

# **Sohravardi and the Question of Knowledge**

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## [Introduction]

Shihab al-Din Yahya Sohrawardi, known as *Shaykh al-Ishraq* (the Master of Illumination), was born in Sohraward, a village close to the city of Zanjan in northwestern Persia, in the year 549/1154. After his preliminary education he went to Maragheh and studied Islamic sciences under Majd al-Din Jili. He then went to Isfahan, where he benefited from the teachings of Zahir al-Din Farisi. Sohrawardi spent a major part of his life traveling, meeting many sages and Sufis from whom he acquired a high degree of knowledge and spirituality. At one point in life he traveled to Mardin in Anatolia, and it is said that he spent some time in the courts of the Seljuk kings. Finally, Sohrawardi went to Damascus and settled in Aleppo, where he received a warm welcome from the city's ruler, Malik Zahir. Sohrawardi's philosophical thoughts, expressed in the wake of Gazali's harsh criticism of philosophy, as well as his novel ideas, careless statements, and persuasive power offended the sensibilities and incited the jealousy of other clerics. Malik Zahir's intercession was of no use, and in the year 587/1191, at the age of 36, Sohrawardi was executed in prison, ostensibly for heresy but more likely due to political reasons.

History indicates that Sohrawardi manifested both philosophical and mystical tendencies from a very young age. In his treatise *Fi halat al-tufuliyyah* ("On the State of Childhood"), he speaks of his own spiritual journey and the light and knowledge he received during his childhood under the guidance of his spiritual master. He was a person of seclusion and asceticism (*zuhd*) who spent extensive time in prayer.

Sohrawardi produced around fifty works, and his masterpiece is considered to be *Hikmat al-ishraq* ("Illuminative Wisdom"). This book contains Sohrawardi's philosophical views and spiritual findings and is the primary text of reference in Illuminationist Philosophy. It covers both the discursive and the visionary dimensions of Sohrawardi's philosophy. Sohrawardi claimed that this book was given to him by the angel Gabriel in a single instant, saying that without guiding light from this angel the book cannot be understood by the reader. In order to study this book one must refer to a vicar of God (*khalifat Allah*) who has the knowledge contained in this book. In addition, before reading this work one should live an ascetic lifestyle of purification for 40 days (2/259).<sup>[2]</sup> The book covers logic, metaphysics or the science of light, angelology, cosmology, psychology, and eschatology from an Illuminationist viewpoint. It is impossible to summarize Sohrawardi's philosophy in this article. My intention instead is to briefly examine Sohrawardi's epistemology. Before beginning this examination it is necessary to talk a little about the nature of what is called Illuminationist Philosophy.

## Illuminatist Philosophy

Prior to the appearance of Illuminatist Philosophy, peripatetic philosophy, represented by thinkers such as Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd, was the dominant philosophy in the Islamic world. Peripatetic philosophy is rooted in speculative reason and Aristotelian syllogistic logic and marginalizes or pays no attention to mystical ideas and experiences. Mystics/Sufis of that era rejected reason or at least did not rely upon reason and logic, emphasizing instead the spiritual journey and immediate vision (*shuhud*) of reality. Ghazali's harsh attack on philosophy is an example of the struggle against philosophy that existed in this era; this attack went far in the weakening or destruction of philosophy among Sunni Muslims.

Sohravardi, inspired by Islamic teachings on the importance of both reason and spirituality and benefiting from the philosophical and mystical heritages of Islamic culture and other ancient traditions such as those of Greek and Persia, attempted to revive and reconstruct a system of wisdom which in his view was one with the perennial wisdom of prophets and sages. He revived an intellectual-spiritual tradition that prophets and sages such as Zoroaster, Hermes (or Idris, the father of wisdom), Pythagoras, Agathadimon, Asklepios, Empedocles, Socrates and Plato had taught, synthesizing their teachings and the teachings of Muslim philosophers and mystics as well as the Quran and Hadith and Muslim philosophers and mystics into one unique system.

According to Sohravardi, this wisdom had always been present among ancient nations including Indians, Persians, Babylonians, Egyptians and Greeks until the time of Plato, as well as among Sufis in the Islamic world. Through Greek philosophers this wisdom came to Zoroaster and Sahl al-Tusturi, and from Zoroaster and other Persian sages like Keyumarth, Feraydun, Keykhosrov, Jamasb, and Bozorgmehr it came to Sufis such as Bayazid Bastami and Hallaj. Finally these two traditions joined together in the person of Sohravardi.

