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ESSAY-REVIEW

AL-SUHRAWARDĪ'S PHILOSOPHY CONTEXTUALIZED

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Jari Kaukua, *Suhrawardī's Illuminationism. A Philosophical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), xii-252 pp.

When in 1868, Alfred von Kremer (1828–89) in his *Geschichte der herrschenden Ideen des Islams* (“History of the Ruling Ideas of Islam”) introduced al-Suhrawardī for the first time to a Western readership, he presented him as a freethinking Sufi devoted to “theosophy.” In a long chapter on Sufism, al-Suhrawardī appears under the heading “anti-Islamic tendencies.” Von Kremer characterized al-Suhrawardī’s thought as a balanced mixture of three sources: Neoplatonic philosophy, a Zoroastrian theory of light, plus Islamic monotheism. “According to the Arab biographers, his teaching was aimed at the destruction of the existing religion, which, however, they say of anyone who dared to oppose the ruling orthodox party.” Expressing views that openly contradict the ruling religion, von Kremer wrote, meant putting one’s life in danger. In accordance with that explanation, al-Suhrawardī died as “a martyr for his convictions” after the all too powerful group of orthodox scholars obtained his death sentence from Saladin.¹

In the spirit of the late European Enlightenment, von Kremer’s presentation aimed at distancing al-Suhrawardī from the sinister persecuting forces of Islamic orthodoxy – seen here as equivalent to the Christian church apparatus – and hence to endear him to his enlightened Western readers. Subsequently, al-Suhrawardī *al-maqtūl* has always enjoyed a good press in Western publications. Where al-Ġazālī was seen as the root of an anti-philosophical inquisition, Avicenna, Averroes, and most often al-Suhrawardī were his “free-thinking” counterparts, who like Galileo

¹ Alfred von Kremer, *Geschichte der herrschenden Ideen des Islams. Der Gottesbegriff, die Prophetie und Staatsidee* (Leipzig, 1868), p. 89–92.

Galilei or Giordano Bruno in the West suffered for their convictions and on occasion paid with their lives.

With its strong libertarian and anti-Catholic traditions, France has always been a place where the myth of the proto-secular and semi-atheist Islamic *philosophes* was kept alive. Avicenna and even more so Averroes were understood as philosophers whose thought pre-empted that of Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau, and like them they were more or less closely connected to a narrative of intellectual progress that led to the run on the Bastille in 1789. The martyr al-Suhrawardī fitted well into this story. Discovered in Europe during the mid-19th century, he soon fell into the hands of those who saw themselves as heirs of the rationalism of the Greeks *and* a spiritualism that they associated with the Orient. Henry Corbin (1903–78) was first a student of Latin Scholasticism and of Martin Heidegger before he discovered al-Suhrawardī in his late thirties. This was the time of the Second World War when the world built on the principles and convictions of the European Enlightenment slowly began to fall apart. Corbin understood al-Suhrawardī to teach a philosophy that is nourished from sources which transcend reason. In his widely read autobiography *Al-munqid min al-ḍalāl*, al-Ġazālī makes a two-fold claim in response to the rationalism of *falsafa*. First, he suggests that reason may be corrected by a higher epistemological authority just like reason itself corrects sense perception, and, second, that the revelation (*wahy*) which prophets receive, the inspiration (*ilhām*) given to *awliyā*², and the glimpses into the unknown (*al-ḡayb*) that ordinary people see in their dreams may precisely be that higher authority.² For Corbin and his students, al-Suhrawardī put al-Ġazālī's program of a new kind of philosophy into practice, one that is built on a higher authority than mere reason. Corbin adopted von Kremer's language of "theosophy" (which in Corbin translates the Arabic word *ḥikma*) to express that al-Suhrawardī was a philosopher who went beyond regular philosophy and whose thought therefore transcends the whole history of "reasoned" philosophy.

Corbin's reading of al-Suhrawardī is not without textual authority. Particularly in the opening pages of his last and most programmatic work, *Hikmat al-iṣrāq*, al-Suhrawardī engages in hefty polemics against the tradition of "peripatetic philosophy," which means almost all the philosophy that has come down to him. He narrates his own history of phi-

² Al-Ġazālī, *Al-munqid min al-ḍalāl / Erreur et délivrance*, ed. Farid Jabre (Beirut, 1969), p. 12–13, and 41–43. See also Frank Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (New York, 2021), p. 256–258.

