

The Meaning and Concept of Philosophy in Islam

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In the light of the Qur'an and Hadith in both of which the term hikmah has been used,¹ Muslim authorities belonging to different schools of thought have sought over the ages to define the meaning of hikmah as well as falsafah, a term which entered Arabic through the Greek translations of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries. On the one hand what is called philosophy in English must be sought in the context of Islamic civilization not only in the various schools of Islamic philosophy but also in schools bearing other names, especially kalam, ma`rifah, usul al-fiqh as well as the awa'il sciences, not to speak of such subjects as grammar and history which developed particular branches of philosophy. On the other hand each school of thought sought to define what is meant by hikmah or falsafah according to its own perspective and this question has remained an important concern of various schools of

Islamic thought especially as far as the schools of Islamic philosophy are concerned. During Islamic history, the terms used for Islamic philosophy as well as the debates between the philosophers, the theologians and sometimes the Sufis as to the meaning of these terms varied to some extent from one period to another but not completely. Hikmah and falsafah continued to be used while such terms as al-hikmat al-ilahiyyah and alhikmat al-muta`aliyah gained new meaning and usage in later centuries of Islamic history, especially in the school of Mulla Sadra. The term over which there was the greatest debate was hikmah, which was claimed by the Sufis and mutakallimun as well as the philosophers, all appealing to such Hadith as "The acquisition of hikmah is incumbent upon you and the good resides in hikmah."² Some Sufis such as Tirmidhi were called hakim and Ibn Arabi refers to the wisdom which has been unveiled through each manifestation of the logos as hikmah as seen in the very title of his masterpiece Fusus al-hikam,³ while many mutakallimun such as Fakhr al-Din al-Razi claimed that kalam and not falsafah was hikmah,⁴ Ibn Khaldun confirming this view in calling the later kalam (kalam al-muta'akhhirin) philosophy or hikmah.⁵

Our discussion in this chapter is concerned, however, primarily with the Islamic philosophers' understanding of the definition and meaning of the concept of philosophy and the terms hikmah and falsafah.⁶ This understanding includes of course what the Greeks had comprehended by the term philosophia and many of the definitions from Greek sources which were to find their way into Arabic sometimes with only slight modifications. Some of the definitions of Greek origin most common among Islamic philosophers are as follows:⁷

- 1- Philosophy (al falsafah) is the knowledge of all existing things qua existents (ashya' al-maujudah bi ma hiya maujudah).⁸
- 2- Philosophy is knowledge of divine and human matters.
- 3- Philosophy is taking refuge in death, that is, love of death.
- 4- Philosophy is becoming God-like to the extent of human ability.
- 5- It [philosophy] is the art (sind'ah) of arts and the science (ilm) of sciences.
- 6- Philosophy is predilection for hikmah.

The Islamic philosophers meditated upon these definitions of falsafah which they inherited from ancient sources and which they identified with the Qur'anic term hikmah believing the origin of hikmah to be divine. The first of the Islamic philosophers, Abu Ya`qub al-Kindi wrote in his *On First Philosophy*, "Philosophy is the knowledge of the reality of things within people's possibility, because the philosopher's end in theoretical knowledge is to gain truth and in practical knowledge to behave in accordance with truth."⁹ Al-Farabi, while accepting this definition, added the distinction between philosophy based on certainty (al-yaqiniyyah) hence demonstration and philosophy based on opinion (al-maznunah),¹⁰ hence dialectic and sophistry, and insisted that philosophy was the mother of the sciences and dealt with everything that exists.¹¹

Ibn Sina again accepted these earlier definitions while making certain precisions of his own. In his *`Uyun al-hikmah* he says "Al-hikmah [which he uses as being the same as philosophy] is the perfection of the human soul through conceptualization [tasawwur] of things and judgment [tasdiq] of theoretical and practical realities to the measure of human ability."¹² But, he went further in later life to distinguish between Peripatetic philosophy and what he called "Oriental philosophy" (al-hikmat almashriqi'yyah) which was not based on ratiocination alone but included realized knowledge and which set the stage for the hikmat al-ishraq of Suhrawardi.¹³ Ibn Sina's foremost student Bahmanyar meanwhile identified falsafah closely with the study of existents as Ibn Sina had done in his Peripatetic works such as the *Shifa'* repeating the Aristotelian dictum that philosophy is the study of existents qua existents. Bahmanyar wrote in the introduction to his *Tahlil*, "The aim of the philosophical sciences is knowledge of existents."¹⁴