Sohravardi did not accept rationalistic thinking in isolation or the domination of Aristotelian philosophy; therefore his philosophy is in part a criticism of peripatetic philosophy. However he did not deny all aspects of this philosophy; rather he accepted many of its principles. He himself was a master on peripatetic philosophy, and some of his works are devoted to explaining this philosophy. He was even to some extent influenced by Ibn Sina in his discovery of Illuminatist Philosophy and use of symbolic language. However, the founding of Illuminatist Philosophy in the Islamic world can be attributed to none other than Sohravardi, for Ibn Sina's Oriental Wisdom (*al-hikmat al-mashriqiyyah*) is not substantially different from peripatetic philosophy.

Illuminatist Wisdom is a wisdom that is given to the worthy souls, whether these individuals are found in the East or West. Thus some Greek philosophers are Illuminatist, even though the source of this wisdom is in the East. This wisdom, or theosophy, is true philosophy. Reason is important, but the key to obtaining true knowledge is found in the purification of heart. Illuminatist Wisdom unifies rational/natural

theology, historical/revealed theology, and the mystical theology of the Islamic tradition into one system, which is nourished both by reason and by the religious/mystical life. This wisdom is not limited to certain individuals or nations; rather its door is open to all who travel this path.

In this view, wisdom is defined as assimilation with God to the extent that this is possible for human beings to attain. Assimilation is accomplished through constant effort, by disobeying the dictates of the passions, detaching oneself from that which is other than God and by seeking knowledge. As a cold bit of iron can become white-hot by being in fire, a human being can become enlightened by being proximate to the source of light and become wise by drawing near to the Absolute Wise. As the prophet Mohammad said: “He who worships Allah sincerely for forty days, the springs of wisdom flow from his heart to his tongue.”

Illuminationist Wisdom is centered on light and marginalizes darkness. Sohrawardi strongly rejects Manichean dualism and polytheism (2/111). His sources are the teachings of the prophets, and he refers extensively to the verses of the Quran. The concept of light and its opposite, darkness, is frequently mentioned in the Quran. The most famous verse in this regard is the Light Verse, which says: “Allah is the light of heavens and earth” (al-Nur: 34). Another verse talks about the illumination of earth by the light of God (al-Zumar: 69). In many verses light is used as a symbol for wisdom, knowledge, guidance, life, insight, revelation, and luminosity, which are set in apposition to ignorance, darkness, death, blindness, deviation, etc.

## **Epistemological Principles of Sohrevardi**

Sohrevardi's writings do not contain a systematic discussion of epistemology. However, in a number of different places in his works, Sohrevardi deals with epistemological questions. By gathering and analyzing pertinent passages we can outline the general features of his epistemology and arrange them in a systematic way.

The first step of Sohrevardi's epistemology is his rejection of radical skepticism. This kind of Cartesian doubt is not reasonable; and if it occurs there is no logical way to escape from it. In Sohrevardi's process of rejecting this kind of skepticism he asks whether the skeptic thinks that his position is right or wrong, or is he skeptical about it? If he thinks that his position is right, then he believes in a true statement and is no longer a radical skeptic. If he thinks that his position is wrong, then again he rejects radical skepticism. If he is skeptical even about his position regarding skepticism, one can ask whether he has doubt about his doubt, or if is he certain about it. If he is certain about his doubt, then he accepts a truth, and if he is doubtful about his doubt, then discussion with such a person is useless and he must be treated in another way (1/212).

Rejection of skepticism means that one is never without some certain knowledge. The second step of Sohrevardi's epistemology naturally follows the rejection of radical skepticism and is the premise that self-evident truths exist, meaning that there are some fundamental truths that are not based on any other truth (1/211). If all statements are based on other statements, it leads to infinite regress. Without some basic knowledge no knowledge is possible; therefore, in Sohrevardi's view there must be some basic self-evident truths as foundations for other knowledge (2/18).