losophy, where parallel to the “research philosophy” (*ḥikma baḥtiyya*) of peripatetics such as Aristotle, al-Fārābī, and Avicenna, there has always been a tradition of “taste philosophy” (*ḥikma dawqiyya*) to which belonged philosopher-prophets of antiquity such as Agathodaemon, Hermes Trismegistus, and also Plato, then the sages of Persia (Ġāmāsp, Frašōstar, Bozorgmehr, Kay-Khosrow, and Zoroaster), as well as Muslim Sufis such as Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī and Sahl al-Tustarī. Note that “taste” (*dawq*) is also a key notion in al-Ġazālī’s *Al-munqid min al-ḍalāl*.³ Al-Suhrawardī claims that only those who engage in both traditions, research *and* taste philosophy, are “truly philosophers” (*al-falāsifa wa-l-ḥukamāʾ ḥaqq^{an}*).⁴ Indeed, al-Suhrawardī develops a whole vocabulary of exclusivity, consisting of *dawq* (“taste”), *al-ʿilm al-ḥudūrī* (“knowledge as presence”), or *al-ʿilm al-ṣuḥūdī* (“knowledge as witnessing”), and also the verbal noun *taʾalluh* (probably best translated as “divinely inspired”)⁵ that express his claims of an alternative philosophical system to that of Avicenna, the master of “peripatetic philosophy.” The word *iṣrāq*, “illumination,” is itself part of that new terminology.

Given his strong polemics and the connections that al-Suhrawardī himself created between his thought and the Sufi tradition in Islam – in works such as *Kalimat al-taṣawwuf*, for instance – it should not surprise when many modern readers, among them Corbin, Christian Jambet, Hossein Ziai, John Walbridge and others, read him as a quintessentially different philosopher, whose innovative thought cannot be fully gleaned from the pages of his books because he makes claims to both discursive and intuitive wisdom. Did the master himself not write that in his books he can offer no more than “symbolic expressions” (*marmūzāt*) because “the momentous and noble matter, (...) we only discuss with our illuminationist companions?”⁶ In their understanding of an esoteric al-Suhrawardī, these interpreters walked in the path of prominent illuminationist followers of the master, such as Ibn Kammūna, al-Šahrazūrī, or Quṭb al-Dīn al-Šīrāzī, indeed, the whole tradition of Iranian illuminationist philosophy.

³ For a comparison of al-Ġazālī’s and al-Suhrawardī’s notions of *dawq* see Griffel, *Formation*, p. 254–260.

⁴ Al-Suhrawardī, *Al-talwīḥāt. Al-ilāhiyyāt*, in *Œuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, t. 1 (Opera philosophica et mystica I), ed. Henry Corbin (Istanbul, 1945), p. 74.

⁵ The word *mutaʾallihūna* also already appears in al-Ġazālī’s *Al-munqid* (p. 24, lines 18 and *ult.*) as a reference to Sufis and proto-Sufis from the time before Islam.

⁶ *Amma al-ḥaṭab al-ʿazīm al-karīm (...) fa-lā nubāḥiṭu fihi illā maʿa aṣḥābinā al-iṣrāqiyyīn*; al-Suhrawardī, *Al-mašārīʿ wa-l-muṭārahāt. Al-ilāhiyyāt*, in *Œuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, t. 1, p. 401.

Ibn Kammūna (d. 683/1284), al-Šahrazūrī (d. after 685/1286), and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Šīrāzī (d. 710/1311) belong to the late 7th/13th and early 8th/14th centuries and they never met al-Suhrawardī, who was executed in Aleppo around 587/1192.⁷ In fact, “illuminationism” as a philosophical school is an intellectual tradition that formed in the second half of the 7th/13th century, more than fifty years after al-Suhrawardī’s death. A fully contextualized understanding of al-Suhrawardī’s philosophy must divest itself from this tradition and try to understand his thought solely from his works and their context in the last quarter of the 6th/12th century. Jari Kaukua’s recent monograph *Suhrawardī’s Illuminationism*, does precisely that. It is the first monograph study that reads al-Suhrawardī’s philosophical works with a close focus on the problems that are discussed therein and the solutions they offer. Kaukua’s reading is also the first contextualized study of al-Suhrawardī and it comes to astonishing, though not all to surprising, results. Philosophical buzzwords such as “theosophy,” “illuminationalist knowledge” (*‘ilm iṣrāqī*), or “knowledge through presence” (*‘ilm bi-l-ḥuḍūr*) that appear frequently in earlier interpretations of al-Suhrawardī play next to no role in Kaukua’s reconstruction of his original epistemology and ontology. Corbin’s overall project of rediscovering al-Suhrawardī was driven by a good dose of Orientalist projection about “the theosophy of the Orientals” (*théosophie des Orientaux*).⁸ This led him to read al-Suhrawardī’s teachings about epistemology as normative claims to arrive at a different level of consciousness about God and the world which offers deeper and more immediate insights than the kind of knowledge favored in the Aristotelian – and implicitly included here as well: the Western – tradition. This, Kaukua’s monograph shows, is a de-contextualized reading. Something similar applies to Mehdi Haʿiri Yazdī’s (1923–99) book *Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy*, which presents al-Suhrawardī’s epistemology as a paradigm shift and in terms that aims to make it appealing to analytical philosophers of the Anglo-American tradition.⁹ This is an equally de-contextualized reading, albeit of a different kind.

