

I begin this essay with a consideration of G.W.F. Hegel's claim that Zoroastrian spirituality is pantheistic. Hegel justifies this claim by attributing to Zoroastrianism the view that light is both divine and natural. I defend Zoroastrian Persian thought against the charge of pantheism by introducing a phenomenological analysis regarding the divinity of light that has its beginnings in Abū 'Alī Hussain ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) but gets developed by other Persian Muslim thinkers, notably Abū Hāmid Muhammad Ghazzālī (Ghazali). I then show that this analysis is compatible with the descriptions of the divine rank of light in Zoroastrianism.

1.

In this part of the essay, I put forward a general outline of Hegel's history of spirit and the place of Zoroastrianism in it. I focus on Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, in which pre-Islamic Persian civilization receives an extensive treatment, and his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, in which Zoroastrianism obtains the label of pantheism. My aim is to sort through textual ambiguities and present Hegel's position charitably. In the next part of the essay, I begin the defense of Zoroastrianism by introducing the Islamic phenomenological analysis of luminous beings.

In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel locates the Zoroastrian sacred poetry at the inception of the historical period dominated by symbolic art. Symbolic art, for Hegel, involves "a detachment of a universal meaning from what is immediately present in nature."¹ Hegel considers the Zoroastrian Mazdean light as a symbol of the spirit (*Geist*), but this light does not detach the spiritual meaning from the concrete natural objects; rather the natural light is the spirit itself and through it other natural objects show themselves: "[F]or them [Parsis] the light, precisely as light, is goodness and so interpreted that, as *light*, it is present and effective in all particular goods, in all living and positive things."² Hegel calls this proto-symbolic moment in the development of the spirit pantheism and maintains that it is transcended in sacred Jewish poetry.³ Sacred Jewish poems are instances of the symbolism of the sublime, because their "meaning, as spiritually explicit universality, is separated for the first time from the concrete existent, and makes that existent known as its

negative, external to it, and its servant."⁴ To put it in the words of Paul de Man: "The moment Hegel calls the sublime is the moment of radical and definitive separation between the order of discourse [the concrete existent] and the order of the sacred [the spiritually explicit universality]."⁵ Such a moment is captured best in the second commandment of the Jewish law: *Thou shalt not make any graven image, nor the likeness of anything which is in heaven, in the earth, or under the earth*. The symbolic art, as exemplified thus, is self-contradictory: it annihilates itself, and its destruction refers us to the spiritual universal. It is not accidental that the symbolism of the sublime receives expression in the religious law. The negation of the particular in the form of a universal law catapults the subject to a consideration of the universal as the ground of action. And this is the beginning of the history of spirit.

a. In order to clarify Hegel's account of the history of spirit and the place of Zoroastrianism in it, I want to turn to the work of an influential critic of Hegel, Slavoj Žižek. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek examines Hegel's history of spirit and argues that his understanding of this history is distorted (perhaps because of Hegel's alleged anti-semitism), and that the proper order of spiritual development is not Jewish, Greek, and then Christian. The history of spirit, according to Žižek, begins with Greek classicism, moves to the Jewish symbolism of the sublime, and then culminates in Christian romanticism. He writes:

[T]he Greek, Jewish, and Christian religions do form a kind of triad which corresponds perfectly to the triad of reflection (positing, external and determinate reflection), to this elementary matrix of the dialectical process. Greek religion embodies the moment of 'positing reflection': in it, the plurality of spiritual individuals (gods) is immediately 'posited' as the given spiritual essence of the world. The Jewish religion introduces the moment of 'external reflection' – all positivity is abolished by reference to the unapproachable transcendent God, the absolute master, the One of absolute negativity; while Christianity conceives the individuality of man not as something external to God but as a 'reflective determination' of God himself (in the figure of Christ, God himself 'becomes man').⁶

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) p. 323.

² *Ibid.*, p. 329.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁵ Paul de Man, "Hegel on the Sublime," in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minneapolis Press, 1996) p. 110.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (NY: Verso, 1989) pp. 201–2.

I disagree with Žižek's revision of Hegel's history of spirit, but it is, nonetheless, beneficial for understanding Hegel's own view and my criticism of it. Žižek supports his modification by maintaining that it conforms better to the triadic movement of reflection, the Hegelian dialectical process.