Isma'ili and Hermetico-Pythagorean thought, which paralleled in development the better-known Peripatetic philosophy but with a different philosophical perspective, nevertheless gave definitions of philosophy not far removed from those of the Peripatetics, emphasizing perhaps even more the relation between the theoretical aspect of philosophy and its practical dimension, between thinking philosophically and leading a virtuous life. This nexus, which is to

be seen in all schools of earlier Islamic philosophy, became even more evident from Suhrawardi onward and the hakim came to be seen throughout Islamic society not as someone who could only discuss mental concepts in a clever manner but as one who also lived according to the wisdom which he knew theoretically. The modern Western idea of the philosopher never developed in the Islamic world and the ideal stated by the Ikhwan al-Safa' who lived in the fourth/ tenth century and who were contemporary with Ibn Sina was to echo ever more loudly over the ages wherever Islamic philosophy was cultivated. The Ikhwan wrote, "The beginning of philosophy (falsafah) is the love of the sciences, its middle knowledge of the realities of existents to the measure of human ability and its end words and deeds in accordance with knowledge."¹⁵

With Suhrawardi we enter not only a new period but also another realm of Islamic philosophy. The founder of a new intellectual perspective in Islam, Suhrawardi used the term hikmat al-ishraq rather than falsafat al-ishraq for both the title of his philosophical masterpiece and the school which he inaugurated. The ardent student of Suhrawardi and the translator of Hikmat al-ishraq into French, Henry Corbin, employed the term theosophie rather than philosophy to translate into French the term hikmah as understood by Suhrawardi and later sages such as Mulla Sadra, and we have also rendered al-hikmat al-muta aliyah of Mulla Sadra into English as "transcendent theosophy"¹⁶ and have sympathy for Corbin's translation of the term. There is of course the partly justified argument that in recent times the term "theosophy" has gained pejorative connotations in European languages, especially English, and has become associated with occultism and pseudo-esoterism. And yet the term philosophy also suffers from limitations imposed upon it by those who have practised it during the past few centuries. If Hobbes, Hume and Ayer are philosophers, then those whom Suhrawardi calls hukama' are not philosophers and vice versa. The narrowing of the meaning of philosophy, the divorce between philosophy and spiritual practice in the West and especially the reduction of philosophy to either rationalism or empiricism necessitate making a distinction between the meaning given to hikmah by a Suhrawardi or Mulla Sadra and the purely mental activity called philosophy in certain circles in* the West today. The use of the term theosophy to render this later understanding of the term hikmah is based on the older and time-honoured meaning of this term in European intellectual history as associated with such figures as Jakob Bohme and not as the term became used in the late thirteenth/nineteenth century by some British occultists. Be that as it may, it is important to emphasize the understanding that Suhrawardi and all later Islamic philosophers have of hikmah as primarily al-hikmat al-ildhiyyah (literally divine wisdom or theosophia) which must be realized within one's whole being and not only mentally.

Suhrawardi saw this hikmah as being present also in ancient Greece before the advent of Aristotelian rationalism and identifies hikmah with coming out of one's body and ascending to the world of lights, as did Plato.¹⁷ Similar ideas are to be found throughout his works, and he insisted that the highest level of hikmah requires both the perfection of the theoretical faculty and the purification of the soul.¹⁸

With Mulla Sadra, one finds not only a synthesis of various earlier schools of Islamic thought but also a synthesis of the earlier views concerning the meaning of the term and concept philosophy. At the beginning of the *Asfar* he writes, repeating verbatim and summarizing some of the earlier definitions, "falsafah is the perfecting of the human soul to the extent of human ability through the knowledge of the essential reality of things as they are in themselves and through judgment concerning their existence established upon demonstration and not derived from opinion or through imitation".¹⁹ And in *al-Shawdhid al-rububiyah* he adds, "[through hikmah] man becomes an intelligible world resembling the objective world and similar to the order of universal existence"²⁰

In the first book of the *Asfar* dealing with being, Mulla Sadra discusses extensively the various definitions of hikmah, emphasizing not only theoretical knowledge and "becoming an intelligible world reflecting the objective intelligible world" but also detachment from passions and purification of the soul from its material defilements or what the Islamic philosophers call *tajarrud* or *catharsis*.²¹ Mulla Sadra accepts the meaning of hikmah as understood by Suhrawardi and then expands the meaning of falsafah to include the dimension of illumination and realization implied by the *ishraqi* and also Sufi understanding of the term. For him as for his contemporaries, as well as most of his successors, falsafah or philosophy was seen as the supreme science of ultimately divine origin, derived from "the niche of prophecy" and the *hukama'* as the most perfect of human beings standing in rank only below the prophets and Imams.²²

This conception of philosophy as dealing with the discovering of the truth concerning the nature of things and combining mental knowledge with the purification and perfection of one's being has lasted to this day wherever the tradition of Islamic philosophy has continued and is in fact embodied in the very being of the most eminent representatives of the Islamic philosophical tradition to this day. Such fourteenth/twentieth-century masters as Mirth Ahmad Ashtiyani, the author of *Ndmayi rahbardn-i dmuzish-i kitdb-i takwin* ("Treatise of the Guides to the Teaching of the Book of Creation"); Sayyid Muhammad Kazim `Ansar, author of many treatises including *Wahdat al-wujud* ("The Transcendent Unity of Being"); Mahdi Ilahi Qumsha'i, author of *Hikmat-i ildhi khwdss wa amm* ("Philosophy/Theosophy - General and Particular")

and Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, author of numerous treatises especially *Usul-i falsafa -yi ri dlixm* ("Principles of the Philosophy of Realism") all wrote of the definition of philosophy along lines mentioned above and lived accordingly. Both their works and their lives were testimony not only to over a millennium of concern by Islamic philosophers as to the meaning of the concept and the term philosophy but also to the significance of the Islamic definition of philosophy as that reality which transforms both the mind and the soul and which is ultimately never separated from spiritual purity and ultimately sanctity that the .very term .hikmah implies in the Islamic context