⁷ On al-Suhrawardī’s execution, its time, and the possible reasons for it, see Griffel, *Formation*, p. 138–152.

⁸ Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1971), vol. 2, p. 44–46, 61–63, 65–66; see also idem, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1986), p. 290–92.

⁹ Mehdi Haʿiri Yazdī’s *Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (Albany [N. Y.], 1992), goes back to the author’s 1979 PhD dissertation at the University of Michigan.

None of these authors, neither Corbin, Jambet, Ha³iri Yazdi, nor Ziai or Walbridge, Kaukua engages with in a major way. Walbridge appears a few times in the book and is seen as offering a more “nuanced view” than that of Corbin (p. 131, n. 32), who is mentioned only twice in Kaukua’s book in marginal contexts. Rather, Kaukua’s interlocutors are a mostly young generation of historians of Islamic philosophy who work on the 6th/12th century, among them Peter Adamson, Rüdiger Arnzen, Roxanne Marcotte, Seyed N. Mousavian, Ayman Shihahdeh, Cornelis van Lit, Robert Wisnovsky, and most importantly Fedor Benevich (Edinburgh). In fact, Kaukua’s book reads at times as a long dialogue with Benevich, who with eleven publications is the author who has the largest number of titles in Kaukua’s bibliography of secondary literature.

With 235 pages of text, Kaukua’s book is rather on the short side, yet he packs in there much analysis and interpretations. This is the most important publication on al-Suhrawardī that I am aware of. The book is divided into nine individual chapters that fall into three blocks. The first is about al-Suhrawardī’s epistemology (chapters 1–4), the second about his ontology of light (chapter 5–8), and the third is chapter 9, which is the last and which deals with his theory of science where both earlier topics are combined. Kaukua first presents al-Suhrawardī’s criticism of Avicenna’s teachings on epistemology and then his own affirmative views on that subject. Criticizing Avicenna’s epistemology was highly *en vogue* in the late 6th/12th century Islamic east, and much of what al-Suhrawardī presents here is now known from other contexts. Yet whereas Kaukua contextualizes al-Suhrawardī “upwards” with Avicenna – and thus achieves significant results – there remains a horizontal contextualization within al-Suhrawardī’s own generation of thinkers and their teachers. Al-Suhrawardī’s critique of Avicenna picks up numerous points that stem from Abū l-Barakāt al-Baġdādī’s (d. ca. 560/1165) philosophy and have many parallels in Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). There are interesting connections with one of my recent works (*Formation*, see footnote 2) which I will try to explore in this essay-review. In the following I will try to present Kaukua’s results with a view to these two thinkers and others who were active in the 6th/12th century.

Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was four or five years older than al-Suhrawardī. The latter was born around 549/1154, most probably as the son of the custodian or supervisor (*qayyim*) at a *madrassa* in Suhraward, in north-west Iran (*Formation*, p. 244–46). Of his education we know little, yet one name sticks out, namely that of Maġd al-Dīn al-Ġilī, who taught

philosophy at a *madrassa* in Maragheh, also in north-west Iran. This al-Ġīlī is known to us from another context: He was also the philosophical teacher of Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. One of al-Rāzī's sons credits al-Ġīlī with providing his father with major insights that led to his philosophical and theological accomplishments (*Formation*, p. 268–69). Al-Ġīlī left only a single short work of a rather technical nature that offers hardly any conclusions about his directions of thought. His biography connects him to the Nizāmiyya *madrassa* in Nishapur and hence to al-Ġazālī (*Formation*, p. 240–43). Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's presence in Maragheh is noted for 570/1174–75, which may have been the year he graduated (*Formation*, p. 242, 268). No historian mentions that al-Suhrawardī, who in 570/1174–75 was around twenty, ever met al-Rāzī. Yet such a meeting is likely. In fact, al-Rāzī may have been a graduate teaching assistant when the younger al-Suhrawardī studied under al-Ġīlī.