## Knowledge by Presence

The third step is the declaration that knowledge is of two types: knowledge by correspondence (*al-'ilm al-husuli*), and knowledge by presence (*al-'ilm al-huduri*). In knowledge by correspondence there is a mediator between the knower and the object known. In this kind of knowledge the knower does not have immediate access to the object of knowledge; rather his awareness of the object is through the image of that object in his/her mind. However, knowledge by presence is direct knowledge in which the object known is identical with the knower or at least it is on the presence of the knower.

Sohravardi relates that at one time he found himself frustrated in his efforts to solve the problem of knowledge. At this point Aristotle appeared to him in a dream-vision, telling him that the key to solving the problem of knowledge is paying attention to knowledge by presence, and that the true sages are those who have acquired this type of knowledge (1/72-74). The primary instance of this knowledge is self-knowledge. In a lengthy discussion Sohravardi argues in various ways that self-knowledge does not depend on any mediator such as an image or a form; for in that case one would be aware of the image or form, not of himself. In other words, what "I" know in knowledge by correspondence is "it," not "I;" the image is "it," not "I" (1/487).

If I had knowledge of myself via an image of myself, how would I know that the image corresponds to myself? To know that an image is an image of myself I must already know myself, in which case I see that the image corresponds to myself, realizing that this is my image. But if I have no knowledge of myself except through an image, how will I realize that this image corresponds to myself? Moreover, if my essence knows itself through its image, it means that essence knows itself through its attribute/accident, and this is absurd. Essence knows itself before knowing any attribute (2/111). Again, knowledge through a form is universal/general, for the form is applicable to many instances; but self-knowledge is particular and cannot be universal (1/484). Therefore, self-knowledge is immediate and identical with the self.

The soul itself is presence, never absent from itself; this awareness is identical with the soul. However, this does not mean that the soul knows everything about itself; nor does it necessitate the soul knowing the external and internal parts of its body (2/112). Humankind knows itself constantly and is not unaware of itself in any moment: this knowledge does not depend on body. Sohravardi in Partov Nameh writes: "Know that you may forget each part of your body ... and you may neglect each body and accident ('arad), but you never forget yourself, and you know yourself without knowing these things. Thus, your essence is not any of these" (3/23). This is, according to Sohravardi, a proof of the immateriality of the soul. He continues: "You call yourself 'I,' and you can refer to parts of your body as 'it,' and whatsoever you can call 'it' is different from the one in you who says 'I,' for whatever is 'it' for you is not 'I' of you...thus you are beyond all these" (3/23). Another proof of the immateriality of soul is that

humankind is able to perceive abstract meanings; if it were corporeal it could not perceive abstract meanings.

According to Sohrevardi, the soul's knowledge of itself and its faculties and immaterial realities are immediate and by presence. Other immaterial realities such as angels' knowledge are of this type. Knowledge of God is also immediate. God's self-knowledge is identical with His essence and His knowledge of other things is by illumination; God knows them directly, not through their forms or images; they are themselves God's knowledge.

The most fundamental principle of Sohrevardi's philosophy, and since his time in Islamic philosophy in general, is knowledge by presence. According to some accounts, self-evident truths also depend on this knowledge. Without self-awareness no knowledge is possible. Furthermore, self-knowledge is immediate, does not depend on any other knowledge and is not acquired knowledge. Knowledge by correspondence depends on knowledge by presence, because knowledge by correspondence is knowledge via concepts or forms, and our knowledge of concepts and forms is immediate, not via other concepts or forms; otherwise we would face an infinite regress. Therefore, all conceptual knowledge depends on immediate knowledge.

One of the characteristics of immediate knowledge is that it is immune from error. Error takes place when a mental form does not correspond with its object. Because in knowledge by presence there is no mental form, and knowledge and the object known are in some way united, there is no place for correspondence or non-correspondence, and thus talk of error is irrelevant.

## Sense Perception

The forth step in Sohrevardi's epistemology is that sensory perception is one of the sources of knowledge. Our senses are our means to knowing the physical world. Sohrevardi maintains that sensory perception is innate knowledge (*fitri*) and the foundation of our knowledge of the external world (2/104). We know physical objects only by our senses. There are five external senses (the senses of touch, hearing, sight, taste, and smell) and five internal senses (*sensus communis* "*al-hiss al-mushtarak*", fantasy "*khiyal*", apprehension, which is the sense that feels particular inner meanings "*wahm*", imagination "*mutakhayyilah*", and memory "*hafizah*"). However, he holds that there is no reason that the number of senses should be limited to ten (3/27-31 and 2/203, 208).