Žižek's understanding of the triadic reflection is exemplified in his account of textual hermeneutics. We begin, Žižek maintains, by approaching a text – say Sophocles' *Antigone* – naïvely: The first movement of reflection, 'positing reflection', "corresponds to a naïve reading claiming immediate access to the true meaning of the text: we know, we pretend to grasp immediately what a text says."⁷ In this manner of thought, we assume that the text is immediately accessible. According to Žižek, the Greeks approached spirituality in this way. They posited divine beings, the spiritual essence of the world, alongside created beings – on the same plane of existence as the created beings. This naïve approach confronts a problem when multiple mutually exclusive accounts of the spiritual essence are discovered.⁸ In the case of the *Antigone*, the reader is stymied when she discovers many different and often incompatible readings of Sophocles' text offered by readers separated out historically, culturally, and theoretically.⁹ In the same way, presumably, the Greeks were befuddled as they came across other accounts of the spiritual essence in their encounter with other cultures. The second dialectical moment, 'external reflection', "provides a way out of this impasse: it transposes the 'essence', the true meaning of a text, into the unattainable beyond, making of it a transcendent Thing-in-itself"¹⁰ In the second moment of reflection, the naïve approach of the 'positing reflection' is transcended. The reader banishes the meaning of *Antigone* to an unknowable beyond and declares the various interpretations of the text partial, distorted, and historical. The Jewish subject, in a similar fashion, finds herself presumably in exile from intimacy with the divine. So whatever spirituality she can muster is at best a pale reflection of the true transcendent divinity. The final stage of Hegelian dialectic, according to Žižek, is 'determinate reflection.' We arrive at this moment when we realize "how the internal 'essence' is already in itself 'decentered,' how the 'essence' of this essence itself consists in this series of external determinations."¹¹ The reader of *Antigone* learns to let go of "the essential meaning of the text" and to celebrate the plurality of

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

meanings provided by the meaning-giving activity of the readers. The Žižekian Christian also celebrates the embodiment of the divine in the figure of Christ, and by emulating him revels in the multiplicity and the particularity of the divine agency in the world.

In Žižek's account, Zoroastrianism would have to be a form of classical spirituality, because, as Hegel puts it, it is a pantheism that lets the divine essence of the world, the Mazdean light, appear with the other phenomena. Classical spirituality is sublated, in Žižek's scheme, by the Jewish spirituality of the sublime and the Christian Man-God. In this essay, I am not interested in disputing Žižek's position. I am, however, interested in disputing his reading of Hegel, as I want to take issue with his revision of the logic of Hegel's history of spirit. To do this, I want to concentrate on Hegel's account of the Zoroastrian Persians as provided in his *The Philosophy of History* and his *Aesthetics*.

b. In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel maintains that the world is the intersection of spirit and matter.¹² What distinguishes the spirit from matter is freedom. Freedom or self-determined existence is the essence of spirit, and matter is marked by its dependence on something external to it.¹³ In other words, matter is determined by something other than itself, i.e., the spirit. The history of the world is the result of the immersion of spirit in matter.¹⁴ At first, the spirit manifests itself in natural regularity, but, through man's historical development, it achieves self-consciousness.¹⁵ Freedom's self-consciousness is the meaning of world history.

For Hegel, Zoroastrian Achaemenid Persia "constitutes strictly the beginning of world history,"¹⁶ and the Persians are the "first Historical People."¹⁷ He interprets "Zoroaster's Light" as the first objectification of the spirit, i.e., the first towards freedom's self-consciousness.¹⁸ The Mazdean natural light enables all beings, including the individual human being, to achieve freedom to act in as many ways as their natural

¹² G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (NY: Dover, 1956) pp. 15–16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174. Hegel has two main sources for his discussion of ancient Iran: 1) Ancient Greek accounts of the Persians in such works as Herodotus' *The Histories*. 2) The work of Anquetil-Duperron on Zoroastrianism titled: *Le Zend Avesta, Ouvrage de Zoroastre, contenant les idées théologiques, physiques et morales de ce Législateur, les Cérémonies du Culte Religieux qu'il a établi, et plusieurs traits importants relatifs à l'ancienne Histoire des Perses* (Paris, 1771). The latter was a study of the Indian Parsees, and, as the only systematic and sustained study of Zoroastrianism available to Hegel, it influenced his philosophy of history tremendously. Hegel may also have had access to Thomas Hyde's *Historia Religionis veterum Persarum* (Oxford, 1700).