Looking at al-Suhrawardī's and Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's philosophical theories, one may construct a Venn diagram of overlapping circles. What overlaps may arguably come from al-Ġīlī and/or common elements in the philosophical climate in Maragheh and Iran during the second half of the 6th/12th century. If we follow this logic, then al-Ġīlī and his environment were heavily influenced by Abū l-Barakāt al-Baġdādī's criticism of Avicenna. This shows, first, in the method of philosophy. Committed to principles stressed by al-Fārābī, Avicenna was sure to build philosophy on demonstrative arguments and on apodeixis (*burhān*). In his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, al-Ġazālī aims to show that this is impossible in metaphysics and in philosophical theology, the latter being the argumentatively grounded teachings on God (*Formation*, p. 81–84). The 6th/12th century can be characterized by a turn away from the apodictic method in philosophy toward the next best thing: dialectical arguments (*Formation*, p. 479–93). One of the last points in Kaukua's "Conclusion" is the acknowledgment that al-Suhrawardī's highly innovative and at times perplexing philosophical system is born out of, "the lucid recognition of the ultimate indemonstrability of our commitment to whatever foundational theory we happen to endorse (...)" (Kaukua, p. 234). The *ṣayḥ al-iṣrāq* was, says Kaukua, aware of "the limits of philosophical argumentation" and tried to construct a theory that is internally consistent. Such a theory cannot be decisively refuted, nor will it force a reluctant skeptic to accept it. In fact, al-Suhrawardī's claim of having found a philosophy supported by *dawq* and *ta'alluh* can be seen as a reaction to its acknowledged indemonstrability. Where reason and demonstration fail to lead to a decision, one starts to look for other sources. Al-Ġazālī does this in

Al-munqid and he claims that the tradition of philosophy was founded by people who “learned” much of their true insights in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and other natural sciences through divine inspiration. Once acquired with the help of prophecy or Sufi *ilhām*, however, these insights become part of the body of the rational sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyya al-naẓariyya*) and can be learned by every human from any good teacher, even without the assistance of prophecy, inspiration, or a “veridical dream.”¹⁰ While a faculty higher than reason is needed to develop the philosophical sciences, their structure and method is entirely (cis-)rational. It seems al-Suhrawardī shared much of al-Ġazālī’s views about the relationship between prophecy and philosophy. He evidently also held that divine inspiration, of which he thought he had quite a lot (*Formation*, p. 146–52), helps in learning and understanding philosophy. This explains his insistence on trans-rational faculties (*dawq*, *taʿalluh*) in the processes of developing and acquiring “true” philosophy. In contrast to its attainment, al-Suhrawardī’s philosophical system itself – this is Kaukua’s overall verdict – is free from claims to trans-rational gnosis and, in fact, does not need them. Al-Suhrawardī’s thought-system is firmly rooted in 6th/12th century philosophical developments in the Islamic east and *pace* Corbin and Jambet, there is no esotericism in it.

Kaukua begins his presentation with epistemology and al-Suhrawardī’s critique of Avicenna’s theory of definition. For the latter, definitions are “real” insofar as they determine truly existing entities (the *māhiyyāt* or quiddities) through their essential qualities. In the tradition of Neoplatonism, Avicenna constructs a Porphyrian tree where all existing beings are qualified by the constituents (*muqawwimāt*) of their definitions. A human is defined as “rational animal,” which means that the constituents of what defines “animal” (substance, body, life, and having a soul) are further narrowed down by the distinctive criterion “rational.” The quiddity or *māhiyya* of “human” exists for Avicenna independent of its individuals. For a faithful Aristotelian like Avicenna, real definitions are the starting point of all sciences (Kaukua, p. 21).

Al-Suhrawardī rejects the Avicennan epistemological system and with it the idea that our definitions describe any more than our use of words. There is simply no evidence that *māhiyyāt* or quiddities exist outside of the human mind. Hence, definitions do not refer to things outside our minds. For al-Suhrawardī all definitions are merely “nominal” insofar as they clarify which universal names we give to what kind of groups

¹⁰ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (New York, 2009), p. 100.

of objects in the outside world. Avicenna's "real definitions" that refer to "real" existing universals do not exist for al-Suhrawardī (p. 32). Here, Kaukua mentions in passing that Faḥr al-Dīn does something similar in one of his *kalām* books (p. 29). Indeed, already in 2013, Bilal Ibrahim explained al-Rāzī's critique of real definitions in a by now seminal article that was based on his McGill dissertation from a year prior.¹¹ Ibrahim bases his presentation on al-Rāzī's *ḥikma* works, namely *Al-mabāḥiṭ al-mašriqiyya* and *Al-mulahḥaṣ fī l-ḥikma wa-l-mantiq*. Al-Suhrawardī's arguments against real definitions (presented by Kaukua on p. 21–33) are largely the same as those analyzed by Ibrahim. They are both rooted in Abū l-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī's rejection of Avicenna's division of the human soul into different faculties of sense perception, inner faculties such as imagination or memory, and a purely immaterial intellect.

