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ESSAY-REVIEW
SUHRAWARDĪ AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY

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John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients. Suhrawardī and the Heritage of the Greeks* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000), xviii + 305 pp.

Suhrawardī, the founder of the illuminationist school of Arabic philosophy who was executed in Aleppo upon orders of Saladin (of Crusader fame) sometime between 1190 and 1192, has been increasing in popularity in recent studies. He was first brought to the wider attention of Western scholarship by the French orientalist and philosopher Henri Corbin (1903-1978), and the study of his works in the 20th century was accordingly dominated by Corbin's approach, which is best indicated by the title of the latter's seminal monograph, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardî* (Tehran, 1946). A younger generation of scholars, notably Hossein Ziai and the author of the book under review here – both of whom collaborated in the recent edition and translation of Suhrawardī's major work, *Ḥikmat al-Išrāq* (*The Philosophy of Illumination*)[1] – is attempting to re-orient research in other directions. John Walbridge is explicit about the direction he wishes to take in this book: "For Suhrawardī the central point of the philosophical tradition was Plato, not Zoroaster" (p. 7).

The starting point for the investigation of Suhrawardī's philosophy has been the following passage from the introduction of his *Philosophy of Illumination*:

> In all that I have said about the science of lights and that which is and is not based upon it, I have been assisted by those who have traveled the path of God. This science is the very intuition of the inspired and illumined Plato, the guide and master of philosophy, and of those who came before him from the time of Hermes, "the father of philosophers," up to Plato's time, including such mighty

[1] John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai, *Suhrawardī, The Philosophy of Illumination* (Provo, Utah, 1999).

pillars of philosophy as Empedocles, Pythagoras, and others. […] This is also the basis of the Eastern doctrine of light and darkness, which was the teaching of Persian philosophers such as Jamasp, Frashostar, Bozorgmehr, and others before them.[2]

For his approach, Corbin chose to concentrate on the Persian side of the pedigree claimed by Suhrawardī in this passage. Walbridge decided to take the other approach and study the Greek background. Specifically, as he states in his first chapter (pp. 9-10), his thesis is that

Suhrawardī's Plato is the Pythagoreanizing Plato of the *Timaeus*, not the political Plato of the *Republic*. […] It is a tradition that runs from the Academy of Plato's old age through the Pythagoreanizing Neoplatonists like Iamblichus and Proclus into the Islamic world.

Walbridge divides his book into three parts. The first, introductory, surveys rapidly Suhrawardī's life and works and offers a valuable précis of Walbridge's understanding of Suhrawardī's philosophy (Chapter 3). The second is the main part, in which Walbridge surveys at some length the philosophical material by Empedocles, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics available in medieval Arabic translation. Although this part is marred by occasional mistakes and lapses in the knowledge displayed of secondary literature on the subject, it is nevertheless useful as a first approach to the subject if read with the proviso that Walbridge mentions only whatever he thought would have been read by Suhrawardī. The third part has a concluding chapter on the political implications of Suhrawardī's philosophy, where Ziai's thesis that Suhrawardī was executed because of his potential political trouble-making is repeated and defended, and another one on Suhrawardī's philosophical heritage. Two appendices, one on Henri Corbin and another on Suhrawardī's Aristotle dream, conclude the book.

So far the arrangement and contents of the book are as one might expect them in a work on intellectual history. The surprise comes when one studies the second, main part of the book where all the philosophers and philosophical schools which allegedly "leavened" Suhrawardī's thought are discussed. For as one reads through the chapters of this part, one sees that what Walbridge says was available and known to Suhrawardī of their ideas has very little, if anything, to do with his actual philosophy. So in the

[2] *Ibid*., p. 2.

end Walbridge's extensive discussion of the knowledge available in Arabic of these philosophers works against – indeed disproves – his main thesis that he was following them or that he belonged in their tradition.

Take Empedocles, for example: Walbridge lists (pp. 45-7) all the relevant texts in Arabic which contained, or even purported to contain, his ideas – he even includes among these the "hidden current of Empedocleanism" argued for by Peter Kingsley in his *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic* (Oxford, 1995) – but in the end Walbridge tells us that the only "distinctively Empedoclean doctrine" (p. 48) used by Suhrawardī is that of Love and Strife, although Suhrawardī neither uses it in the same way nor, even more outrageously, does he anywhere "explicitly associate Empedocles with this particular doctrine" (p. 50)!

