophical pursuits have been followed in the form of organized thinking, but before that, philosophy was infused in the body of myths and fictions. Suhrawardi tries to enrich his philosophy using the intrinsic and natural utilities of these myths, fictions and mystery expressions. Shaikh al-ʾIshraq believes that the language of mystery could neither be criticized nor be rejected (Ebrahimi-Dinani, 2014, pp. 125-126).

5- **Perennial philosophy**
From the point of view of Shaikh al-ʾIshraq, the primordial essence is always glowing like a sun in the realm of reality and is not bound by any spatial or temporal direction. The carriers of this eternal wisdom, beyond logic and reason, are acquainted with revelation/intuition and inner (batin) mysteries. Therefore, in Suhrawardi’s view, the inheritors and carriers of wisdom are not the same as philosophers in the common sense; however Suhrawardi himself has inherited mysticism not as a mystic but as a philosopher and therefore he has developed and empowered his philosophy to embrace mysticism (Ebrahimi-Dinani, 2014, pp. 126-127).

Another characteristic of the essence of wisdom for Shaikh al-ʾIshraq is that it is singular. He explains that there is no critical difference between philosophers and that they all agree on the most important issues such as *tawhid* (monotheism) and different levels of the world, in other
words there is no divergence between Plato’s and Zoroaster’s philosophy; they all try to express a singular reality (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 2, p. 11).

One might think the body of perennial philosophy carries exaggerated contents. However, if we try to think objectively, we could see that illumination would not be dominated by darkness, and that which is undefeated will remain eternally. In the philosophy of illumination, light is the real principle and God is the light beyond all lights. Undoubtedly, the light beyond all lights is eternal and immortal and since the philosophy of illumination is expressing the radiant radiance of this light, it would be eternal. Shaikh al-‘Ishraq points out to individuals in ancient Iran who gave people guidance and called them to reality and *tawhid*. He believes that their type of philosophy would not be restricted temporally and the world would never be clear of carriers of illumination philosophy (Noorbakhsh, 2012, pp. 5-8).

6- Illumination metaphysics
Developing ontology based on illumination and darkness is an innovation of Shaikh al-‘Ishraq. The crucial philosophical achievement of Shaikh al-‘Ishraq is establishing a philosophical construction for expressing darkness in the cosmos. He is able to consider the whole material world unilluminated without assuming the existence of an intrinsic source of illumination in this world; however, he approves the existence of phenomenal illuminations such as the light of the lamp or the sun in a mechanical state of generation in the material world (Yazdanpanah, 2012, vol. 2, p. 25).

Considering the crucial importance of light in the logical philosophical system of Suhrawardi, he introduces illumination as a “noble order”. Shaikh al-‘Ishraq establishes its philosophy on the pillars of light just like how Sadr-al-Mote'allehin has built his philosophy around existence; this is why he believes in the nobility of light. Therefore, light is the principle and Shaikh al-‘Ishraq is an advocate of this principle; light is important for Shaikh al-‘Ishraq. Suhrawardi considers light as life. He does not just develop his worldview and categorization of the world order around light, but he also constructs the corresponding epistemology (Ebrahimi-Dinani, 1987, p. 73).

7- Sympathetic encounters with the ancestors
Although Shaikh al-‘Ishraq claims that the innovations of the illumination philosophy are his own, he encounters the ancestors’ philosophy and the spirit of ancient philosophy with sympathy. He also claims that previous philosophers such as Plato and Persian philosophers agree with him and that the spirit of the ancient philosophy is the same as his (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 2, p. 10). He tirelessly tries to recover ancient Iranian school of thinking which he calls *hekmat e nourieh* (illuminated philosophy). He states that “The lights knowledge which I presented, what is based upon it and else, are all justified in the mind of the follower of God. This illuminated knowledge was the vigor of the philosophy leader and Imam, Plato, who gained illumination and gifts. This illuminated knowledge is also the vigor of people before Plato, from the father of philosophers Hermes to Plato, including great philosophers and pillars of the schools of thinking such as Empedocles, Pythagoras and others” (Akbari, 2009, p. 22).
He developed his lights philosophy based on the illumination and darkness of Iranian thinkers such as Jamasp, Farshoushtar, Burzmihr and others thinkers before them (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 2, p. 11).