While neither al-Suhrawardī nor al-Rāzī follow Abū l-Barakāt all the way toward this radical rejection – both still maintain the existence of immaterial intellects, for instance – they accept his critique that there is simply no evidence for the existence of *māhiyyāt* or quiddities in the outside world beyond our souls. Rather, our souls (in our two philosophers: their intellects) make sense of the phenomena that we perceive by constructing quiddities. This "construction" is in al-Suhrawardī called *i'tibārī*, and the resulting quiddities are called *i'tibārāt*, which Kaukua translates aptly as "mind-depending concepts." In the third chapter of his book (p. 56–93) he explains their function and how they still guarantee true knowledge. *I'tibār* is an Avicennan concept that Abū l-Barakāt transformed into a philosophical method.¹² Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī does not go as far the *ṣayḥ al-išrāq* in his outright rejection of real quiddities. He remains skeptic whether quiddities do exist independent from human perception (*Formation*, p. 350–51). Like al-Suhrawardī, al-Rāzī sees not sufficient evidence for the existence of the constituents of definitions in the outside world. He also admits that there is not sufficient evidence for their non-existence. Still, this skepticism leads him into a drastic critique of Avicenna's epistemological edifice along similar lines as al-Suhrawardī (*Formation*, p. 336–51). Both reject the Avicennan understanding of knowledge as "the impression of the quiddity of the object of knowledge onto the mind of the knower" (*Formation*, p. 353). Truth, for

¹¹ Bilal Ibrahim, "Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ibn al-Hayṭam and Aristotelian Science: Essentialism versus Phenomenalism in Post-Classical Islamic Thought," *Oriens*, vol. 41 (2013), p. 379–431.

¹² On Avicenna use of *i'tibār* see Damien Janos, *Avicenna on the Ontology of Pure Quiddity* (Berlin / New York, 2020), p. 61–62, 79–113; on Abū l-Barakāt's see Griffel, *Formation*, p. 369, 482–499.

Avicenna, is the correspondence of the form of a perceived object with the form in the mind of the perceiver. Kaukua points out that al-Suhrawardī does not criticize the correspondence theory (p. 85). Rather, like al-Rāzī, he rejects the transfer of forms and the imprint theory. All this is inspired by the much more radical critique of Abū l-Barakāt for whom perception is the work of a soul that is undivided into faculties, such as the outer or inner senses and the intellect, and that simply “meets” (*talqā*) its object of perception (*Formation*, p. 368–69).

Abū l-Barakāt, al-Suhrawardī, and al-Rāzī all agree on the alternative to Avicenna’s epistemology. Following al-Ġazālī’s intervention in his *Tahāfut*, they describe knowledge as a “mere relation” or “relational state” between a knower and the object of knowledge. This definition also has Avicennan roots, because for Avicenna knowledge was both a relation *and* an attribute attached to the *dāt* of the knower (*Formation*, p. 375–82). Al-Ġazālī objects that the existence of an attribute is far from necessary or even evident. He suggests that if knowledge is understood as mere relation without the attribute, then it would allow even the God of Avicenna to have knowledge of individuals (*Formation*, p. 374, 382–84). This makes “knowledge as relation” a highly attractive concept to philosophers of the 6th/12th century who were critical of Avicenna. They develop it step-by-step into a fully-fledged epistemology that follows more nominalist and empiricist principles than Avicenna’s realism. Abū l-Barakāt is the first to pick this up (*Formation*, p. 359–69) and both Faḥr al-Dīn (*Formation*, p. 351–55) and al-Suhrawardī advance the theory. For the latter, knowledge as “relation” (*iḍāfa*) is not the kind of philosophical buzzword it is for the former two; still it appears in Kaukua’s book (p. 92–93) when al-Suhrawardī describes the mind-depending concepts (*i^ctibārāt*) as not determined by “anything apart from relations.” In fact, given its prominence elsewhere, the concept of knowledge as relation merits a second look in al-Suhrawardī, who in his *Al-mašārī^c wa-l-muṭāriḥāt* writes that God’s knowledge is characterized by a mere relation, “without a form in his *dāt*. (...)” God’s relation to the objects of his knowledge change without a change in his *dāt*.¹³