¹⁷ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, op. cit., p. 173.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

propensities allow. This is only the first step towards the spirit's self-consciousness. But before discussing the next step, it is important to note that, for Hegel, the Zoroastrian spiritual space opened up by the antithesis between light and darkness gets replicated in the Achaemenid political organization (i.e., the Persian empire): "We find ... [the Persian empire] consisting of a number of states, which are indeed dependent, but which have retained their own individuality, their manners, and laws ... As Light illuminates everything – imparting to each object its peculiar vitality – so the Persian Empire extends over a multitude of nations, and leaves to each one its particular character."¹⁹

With Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire, the torch of spiritual development gets passed to the Greek World, then to the Romans, and finally to the Germans. The Greeks, according to Hegel, give a spiritual content to the (spiritual) form introduced by the Persians.²⁰ Whereas the Persian law frees its subjects to exercise their natural abilities, the Greek law (*nomos*) demands the subjugation of those abilities for the sake of the non-natural principles of the city-state. The Greek law of the state further objectifies the spirit, as the subjugation of the natural for the sake of the spiritual law enhances human freedom. "For Law is the objectivity of Spirit; volition in its true form. Only that will which obeys law, is free; for it obeys itself – it is independent and so free."²¹ The compulsory prescriptions of the law of the state are transcendent to natural necessity. Their necessity is derived from the absolute freedom of the spirit. Therefore, obedience to the law can liberate the individual from the constraints of natural inclinations. The Greeks, however, reserve this liberation for an elite few.

The Romans generalize the Greek objectification and institute a tyranny of the spirit, which stifles the natural side of spirit, the side that had found its fulfillment in Persian pluralism.²² This is done partly through the grounding of the state in religion. According to Hegel, such grounding helps in preserving the state: "in order to maintain ... [the state], Religion must be brought into it – in buckets and bushels as it were – and impressed upon people's hearts."²³ The alleged divine origin of the state is more effective in moving the masses to submit their wills to its prescriptions, and this submission is useful in realizing freedom in the subject. But freedom is denied its ultimate fulfillment in this phase of the history of the spirit. Greek elitism continues in the tyrannical Rome. From the Roman world, Hegel posits the emergence of the self-conscious freedom in the Christian, German world. The latter

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 278.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

sponsors the plurality of spiritual forms of life, free human activities, that are no longer "the substratum of their religious conceptions," but of "free and spontaneous developments from their subjective self-consciousness."²⁴ The tyranny of the spirit is lifted, and the individual realizes her freedom

In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel divides the various forms of art in a way that corresponds to the different stages of the history of spirit, because, for Hegel, art is the sensuous expression of the spirit's consciousness of itself.²⁵ The different forms of art are the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic.²⁶ Symbolic art is the form of Oriental art, and, according to the logic of the *Philosophy of History*, Zoroastrian Persian art is a kind of symbolic art. Jewish symbolism of the sublime relegates the spiritual essence to a realm transcendent to the natural and, as such, mediates between the Persian – which still considers the spiritual as natural – and the classical. To the classical corresponds the art of the Greek and Roman worlds. The classical art gives positive expression to the spiritual; the spiritual becomes real. Therefore, the classical is the transition to the romantic age when the spiritual is finally appropriated by the individual human subject, whose free agency expresses the divine in the world. The romantic is the artistic manifestation of the German world.

c. What I take to be the distinguishing feature of Hegel's history of the spirit is the way Hegel articulates the notion of freedom. For Žižek, the freedom of the subject is attained when she recognizes that her activities are the source of meaning in the world, rather than the world having its own meaning (positing reflection) or deriving its meaning from a transcendent source (external reflection). For my Hegel, on the other hand, the freedom of the subject is attained when the subject trains herself not to act or think based on natural inclinations (positing reflection) nor from transcendentally postulated principles (external reflection). Rather, freedom enables the subject to act spontaneously and appropriately in response to the relevant normative features of a situation. The Zoroastrian and Jewish conceptions of spirituality train the subject to resist natural inclinations and to act from metaphysical grounds. These systems help the subject in overcoming the pressure of passions and appetites, but they unnecessarily constrain the subject by metaphysical laws. The Greek and Roman views of spirituality present the subject with concrete examples of freedom, but these exemplars are elite or divine beings that manifest themselves as possessing a law unto themselves. The Christian moment is established by the connection

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

²⁵ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Vol. 1, op. cit., p. 72; see also Charles Taylor's *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) pp. 465–6.