The principles of illuminationists could be established only through “illuminative encounters” in a way that whenever they become skeptical of the principles, they would be relieved through disarmament of the body and spiritual experience (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 2, p. 13).

8- Intuitionism
Shaikh al-ʿIshraq believes that any kind of deep and certain reflection of a phenomenon would only come through intuition/revelation of a superior reality, and therefore intuition is the decisive component of his thinking resources for the illumination school of philosophy. In other words, the only critical component and resource of illumination philosophy in the context of ejmal (vision of beauty) and enzal (inspiration) is intuition, however, in other aspects such as detailsl and tanzil, i.e. translation, analysis, description and explanation, intuition would be the present absentee and other resources would have direct influence. Revelation is the creative aspect of Suhrawardi, but he is also the pillar of this philosophical building and its final reference (Salavati, 2014, p. 464).

Shaikh al-ʿIshraq places “light reality” at the center, light is “revelation”, “knowledge”, and “consciousness”. He takes knowledge as a light substance and therefore he is an/a “intuitionist/revelationist”. For him, intuition and illumination are much closer paths to reality. Spiritual experiences are the foundations of real philosophy just like the way sensory observations are the foundations of science. Anyone who is not acquainted with spiritual observations is detached from real wisdom (Ebrahimi-Dinani, 2014, p. 128). He places intuition and sensory observations at equal footings for understanding existential and phenomenal (material) realities respectively and comes to this point that true reasoning is a combination of intuition and logical reasoning. In his own words: “Just like how we observe material things and through this sensory input we become certain of some of their states and after that we develop sciences such as astronomy based on those observations, we also observe some aspects of immaterial and spiritual things and then we extract some knowledge and ideas based on those observations. Anyone who does not do this, has not gained wisdom” (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 2, p. 13).

Shaikh al-ʿIshraq has pushed the boundaries of philosophy by infusing revelation to its body. Instances of his philosophical thoughts which have expanded philosophical thinking in the history of philosophy are: Oghul and Mofareghat which cannot hide from each other, the relation of lights is the relation of love and admiration and superior lights have separating and illuminative tendencies towards inferior lights, [...] one can realize the illumination directions through abstinence (Yazdanpanah, 2012, vol. 2, p. 44).

9- Objectivism
Some of the philosophers believe that this view of Shaikh al-ʿIshraq that existence is only rationally valid (Suhrawardi, 2007, vol. 3, p. 46) and that it does not have any real justification different from its essence in the outside world, is as what is known among Islamic philosophers...
an acceptance of the priority of essence. Any judgment in this regard requires a clear and precise understanding of Suhrawardi’s opinions. Undoubtedly, Suhrawardi’s view about the outside representation of essence is different from Sadr-al-Mote'allehin criticisms of existentialism and agreements with the priority of essence. It is better to understand Suhrawardi’s views on essence in the framework of objectivism because he takes reality as tangible and partial objects which generate representations for themselves and for others. This could only come from a deep knowledge of the existence of specific objects, either sensory and phenomenal or immaterial and spiritual, and the belief that there is no difference between essence and existence in a metaphysical level. However, Sadr-al-Mote'allehin criticisms of existentialism and agreements with the priority of essence are based upon outside differentiation of existence and essence. In the language of objectivists, Shaikh al-ʿIshraq does not believe that it is required to differentiate existence and essence. Instead of differentiating possible and essential representations, which both are “existent”, he differentiates rich and poor (Akbarian, 2007, p. 82).