This leads to the last and most striking similarity between al-Rāzī’s and al-Suhrawardī’s epistemologies. The latter has been long known for what has been regarded as a highly original theory of knowledge as a mere “presence” in the mind (*Formation*, p. 355–58). Al-Suhrawardī

¹³ Al-Suhrawardī, *Al-mašārī^c wa-l-muṭāriḥāt. Al-ilāhiyyāt*, in *Œuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, t. 1, p. 488.

claims that certain types of knowledge such as inner self or inner pain are perceived directly without forms. Other things like outer sense perceptions we perceive through representations in our corporeal organs – like a mountain in our eyes – and again others we perceive as forms that are impressed on our corporeal organs. Once these universals and particulars are present in the self’s faculties and its bodily organs, they are also present to the self’s mind. Object-perception is for al-Suhrawardī a particular case of self-perception. A form may occur in the instrument of sight, yet the human may not be aware of it. Hence, it is not sufficient for perception that the physical process takes place in the organ, the process must also be attended to by the mind. What goes on in the organ has to enter the field of presence constituted by the mind. Knowledge for al-Suhrawardī means that something is not hidden (*ḡayr ḡāʿib*) from our selves, either by way of direct knowledge or by representation or by the impression of forms in faculties and organs that are accessible to direct knowledge.

Kaukua dealt with these teachings in an article of 2013.¹⁴ In this book he simply refers to his earlier work and limits the relevance of “knowledge as presence” to al-Suhrawardī’s conceptualization of the divine knowledge (p. 117, 229–30, 234). The impression he gives is that al-Suhrawardī’s successors in the school of illuminationism elevated this limited theory to a more general one and gave it an importance that it doesn’t have in the *ṣayḥ al-iṣrāq*. Yet even the al-Suhrawardī of Kaukua’s most recent book teaches that things perceived through sense perception are “innately recognized and [cannot] be made known in any way” (p. 115–16).¹⁵ Building on his critique of real definitions he claims that “the foundations of knowledge consist of simple and immediate percepts, which are epistemically inexplicable, or primitive, precisely because of their simplicity and immediacy” (p. 119). In fact, “lights” the most fundamental building blocks in al-Suhrawardī’s universe (see below), are simply apparent (*zāhir*) and cannot be explained. “[A]ll scientific explanation is ultimately based on premises that are innately recognised as true (*fiṭrīyan*), or properly grounded in indubitable perception” (p. 227).

In his philosophical books, Fahr al-Dīn al-Rāzī also talks about

¹⁴ Jari Kaukua, “Suhrawardī’s Knowledge as Presence in Context,” *Studia Orientalia*, vol. 114 (2013), p. 309–24. See also Fedor Benevich, “God’s Knowledge of Particulars: Avicenna, *kalām*, and the Post-Avicennian Synthesis,” *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales*, 86 (2019), p. 1–47, at 33–40.

¹⁵ *Fa-hiya fiṭriyya allatī lā taʿrif laha aṣlan*; al-Suhrawardī, *The Philosophy of Illumination. A New Critical Edition of the Text of Hikmat al-ishraq With English Translation*, ed. and trans. John Walbridge and Hussein Ziai (Provo [Ut.], 1999), p. 74.

knowledge as presence (*ḥudūr*), most prominently in his response epistle to al-Mas'ūdī's "Commentary to Pointers and Reminders" (*Formation*, p. 340–41). Concepts (*taṣawwurat*) are not acquired but are already there when we start using them. For al-Rāzī some inner states or feelings, for instance, we find "as ready occurrences in the mind" (*bi-badīhat al-'aql*) while others, such as sense perceptions, are "intuitive" or even "obvious" (*badīhī*). These concepts are "not in need to be acquired" or "primary" (*awwalī*) (*Formation*, p. 349–50). In al-Rāzī the simple "presence" of *taṣawwurat* gives an answer to the challenge of Meno's paradox, which he regards as serious (*Formation*, p. 313–14, 338–39, 341, 348–49). But what is he saying? Is this a philosophical nativism that argues against the acquisition of knowledge through sense perception? Given the proximity of al-Suhrawardī and al-Rāzī, the theory of knowledge as presence deserves a second or third look in both of them. Again, Abū l-Barakāt is the likely starting point given that he already uses the word "presence" (*ḥudūr*) in connection with knowledge (*Formation*, p. 368–69).