²⁶ *Aesthetics*, Vol. 1, op. cit., pp. 300–2.

between one divine being – Christ – and the ordinary individuals. The exemplarity of Christ invites emulation and such an invitation promises salvation which is manifested, at least in part, in the Christian subject's freedom, in her ability to act independently of nature and the religious law for the sake of the relevant particular good. Here, the contrast between my take on Hegel's view of the development of spirit and Žižek's can be seen. My view of Hegelian freedom emphasizes the normative constraints of the particulars on the autonomous subject. Žižek's view has no place for such a constraint; for him, normative constraint cannot originate outside the subject's meaning-giving activity. Again let me emphasize that I don't believe I have undermined Žižek's position here; what I have shown is that Hegel's account of the progress of spirit is coherent and is not in need of Žižek's revision.

2.

Having spelled out a broad view of Hegel's history of spirit and the place of Zoroastrianism in it, I want to challenge Hegel's charge that Zoroastrianism is a form of pantheism that is immediately superseded by the sublime transcendence of the spirit in the Jewish verse. I want to argue that another form of transcendence is present in Zoroastrianism, and I want to spell out the nature of this transcendence by invoking the Islamic phenomenology of the luminous substances. It was in the study of this tradition that I was first drawn to see the limitation of the Hegelian characterization of transcendence. The principal difference between the transcendence found in Islamic and Zoroastrian systems of thought and in that of Hegel is that the former presuppose the development in which the Hegelian articulation of transcendence plays a part. In other words, the Islamic and Zoroastrian visions of transcendence already incorporate a Hegelian account of freedom.

a. In his famous *The Niche of Lights*, Ghazali – the legendary Persian thinker and the theologian of Sunni Islam – ponders the significance of the famous Qur'anic Light verse:

God is the light
Of the heavens and the earth.
The parable of His Light
Is as if there were a Niche
And within it a Lamp:
That lamp enclosed in a Glass:
The glass as it were a brilliant star:
Lit from the blessed Tree,
An Olive, neither of the East
Nor of the West,
Whose oil is well-nigh
Luminous,
Though fire scarce touched it:

Light upon Light!
God doth guide
Whom he will
To His Light:
God doth set forth Parables
For men; and God
Doth know all things.²⁷

Ghazali begins by examining the meaning of "light" (*al-nūr*) as that "which is seen in itself and through which other things are seen, such as the sun."²⁸ He then argues that this sense of "light," i.e., the natural light, is not the primary one, because there are other luminous beings which, in addition to the qualities possessed by the natural light, "see" themselves and others. Therefore, sense perception is superior to the sun as the more primary bearer of the name "light" (because the sun does not perceive).²⁹ Intellect, however, corrects sense perception and gets at the things themselves, so it is even more primary than sense perception as that which "light" names.³⁰ Ghazali does not end his analysis here; he proceeds by arguing that if there is something which "allows other things to see, while seeing itself and others, then it is [even] more worthy of the name 'light'."³¹ All prophets, whose succession terminates in prophet Muhammad, are lights in this sense.³² They give human beings prophetic wisdom (*hikmah*) which illuminates their minds like the sun illuminates the eyes.³³ The laws and practices that the prophets institute provide the guidance and illumination by which human beings cultivate their souls and acquire the ability to see the divine light. At the stage of guidance by religious law (*sharī'ah*), prophetic wisdom is pure transcendence in the way the divine is in Hegel's account of sacred Jewish verse. Wisdom is the withdrawn source of light whose laws make absolute demands on the faithful's actions. Through the observation of the law and the path (leading to the cultivation of the character and the mind), the human subject *tastes* the transcendent divine wisdom.³⁴ She becomes the intimate of the prophet and his divine wisdom.

²⁷ "Āyat al-nūr", *Qur'an* 24:35, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (NY: Tarikhe Tarsile Qur'an, 2001) pp. 907–908.

²⁸ Abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1998) p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–3.

³² For a good discussion of the Muhammadan light in the Islamic tradition, refer to U. Rubin's "Pre-existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of Nur Muhammad," *Israel Oriental Studies* V (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University press, 1975) pp. 62–119.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁴ Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, op. cit., pp. 32–4.