NOTES

- 1 For the use of hikmah in the Qur'an and Hadith see S. H. Nasr, "The Qur'an and ,Hadith as Source and Inspiration of Islamic Philosophy", Chapter 2 below.
- 2 Alayka bilhikmah fa inna'l--khayr f 1-hikmah.
- 3 See Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi, *The Wisdom of the Prophets*, trans. T. Burckhardt, trans. from French A. Culme-Seymour (Salisbury, 1975), pp. 1-3 of Burckhardt's introduction; and M. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints - Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn Arabi*, trans. S. L. Sherrard (Cambridge, 1993): 47-8.
- 4 See S. H. Nasr, "Fakhr al-Din Razi", in M. M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 1 (Wiesbaden, 1963): 645-8.
- 5 'Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji, the eleventh/seventeenth-century student of Mulla Sadra who was however more of a theologian than a philosopher, writes in his kalami text *Gawhar-murdd*, "Since it has become known that in acquiring the divine sciences and other intellectual matters the intellect has complete independence, and does not need to rely in these matters upon the Shari`ah and the proof of certain principles concerning the essence of beings in such a way as to be in accord with the objective world through intellectual demonstrations and reasoning ... the path of the hukamd, the science acquired through this means is called in the vocabulary of scholars hikmah. And of necessity it will be in accord with the true Shari`ah for the truth of the Shari`ah is realized objectively through intellectual demonstration" (*Gawhar-murad* (Tehran, 1377): 17-18). Although speaking as a theologian, Lahiji is admitting in this text that hikmah should be used for the intellectual activity of the philosophers and not the mutakallimun, demonstrating the shift in position in the understanding of this term since the time of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. There is considerable secondary material on this subject in Arabic as well as in European languages. See Abd al-Halim Maimed, *al- Tafkir al fahaft f:l islAm* (Cairo, 1964): 163-71; Mustafa Abd al-Raziq, *Tamhid li-ta'rikh al falsafat alislamiyyah* (Cairo, 1959), chapter 3: 48ff.; G. C. Anawati, "Philosophie medievale en terre d'Islam", *Melanges de l'Institut*

- Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales du Caire, 5 (1958): 175-236; and S. H. Nasr, "The Meaning and Role of 'Philosophy' in Islam", *Studia Islamica*, 37 (1973): 57-80.
7. See Christel Hein, *Definition and Einleitung der Philosophie - Von der spdtantiken Einleitungsliteratur zur arabischen Enzyklopddie* (Bern and New York, 1985): 86.
- 8 This is repeated with only a small alteration by al-Farabi in his *al Jam' bayn ra ay al-hakimayn*. According to Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah, al-Farabi even wrote a treatise entitled *Concerning the Word Philosophy* (*Kalam fr ism al falsafah*) although some have doubted that this was an independent work.
9. See S. Strouma, *AlFarabi and Maimonides on the Christian Philosophical Tradition*, *Der Islam*, 68(2) (1991): 264; and *Aristoteles - Werk and Wirkung*, 2, ed. J. Weisner (Berlin, 1987). Quoted in Ahmed Fouad El-Ehwany, "Al-Kindi", in M. M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 1 (1963): 424.
- 10 *Kitab al-Huruf*, ed. M. Mahdi (Beirut, 1969): 153-7.
- 11 *KitAb jam' bayn ra ay al-hakimayn* (Hyderabad, 1968): 36-7.
- 12 *Fontes sapientiae (Uyun al-bikmah)*, ed. Abdurrahman Badawi (Cairo, 1954):16.
- 13 On Ibn Sina's "Oriental philosophy" see Chapter 17 below.
- 14 *Kitab al-Ta{xil* ed. M. Mutahhari (Tehran, 1970): 3.
- 15 *Rasail 1* (Cairo, 1928): 23.
- 16 See S. H. Nasr, *The Transcendent Theosophy of Sadr al-Din Shirdzi* (Tehran, 1977).
- 17 See his *Tawihdi*, in H. Corbin (ed.) *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, 1 (Tehran, 1976): 112-13.
- 18 See S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar, 1975): 63-4.
- 19 *Al Asfar al-arba ah*, ed. Allamah Tabataba i (Tehran, 1967): 20.
- 20 Mulla Sadra, *al-ShawAhid al-rububiyah*, ed. S. J. Ashtiyani (Mashhad, 1967).
- 21 See the Introduction of the *Asfar*.
- 22 Muhammad Khwajawi, *Lawami' al-arifr*n (Tehran, 1987): 18ff., where many quotations fro