Next to epistemology, the second set of teachings Kaukua explains in his book is al-Suhrawardī's ontology. This has long fascinated Western readers, given that he has no substances, accidents, and existence, but rather talks of "lights," "appearance" (*zuhūr*), "shadows," and the "barrier" (*barzah*) as the building blocks of the universe. Kaukua claims that "much of the foreignness of illuminationist theory is terminological" (p. 118) and he subsequently aims to cut through it and translate those words into philosophically comprehensible concepts. The connection to al-Ġazālī's monism in his *Miškāt al-anwār* – a monism that stands on firm Avicennan ground¹⁶ – seems clear enough and is also pursued by Kaukua (p. 131–34). Despite that, Kaukua claims that al-Suhrawardī's vocabulary is novel and "had not served a significant technical function in the philosophical mainstream of his time" (p. 118). I think al-Ġazālī is overlooked in that statement.

Kaukua tries to bring order in al-Suhrawardī's ontology by formulating four axioms of his thought (p. 118–30). The first is: Something that is so well known that it need not be defined is "apparent" (*zāhir*) and it is "light" (*nūr*). Here, he means, first, the concepts and percepts that are simply "present," but he also points implicitly to Avicenna's determination of "existence" as the most general thing that cannot be defined by means of a higher genus and is hence known intuitively. The

¹⁶ See Alexander Treiger, "Monism and Monotheism in al-Ghazālī's *Miškāt al anwār*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, vol. 9 (2007), p. 1–27.

second axiom says that things other than God depend on other beings both with regard to their existence *and* their essence. Avicenna assumes such a causal dependance only for existence. Essences in Avicenna are famously “contingent by themselves” and need no cause for their pure contingency. The assumption that essences need causes or depend on being “set” (*ḡaʿala*) before they can become existent is an idea that comes from *kalām*, I would say. This suggestion is openly pursued by Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in his books of *hikma*.¹⁷ The third axiom defines several elements of al-Suhrawardī’s cosmos and clarifies several kinds of lights as well as “dusky substances” and “the barrier.” The latter is, in layman’s terms, the body which consists of a “dusky substance” (*ḡawhar ḡāsiq*) illumined by “accidental light,” which itself is caused by “pure light.” Such pure lights are plain and simple Avicennan intellects (p. 125). This leads to the fourth and last axiom: Everything that is conscious of itself is “pure light.” In chapter 5 and 6, Kaukua shows how al-Suhrawardī’s cosmos can be derived from these four axioms. The broad take-away is that “light” here is both an ontological as well as an epistemological concept and hence combines what in Avicenna is existence with knowledge. Both have their source in the Light of Lights and proceed from there in an emanative system. The whole universe consists of “light in varying intensity” (p. 139). Kaukua explains (p. 157):

At the most basic level, illuminationism is a robust kind of priority monism, which recognizes only one basic being, namely light or appearing to self as the internal activity of the first principle, and derives the phenomenal multiplicity of things by applying the ideas of double activity, intrinsic gradation, and complex appearing of lights to one another.

Frequent comparisons to Avicenna’s philosophical system help those who are familiar with it to understand al-Suhrawardī’s. By now it is clear that he is up to something radical new which goes far beyond Abū l-Barakāt and al-Rāzī. While the latter two maintain (in their books of *hikma*) a traditional hylomorphic ontology, al-Suhrawardī departs from that and posits a light monism. He still has forms, however, which he describes more in terms of Platonic ideas as, “the atemporal, full actuality of all that belongs to [a species’s] perfection (...)” (p. 215). Indeed, al-Suhrawardī likes to associate himself with Plato, though according to Kaukua, he is not a Platonist (p. 227–28). His forms are not much dif-

¹⁷ See Bilal Ibrahim, “Causing an Essence. Notes on the Concept of *Jaʿl al-māhiyya*, from Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī to Mullā Ṣadrā,” in Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele (ed.), *Philosophical Theology in Islam. Later Ashʿarism East and West* (Leiden, 2020), p. 156–194.

ferent from Avicenna's quiddities (p. 175), "the only difference would be that for al-Suhrawardī, the Forms are distinct from each other, whereas Avicenna takes the active intellect to encompass the essences of all sub-lunar species" (p. 183). There is also no Platonic theory of knowledge as recollection (p. 219).

Even here there is some significant overlap between al-Suhrawardī on the one hand and Abū l-Barakāt and al-Rāzī on the other. Like in Abū l-Barakāt, the fixed stars play a metaphysical and psychological role which they do not play in Avicenna or earlier cosmologies (p. 149–50). And although al-Suhrawardī occasionally trashes Abū l-Barakāt (p. 113, n. 56), he follows him on important points of epistemology, for example in his "mirror argument." It says that it cannot be the form of a mountain that is imprinted in our vision because size is clearly part of that. The form of a mountain is simply too big to fit into our eyes. What we perceive is a mere representation of the mountain, like the mountain that we see in a mirror (Kaukua, p. 113–15 ; *Formation*, p. 362, 367).