10- Gradation/skepticism
In Peripatetic school of thinking, differences between things which live inside or outside our mind could only be in three forms:

First: distinction of the whole nature like two different essences in which one is related to the substance and the other is related to quality or quantity.

Second: distinction in parts of the nature in which parts of their natures are common and the rest are different.

Third: Unity of the whole natures and distinction of the corresponding outside impressions (Toosi, 1988, p. 27). Shaikh al-ʿIshraq expresses the above kinds of distinction as being taamma (total) and introduces three counterparts to these three categories, the later not being restricted by our thinking. The new categories are caused by gradations, doubt, accidentals, and skepticism (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 2, p. 87).

In the gradation type of distinction, the differences are caused by the same essence which generates the corresponding unity as well; some of the elements of the essence shares more of the essence that form their reality in such a way that one might say they are more complete and the others possess less shares of the essence and one might also say that they are incomplete. For instance, the criterion of living for philosophers is a body which possesses a responsive nafs and willful motion and change. Therefore sensing and movement are implicit in the definition of human being. However, sensing and movement have different levels and the corresponding intensities and degrees arise from the differences in the subjective and effects. Therefore, a living who has a more powerful nafs capable of higher levels of sensing and motion, his sensitivity and motion would be more taamma. So the liveliness of a living such as human being is more taamma than other livings. One could not deny that the former is more taamma than the later (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 2, p. 88).

11- Comparison with peripatetic views
In contradiction with peripatetic views, Shaikh al-ʿIshraq believes that God’s knowledge of things is immediate and present, he even takes God’s knowledge of material objects in an inclusively illuminated manner.
Compared to peripatetic philosophers who categorize things in ten terms, Suhrawardi presents a quintet categorization.

In the context of seeing material objects, Shaikh al-ʿIshraq rejects emergence of light from human eyes as well as Aristotle’s theory of impression. He considers “seeing” as a result of the *espahbod* light (soul-light) which is the present-illuminated-nafs knowledge of the meditator. He implies that, in the act of seeing, the eyes are merely tools in the hands of nafs (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 1, p. 486).

Shaikh al-ʿIshraq does not accept the concept of *hayoula* (the essence of matter) which he believes is only an absolute value. Then, he associates the absolute value with an absolute object which through attaching to three physical dimensions would transform to a physical body. Further, he categorizes figure as a representative thing (Gholami Shiri, 2014, pp. 206-208). Therefore, from the viewpoint of Suhrawardi, essences exist in three classes: *oghul, nafs,* and bodies while representations exist in four classes: quantity, quality, motion, and relation (Suhrawardi, 2009, vol. 2, pp. 74-75).

**Conclusion:**
Following Suhrawardi’s views, philosophical thinking would enter a new era because his school of thinking is truly distinctive. He was able to develop and infuse new philosophical structures such as illuminationism, gradation and Mundus Imaginalis into the body of his philosophy. Developing an ontology revolving around light and darkness was the crucial and successful philosophical pursuit of Suhrawardi. He presents arguments regarding the foundations and directions of past philosophers and based on these criticisms, his new philosophy emerges. The unique characteristic of his philosophy is its new terminology and conceptual framework. As he states, illumination school of thinking has divine resources and not everyone can grasp onto it.

His views on essence representations in the outside world are different from Mulla-Sadra’s criticisms of existentialism and agreements with the priority of essence. This is why some take Suhrawardi as an essentalist, some think that he is an objectivist, and others would consider him an Illuminationist. He places revelation and sensory observations at equal footings for understanding existential and phenomenal (material) realities respectively and believes that true reasoning is a combination of revelation and logical reasoning. He eulogized sun by calling it “*hoorakhsh*” (glory of god) because just like how God is the light beyond all lights in the realm of *aghāl* (reason/rationality) and illumination, sun is the same in the material world. What have been expressed here as the characteristics of the philosophy of illumination, were merely general remarks on the important aspects of this school of thinking. The authors are hopeful that this could lead the way for in-depth investigations of Suhrawardi’s philosophy.
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