One of the sensory perceptions is visual perception (*ibsar/ru'yah*). Here Sohrevardi departs from the peripatetic tradition and says that seeing is a kind of knowledge by presence. When seeing, the soul connects itself to the object seen and finds it in its presence. He rejects the theory of *intiba'* and the theory of *khuruj al-shu'a'*. According to the theory of *intiba'*, when one sees, a ray of light radiates from the physical object to the pupil of the eyes in which the form of the object will be imprinted. The form is then reflected in the *sensus communis*, before being seen by the soul. According to the theory of *khuruj al-shu'a'*, one sees an object when a ray of light from the eyes radiates on the external object in a conic way. However, Sohrevardi says that seeing occurs in neither of these two ways – that nothing goes out from the eyes and nothing comes into the eyes. In his view, vision takes place through the illumination of the eyes on the physical object when it is in front of the eyes. When the luminous object is in front of the eye and there is no barrier between them, the soul will embrace it and see it by illumination (2/99, 34 and 1/486).

## Rational Perception

The fifth step in Sohrevardi's theory of knowledge is the recognition of rational perception (*idrak al-'aqli*). Sensory and imaginary perceptions are particular perceptions and belong to senses and memory, but rational perception is the function of reason/intellect and is abstract and universal. Sohrevardi believed in Plato's Ideal World, but his interpretation of universals is Aristotelian (2/15, 160). Sohrevardi argues that universals cannot exist in reality, for anything that truly exists must be particular and distinguished from other things (2/17). Universality attributed to ideas or *arbab al-anwa'* is not conceptual and logical universality (2/160); rather this universality is existential and inclusive.

Sohrevardi distinguishes two types of universal concepts: general concepts of quiddities (*al-mahiyyat*), such as concepts like "human being" and "horse," and abstract concepts, such as concepts like "existence" and "contingency." The former have individual instances in reality, but the latter are only in mind; they are second intentions (2/64-73). Therefore, the concept of existence is a mental concept with no reality in the external world. If we suppose that the concept of existence has reality outside the mind, then we must say that existence has existence; the same is true with regards to the existence of existence. Hence, if we suppose that existence exists, it leads to an infinite regress. Therefore, existence is only *i'tibari*, a mental construct (1/348). On the bases of this argument Sohrevardi holds the priority of quiddity/essence over existence (*asalat al-mahiyyah*).

Sohrevardi gives two criteria for distinguishing mentally constructed concepts from that which is real. His first criterion is that "anything whose existence in the external world necessitates the repetition of its species, i.e., leads to infinite regress, must exist only in the mind and not in the external world." His second criterion is that "every attribute which is impossible to separate it from its subject is constructed by mind" (1/22, 24 and 2/69). We must distinguish between real attributes and mental attributes of things; whiteness and blackness are real, but attributes like contingency and substantiality are only in the mind.

Four centuries later another Iranian philosopher, Sadr al-Din Shirazi, criticized this argument and established the theory of the priority of existence (*asalat al-wujud*) over essence. In his analysis, Shirazi makes a distinction between the concept and the reality of existence. He holds that it is essential for existence to be real and that the reality of existence is an external reality by itself not through another existence. Here we must distinguish between logical concepts which are only in minds and philosophical concepts which describe external reality (see Secondary Intelligible, chapter 2).

## Logic

Since Illuminationist Philosophy accepts rational thinking, it gives importance to logic and considers it the method employed in rational thinking. Therefore, in his major works Sohrevardi deals with logic. In his view, all our knowledge is not self-evident. We are unaware of many things that it is possible to know, and we learn some things which were previously unknown to us. Nor, however, is all our knowledge acquired. In order to acquire knowledge we need some basic self-evident knowledge. Therefore, some of our knowledge is self-evident and some of it is acquired. Logic is a discipline that shows how to increase our knowledge through deducing what is unknown from what is known. Furthermore, it teaches us how to avoid fallacies. In discussing different aspects of logic Sohrevardi criticized peripatetic philosophers and put forth some novel ideas.