The same is true of Pythagoras. Out of all the Arabic texts transmitted as Pythagorean in Arabic and known to Suhrawardī, he makes use of none of them, as acknowledged by Walbridge himself:

> Suhrawardī seems to have ignored the various specific doctrines [of the Pythagoreans] about mathematics […]. Neither was Suhrawardī attracted by the Pythagorean deification of numbers […]. Nor, despite his interest in the occult, was he interested in numerology. In fact, a metaphysics of number, whether Pythagorean or neo-Pythagorean, was incompatible with Suhrawardī's nominalist Platonism (pp. 62-3).

Of the other Pythagorean doctrines Walbridge lists on pp. 67-81, again Suhrawardī makes use of insignificantly few of them. The only thing presumably Suhrawardī had in common with Pythagoras was "a particular way of doing philosophy" (p. 81), *i.e.*, through mystical intuition!

Or take the Stoics. Walbridge is quick to point out that Suhrawardī "nowhere explicitly mentions Stoicism" (p. 193). It is also clear that not a single Stoic idea is claimed by Walbridge to be present in Suhrawardī. What Walbridge actually investigates in this chapter (11) is the reason why Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) says that Suhrawardī was a Stoic. To answer this question Walbridge constructs a completely "speculative account" (his words, p. 195), which may or may not have its merits, but my (and the reader's) question is what this has to do with Stoicism "leavening" Suhrawardī's thought, since this was the function of the other chapters discussing the theories of ancient philosophers.

The same is true even of Plato, allegedly Suhrawardī's primary

mentor. Walbridge's review of Suhrawardī's Platonism (pp. 181-5) shows very little, if anything, concretely Platonic taken up by Suhrawardī and used in the same way. The theory of Platonic Forms, of course, is something that Suhrawardī did accept. However, even in this case, as Walbridge himself admits, Suhrawardī "gives the doctrines his own twist – for example, turning Platonic forms into angelic intellects, thus stripping them entirely of their epistemological functions and making them into cosmological efficient causes of the forms of sublunar beings" (p. 183). This is hardly a "twist"; for someone purporting to be Plato's disciple this is demolishing one of the pillars of the Master's edifice.

At this point the reader may rightly ask himself what is happening here and how it is possible for Walbridge to claim that Suhrawardī was following Plato or a "Pythagoreanizing Neoplatonism" (pp. 10, 184) since, by Walbridge's own account, Suhrawardī knew little of the theories of these philosophers and applied them even less. Walbridge obliges by providing the answer himself when, toward the end of Part II, he spells out his own theory of how intellectual history progresses. Walbridge believes that there are certain philosophical systems or positions – he names, as examples, other than Suhrawardī's so-called "Pythagoreanizing Neoplatonism," "Aristotelianism, the dialectical and political Platonism of the early and middle dialogues, Stoic ethics, and the atomism of Democritus and Epicurus" – that have such "inner logic and robustness" that they transcend history. Even if such a position goes out of circulation, Walbridge claims, because of its "internal logic and consistency" it "appeals to philosophers of a particular bent" and is thus "periodically reinvented whenever conditions are favorable and a sufficient number of texts come back into circulation. These texts need not be comprehensive or systematic; […] even a quite fragmentary collection of material is sufficient to trigger the reinvention of the position." With great honesty, Walbridge goes on to draw the implications of this assumption: if it is the case that these positions "are likely to be rediscovered regularly given even fragmentary sources, then philological analysis is not likely to be decisive in explaining philosophical developments. […] Instead, the development and change of philosophical systems must be explained by an intellectual logic" (pp. 184-5).

To begin with, this approach to intellectual history may be expedient for Walbridge's purposes – insofar as it absolves him

of having to prove concretely and specifically how and what Suhrawardī took from his "Pythagoreanizing Neoplatonists" and eliminates the negative results which his own review in the second part produced – but it can hardly be taken seriously as a scientific scholarly approach in 21st century academia, if only because scholarly theories, just like scientific experiments, in order to be valid have to be verifiable objectively and reproducible at random. But in Walbridge's theory, and with philology and historical documentation thrown out of the window, the principle of hermeneutic arbitrariness is introduced: everything is permissible simply because there are no rules. Walbridge does not say how many is a "sufficient number of texts" that need to come back into circulation so that they will "trigger" that position in somebody's mind. He does not say what the "particular bent" of a person is who is attracted to any one of these positions, and why it is that people with such particular "bents" appear in abundance in certain ages and then disappear for centuries. Worst of all, Walbridge's approach flattens all historical distinctions: the Pythagoreanism of Pythagoras was not the same as that of the Neopythagoreans during the early Empire, nor that of the Neoplatonists, nor that of the Renaissance Platonists; each had different elements that suited its particular context and cannot be "re"-invented, unless we also discard the concepts of history, causality, and historical development.