One of the most important teachings of al-Rāzī in ontology is that "existence" is a univocal term that applies in like manner to God as well as to His creation. He concludes that therefore, both God and creation must be subject to the existence-essence distinction, a point that Avicenna denies (*Formation*, p. 392–402). Al-Suhrawardī notes the same problem in Avicenna: "If 'existence' is predicated univocally of God, in whom it is identical to His essence, and of contingent things, in whom it (...) subsist through their quiddities as an accident, then a critical interlocutor may ask what is it that renders God's existence independent of a distinct quiddity" (p. 108). Faḥr al-Dīn is that critical interlocutor. Al-Suhrawardī is familiar with his point of view – which already appears in Abū l-Barakāt (p. 108, n. 45) – and with the Avicennan counter-argument. That claims that "existence" is a modulated term (*bi-l-taškīk*, here wrongly translated as "ambiguous," p. 136) and while univocal it is sometimes more intense and sometimes less like the color black, which is sometimes stronger and sometimes less strong. Al-Suhrawardī makes this point in a debate of whether forms can be more or less perfect. In his view about God he sides with Avicenna and holds against al-Rāzī (and Abū l-Barakāt) that God's essence is the same as His existence. In his philosophical theology, al-Suhrawardī is a "card-carrying Avicennist" (p. 55).

Kaukua's translations of passages in al-Suhrawardī's works are one of the highlights of his book. They are clear and use a contemporary philosophical vocabulary. While there is already a modern translation

of al-Suhrawardī's *Hikmat al-iṣrāq* by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (see footnote 15), Kaukua does not simply work with it but most often retranslates passages from that book. His translations are generally clearer and present al-Suhrawardī's teaching with greater consistency. Twenty years of highly productive research on the history of Arabic and Islamic, particularly Avicennan philosophy contribute to a much better understanding of al-Suhrawardī's philosophical vocabulary. Kaukua makes ample use of that progress.

Jari Kaukua's recent book is a milestone for the study of al-Suhrawardī as well as for post-classical philosophy in Islam. It allows the reader to align, for the first time, the field of Suhrawardī-studies with the recently booming field of Fahr al-Dīn al-Rāzī studies¹⁸ and with the study of post-classical philosophy in Islam. Finally, we can see the *ṣayḥ al-iṣrāq* for what he truly was: one of a handful of highly innovative critics of Avicenna who were active in the 6th/12th century. Al-Suhrawardī was the most innovative among them. This together with his execution in his late thirties gave him a certain notoriety, which speaks out of the sources on his life – most importantly out of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a – as well as out of comments that have been handed down from some of his philosophical contemporaries (*Formation*, p. 264, n. 1, and p. 243). His students and followers, however, dispersed after his death and there is, except for a short and very appreciative passage in Mu'īn al-Dīn al-Naysabūrī's *Itmān Tatimmat Šiwān al-ḥikma* (*Formation*, p. 244, n. 4, and p. 251), no written reaction to his thought from within the 6th/12th century. Athīr al-Dīn al-Abharī (d. 663/1265) may have been the first to pick up his thought in the mid-7th/13th century.¹⁹ By this time, al-Suhrawardī's thought was only known through his books. The "school of illuminationism" that developed among the generation of al-Abharī's students may not have known more about him than we do. That, however, should be the subject of a future study.

¹⁸ See Damien Janos and M. Faridaddin Attar, *A Comprehensive, Annotated, and Indexed Bibliography of the Modern Scholarship on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (544 / 1150–606 / 1210)* (Leiden / Boston, 2023).

¹⁹ Heidrun Eichner, "Essence and Existence. Thirteenth-Century Perspectives in Arabic Islamic Philosophy and Theology," in Dag N. Hasse and Amos Bertolacci (ed.), *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics* (Berlin / New York, 2012), p. 123–51, at 131, and Benevich, "God's Knowledge of Particulars," p. 40–41. For al-Qazwīnī's (a student of al-Abharī) comments on al-Suhrawardī in his *ʿAḡāʾib al-maḥlūqāt* (whose first recension was written around 659/1260), see Travis Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities. The Marvelous Book that Traveled the World and Mapped the Cosmos* (Cambridge [Mass.], 2023), p. 68, 189, 195.