According to peripatetic epistemology, definition is the only way of knowing general non-self-evident concepts. Through self-evident concepts we define unknown concepts. The best definition in this view is what is called a complete definition (*al-hadd al-tamm*) and is comprised of both genera and differentia. The genus is the general essential property and the differentia is the specific essential property of an essence. Sohrevardi criticizes the Aristotelian theory of definition (2/18-21), asking how someone can find the differentia of a thing if he/she does not know its reality. Furthermore, he asks, how can we make sure that we have isolated all essentials of a given thing? Thus, many definitions that philosophers have offered are inadequate. For example, they define substance only negatively. Simple realities such as the soul and immaterial objects do not have known differentia. Definition by necessary properties (*lawazim*) is difficult as well. How can we know these properties? Defining them through other necessary properties leads to infinite regress.

In order to construct a useful definition of a thing, maintains Sohrevardi, one must list the qualities (*sifat*) that together define the subject. An example of this would be defining a bat with the phrase “the bird that gives birth.” We know these qualities by sense and intuition. Thus, not only essential concepts but also qualities or attributes are also useful in defining something. Not everything is composed of genera and differentia - accidents are one such example. For example, color is a non - composite accident (*'arad al-basit*) which cannot be defined by genera and differentia. The Aristotelian theory of definition is not applicable in cases such as this (2/73). But according to Sohrevardi, these non-composed realities are known immediately by the senses, and composed objects are known by knowing their parts. Some realities are known only by intuition or illumination.

## Illuminative Knowledge

The sixth step in Sohrawardi's epistemology is achieving illuminative knowledge. As mentioned above, according to Sohrawardi, we know the material world through our external senses. We know mental and abstract phenomena through reason and on the basis of self-evident truths, universal concepts and logical rules. How then can we know immaterial and spiritual realities? Sohrawardi holds that we can know these realities through internal vision. On the basis of knowledge by presence and through the purification and cleansing of the heart one can attain this kind of vision. Knowledge by presence in mystical knowledge and internal vision plays a similar role to self-evident truths in speculative knowledge; purification and piety has a function comparable to the laws of logic. In a sense, mystical knowledge of immaterial realities is the expansion and deepening of knowledge by presence.

In Illuminationist Philosophy knowledge is light. This accords with the hadith that says: "Knowledge is a light that God puts in the heart of whomever He wills." Light is evident in itself and illuminates other things (2/113). Nothing is clearer than light, therefore, light does not need any definition (2/106). As light has different degrees of intensity, so knowledge is of varying degrees. Sensory perception is one degree of this light, and discursive knowledge and mystical knowledge are other degrees. The human soul is an immaterial light due to its own self-knowledge, for whatever has self-knowledge is an immaterial light (2/110). Therefore, the soul, like any other immaterial being, is light; and this is the reason why it is fascinated by seeing light and hates darkness.

To the Illuminationist philosopher mystical vision is the best path to the truth, even though discursive method is valid in its own right. In Sohrawardi's visionary dream, Aristotle told him that people of vision such as Plato, Bayazid Bastami and Sahl al-Tusturi were true sages and that he preferred them over rationalistic philosophers (1/70-74). Sensory data is the basis for scientific theories (astronomers, for example, use sensory data to study the stars), and the spiritual observations of mystics are likewise valid and serve as the foundation for illuminative wisdom and mystical knowledge of trans-physical realities.

Shahrzouri, a commentator of Sohrawardi's Illuminative Wisdom, says that science is of two kinds: knowledge by spiritual taste (*dhouqi*) and discursive knowledge (*bahthy*). Knowledge by taste is the direct vision of immaterial realities, not through thinking, argument and definition, but through illuminative lights and God's grace following purification; and this was the way of the sages before Aristotle. This wisdom weakened and disappeared with the post-Aristotelian philosophers, since Aristotle engaged them with discussions and quarrels. In addition, other factors, particularly the desire for superiority, prevented them from paying attention to this kind of wisdom (2/5).

Real wisdom is seeing and reaching the Upper World through ascending and connecting to archetypes of humanity through the archangel Gabriel. This wisdom comes from the world of holiness for those who are deserving and enter this world. The illumination of holy lights envelops the wayfarer

sage and makes him unaware of himself. This is the eternal holy wisdom which is the foundation of all of mankind's genuine traditions of wisdom. Sohrawardi claims that in a revelatory rapture he witnessed the world of light and luminous essences which was the very world that Plato, Zoroaster and Keykhosrov had witnessed.