Secondly, even if one were to tread into this twilight zone and assume with Walbridge that the few "fragments" of "Pythagoreanizing Neoplatonism" that were available to Suhrawardī provided the "trigger" for his "reinvention" of it, it still cannot be claimed that Suhrawardī was aware of the historical tradition of Pythagoras, Plato, and the Neoplatonists as such, and that he belongs to the same tradition as they in the sense that he reproduced their teachings. For this is precisely what Walbridge claims: "Much as a paleontologist infers the skeleton of a dinosaur from a few bones, Suhrawardī was quite capable of understanding the philosophical implications of various Greek systems from the fragmentary information available to him" (p. 9); "a few bones are sufficient for a thoughtful philosopher like Suhrawardī to *rediscover* the dinosaur of Pythagoreanizing Neoplatonism" (p. 184; emphasis added). But in fact, Suhrawardī neither "reinvents" nor "rediscovers"; what he does is to take up a concept that he finds in the philosophical literature and use it in a way that has nothing to do with that concept's original context

and function, as he did with Empedocles' Love and Strife theory and Plato's forms. As it is, with the evidence that Walbridge himself presents of what Suhrawardī actually did with the few doctrines whose names he borrowed, Walbridge's metaphor does not work: for the animal whose few bones Suhrawardī the paleontologist found in his philosophical excavations, and the animal which he created – his own philosophical system – are not one and the same.

Either way, therefore, regardless whether we accept Walbridge's "reinvention" theory of the transmission of ideas or not, his thesis that Suhrawardī *belongs* to the Neopythagoreanizing Neoplatonist tradition cannot be maintained – as a matter of fact, it is disproved by the very evidence Walbridge collects. Accordingly, his initial assumption is also invalidated:

> My assumption will be that Suhrawardī was making intelligent use of the philosophical resources available to him to create a coherent system and that he believed that system to be in essential respects identical with that of the Ancients (p. 8).

The first half of this assumption is certainly valid – almost tautological, one would say: no one claimed Suhrawardī was stupid, and history itself proved his system viable. But it is not true that Suhrawardī "*believed* that system to be in essential respects identical with that of the Ancients" – for as Walbridge frequently mentions, Suhrawardī certainly understood the philosophical import of whatever it was that he was reading, and the changes he effected to the few ideas that he did borrow from the ancients, like the Platonic forms, must have been deliberate – rather, Suhrawardī *presented* the system that he created as being in essential respects identical with that of the Ancients (emphasis added). Once this distinction has been understood, the problem changes entirely, and so does the method to be followed in solving it. No matter how precisely we trace the availability, nature, and diffusion of Greek philosophical material in Arabic – essentially what Walbridge attempted to do here – it will not help us a bit in understanding the sources of Suhrawardī's philosophy, and hence its import, simply because Suhrawardī did not follow what he was reading in most of the Greek sources surveyed by Walbridge. What he *was* following to a certain extent was Plotinus in the description of his out-of-body experience (*Enneads* IV, 8.1). Suhrawardī, who knew this passage as part of the Arabic *Theology of Aristotle* but who ascribed it to Plato anyway, refers

to it a number of times in his works (Walbridge, pp. 134-7), and is obviously indebted to it as one of the two main sources for his own theory of knowledge by presence (his other source was Avicenna's theory of self-consciousness in the famous "flying man" passage). Plotinus, it is to be remembered, in that same passage also refers to Empedocles, Pythagoras, and Plato, and these three are precisely the names that Suhrawardī adopts as the authorities whose teachings he *pretends* to follow.

If that is the case, and given the uncontested and universally acknowledged debt that Suhrawardī's philosophy owes to Avicenna in its entirety, then the problem becomes why Suhrawardī *presented* himself as following these ancient philosophers, and especially Plato, rather than Avicenna. But this is the subject of the book on Suhrawardī that has yet to be written. One hopes that some student of this influential philosopher will soon undertake to do it.

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