Only through works of devotion, casting off of worldly attachments, and living a mystical and religious life can one achieve this wisdom. This disengagement from worldly charms must be cultivated to such an extent that one not only liberates himself from low appetites but also is easily able to escape from the bonds of his/her corporeal frame. Sohrawardi believed that Plato had this ability and maintained that the one who is not capable of escaping his/her body whenever he/she wishes does not deserve to be called a sage (1/113, 503). One must become similar to the world of lights and spirits in order to be able to witness them. The material world is the realm of darkness, and real knowledge is not found there. Therefore, in order to seek knowledge one must leave this world and migrate to the world of lights. These realities can be known only by inner senses, and these senses are only enlivened when one turns away from this world. When one does this, one witnesses the Divine lights and embarks on a journey which has no end.

Sohrawardi gives five practical suggestions for the wayfarer on this journey: (1. fasting and experiencing hunger, for all calamity is from overeating; (2. wakefulness in the night; (3. remembrance of God and recollection of His names by the tongue, heart and whole being; (4. following a spiritual guide (*murshid/peer*) who guides and observes the practices of the wayfarer; (5. acquiring moral virtues such as truthfulness, compassion and sincerity (3/396-401). Truths will be seen and the gateways of heaven opened for the one who practices these disciplines.

According to Sohrawardi, the human soul is light and acquires proximity to the source of light and gains more light through obedience and journeying along the Path. Subsequently the wayfarer's knowledge and being reach perfection, for knowledge and being are the same. Since God is the source of all lights (*nur al-anwar*) and is the most intensive light, His knowledge is all-encompassing and infinite.

Salvation/happiness is a result of the spiritual journey, inward purity and the cleansing of the heart from vice and pollution. Through these things, the Divine eternal light illuminates the soul and covers it with His everlasting blessing. Enveloped by this light, one gains happiness and cheerfulness, and things come under his control. His prayers will be heard, and he receives healing power. The higher stages of this experience bring an indescribable peace and tranquility that is called *sakinah* in the Quran. At these stages one hears delicate voices from paradise and gains certainty of heart (*al-yaqin*) (3/314-332).

Sages and Sufis are those who found true wisdom and arrived at the source of light. They are cut off from the world, liberated from disturbing memories and always remember God. They pray through the night, recite the Quran and enjoy subtle thoughts, continuing in their practice of obedience until they receive divine light and peace and experience the state of annihilation and eventually double annihilation (1/111-114).

Beginners on this journey receive transient light and joy, those who are midway along the path enjoy permanent light and joy and achieve knowledge of unseen, and those who have attained the goal entered through the gate into the luminous chamber, seeing all of the world of lights and receiving the annihilating light (1/50, and 2/252-254).

From the standpoint of his Illuminationist view, Sohrawardi introduces four groups of sages/philosophers. The highest sage is the one who is perfect in both rational and mystical wisdom. He is the qutb (pole), the Imam, and spiritual leader, which gives him the right to have external/social leadership as well. He is the perfect man and the proof of God. Beneath him is the one who is master of mystical wisdom and mediator of rational philosophy. Then is the one who is master in mystical wisdom though not a person of rational philosophy. The earth is never without such a person. The lowest is the one who is expert in rational philosophy but not in mystical wisdom. This group of people does not deserve spiritual and social leadership. History's best times are when a man of God has leadership and its worse times are when such a person does not have leadership (2/11-12).

Reason is imperfect without mystical vision, but it is useful as an introduction to mystical wisdom and protects one from being misled on the spiritual journey (1/361). Therefore, Sohrawardi's Illuminationist Wisdom starts with logic. Logic, however, is not the goal: vision is stronger than reason. The mystical way of life is necessary, for without it mystical vision is impossible (3/317). Sohrawardi claims that his philosophy was formed through mystical revelation, not through reason, and that only later did he rationalize and systematize it, mainly for the sake of others (2/1).

Sohrawardi divides reality into two realms which he calls variously light and darkness, the realms of knowledge and ignorance, and presence and absence. God is pure light, and the physical world is the realm of darkness. The human body belongs to the world of darkness, and the soul belongs to the world of light. In this life the soul is in the cage/prison of body and far from its homeland. Its happiness lies in shedding itself of the body and returning to its real home. By living a spiritual life and detaching oneself from material concerns one becomes able to fly from the Occident of matter to the Orient of light (2/252 and 3/107). The Illuminationist sage attempts to become independent of his/her body before death, transferring itself into the realm of light and attaining salvation.

One of the characteristics of Illuminative Philosophy is the extensive use of symbolic language. In some of his writings, especially some of his Persian works, Sohrawardi presents his philosophy through symbolic narratives. In his *Risalat al-tayr* and *Safir-i simurgh* he talks about spiritual flying; in *Qissat al-ghurba al-gharbiyyah*, the spiritual leader Hadi Ibn Khayr-i Yamani guides the lost wayfarer. In 'Aql-i surkh he speaks of a hawk that soars into the heavens, seeing wonders and becoming aware of the secrets of Qaf mountain. In *Ruzi ba jama'at-i sufiyan* as well Sohrawardi teaches the principles of journey towards wisdom, truth and light, and in *fi haqiqat al 'ishq* he writes of the presence of love in all things.

## Imaginal World

In regards to the hierarchy of being, Sohrawardi divides reality into four realms: 1) the world of sovereignty ('alam al-jabarut) or intellects (al-'uqul), 2) the world of celestial and human souls ('alam al-malakut), 3) the imaginal world ('alam al-muthul), and 4) the material world ('alam al-mulk), which includes the spheres and the physical elements.

Sohrawardi claims that he unveiled these worlds through a genuine mystical experience. The most important of these realms in regards to our present purposes is the third realm, the imaginal world (or mundus imaginalis, as Henry Corbin has called it). This realm is one of Sohrawardi's great contributions to spiritual cosmology, and he calls it by various names including *nakuja abad* (Utopia, or "Land of nowhere"). It is a world of wonders where the mysterious cities of Jabulqa, Jabulsa and Huvarqalya are located.

This theory of the imaginal world is one of the essential elements of Sohrawardi's philosophy on which many of his epistemological and cosmological views are based. The imaginal realm, which is beyond matter, time and place, is the realm of immaterial forms and it is the origin of the forms and shapes of the material objects. Objects in this world have form and shape, but not material content. Mirror images, imaginary forms, and the images in dreams as well as those of genies and devils, belong to this world. Only those souls who follow the ascetic life, pass the mysterious cosmic mountain of Qaf and find enlightenment are able to experience this world. The imaginal realm is a real world and should be distinguished from the realm of images which exists only in the human mind. By creative imagination we can apprehend the imaginal world.

Sohrawardi's imaginal world must also be distinguished from the ideal world of Plato. Plato's Ideas are unchangeable luminous realities, whereas Sohrawardi's forms are without substance and have manifestations in the material world. Sohrawardi explains resurrection, formal visions and the miracles of saints in terms of this world (2/229-235).

In summation, Sohrawardi, like other philosophers, accepts self-evident truths, sensory perception and the principles of logic as foundations of speculative thinking and thus accepts speculative philosophy. However, he sees knowledge by presence as the key of solving the problem of human knowledge and gives a new interpretation of sensory perception and of some principles of logic. He maintains that speculative philosophy is valid but insufficient, and like mystics believes that purification of heart, attention to God and pious living is the only way to achieve experiential knowledge and ultimate salvation and happiness. Thus he offers a comprehensive epistemology in which human beings by the help of their primordial awareness, sensory perceptions, reason, purification, and illumination can attain knowledge of self, the world and God, thereby achieving perfection. On the basis of this epistemology he offers a vision of the world that is comprised of different realms. Above and beyond the world is God, who is absolute light. Farthest from this source of light, at the lowest level of the world, is the physical world. Between these two are other realms of reality, which benefit from the light according to their proximity to its source.

Human beings, through the wisdom and obedience, can ascend from the dark world of nature up towards the worlds of light.

## [Sources]

### Original Source

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### Notes

[1]. Presented in a confrance on “Plato and Sohrevardi” in Athens, February 18, 2006 and published in Plato and Sohrevardi (Athens: Hellenic Society for Philosophical Studies, 2007), pp. 48-62.

[2] The first of these numbers indicates the volume number of Oeuvres Philosophiques et Mystiques, and the second number refers to the page number.