However, beyond the prophets, the even more worthy bearer of the name “light,” according to Ghazali, is “the holy prophetic spirit” (i.e., Gabriel, the messenger angel of revelation). He truly deserves this name in relation to earthly lights.³⁵ Insofar as the heavenly lights are concerned, God, “the Lordly Presence,” is, of course, the most perfect, and the angels or heavenly lights (in whose company Gabriel is included) are ranked in accordance with their proximity to the divine light.³⁶ In relation to the symbols of the Qur’anic verse, Ghazali interprets the light giving lamp as the prophet Muhammad, and the luminous oil is understood as the holy prophetic spirit, which is lighted by the fire of the highest archangel (not Gabriel), “who has seventy thousand faces: in every face are seventy thousand tongues, through all of which he glorifies God.”³⁷

I take this analysis of the luminous phenomena to be phenomenological. Phenomenology, according to Henry Corbin, the prominent scholar of Iranian philosophy, “consists in ‘saving the appearance,’ saving the phenomenon, while disengaging or unveiling the hidden which shows itself beneath this appearance.”³⁸ The phenomenologist refuses to explain phenomena by forcing them under general theories. Rather, she recognizes that phenomena must be seen as they are in themselves (they must be saved), and in this process the hidden phenomenon, which makes possible all phenomena, should also be unveiled. Ghazali’s method is phenomenological in that he enumerates the various luminous phenomena (natural light of the sun, perception, intellect, and prophecy) and looks for the primary sense of “light” by discovering internal criteria that distinguish a luminous phenomenon as conditioning the others. In this process, he suspends all assumptions, attends to how things appear, and describes their particular intelligibility.³⁹

The suspension of prejudice and the ability to attend to the actual features of things are won through a training that frees the subject from error. In the *Niche of Lights*, Ghazali articulates this training for virtue in the move towards the more primary referents of the term “light”. Each recognition of a more primary sense of “light” involves a transmutation in the subject. As the subject turns away from the enchantments of the empirical and the abstract, the bodily and the rational, she is drawn away from the accidental, towards the essential. This movement involves the subduing of the empirical and the rational dimensions

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁸ Henry Corbin, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, trans. Peter Russell (Ipswich: Golgpnooza Press, 1981) p. 5.

³⁹ For a more thorough discussion of the phenomenological approach to Ghazali’s project, see my “Unveiling the Hidden: On the Meditations of Descartes and Ghazzali,” *Passions of the Soul in the Metamorphosis of Becoming*, ed. Anna Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 2003) pp. 219–240.

of the subject, and brings about her intimacy with the divine source of intelligibility.⁴⁰ In Hegel’s philosophy, as we have seen, the phenomenological overcoming of intellectual limitations and error⁴¹ results in the identification of the subject with the divine spirit, but in Ghazali’s view the subject’s perfection and spiritualization only foreshadows the unveiling of a higher transcendence, the Lordly presence.

b. Although unique in important respects, Ghazali’s phenomenology is indebted to the work of his predecessor, Avicenna. In “On the Proof of Prophecies and the Interpretation of Prophets’ Symbols and Metaphors,” Avicenna, after characterizing prophecy philosophically, proceeds to the interpretation of the aforementioned Qur’anic light verse. Before discussing Avicenna’s remarkable interpretation of this verse and its relation to Ghazali’s exegesis, I want to introduce Avicenna’s distinction between the philosopher and the prophet, as this distinction contains the elements of Avicenna’s hermeneutics of the Qur’anic verse. For Avicenna’s philosopher, the discovery of empirical truths, the critical examination of his thoughts,⁴² as well as the acquisition of a just and balanced soul⁴³ must precede his conjunction with and enlightenment by the active intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa‘āl*). The benefits of this conjunction include the acquisition of first principles as well as prophetic visions brought about in the perfected imagination. However, prophets – God’s chosen messengers – do not require the mediation of practical and theoretical perfection (as necessary in the case of the philosopher); they (the prophets) receive immediately from the active intellect: “That which becomes completely actual does so without mediation or through mediation, and the first is better. This is the one called prophet and in him degrees of excellence in the realm of material forms culminate.”⁴⁴ The prophet is the genuinely blessed human being and benefits from unmediated perfection and illumination.

⁴⁰ Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, op. cit., pp. 6–10. See also “Deliverance from Error,” in *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953) pp. 22–26.

⁴¹ In the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel maintains that “[w]hat the Spirit prepares for itself in ... [phenomenology] is the element of true knowledge. In this element the moments of Spirit ... no longer fall apart into the antithesis of being and knowing” [trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) pp. 21–2]. For Hegel, the phenomenological “getting at the things themselves” is the preparation for the identity of the subject with the spirit.

⁴² Avicenna, “On the Proof of Prophecies and the Interpretation of the Prophets’ Symbols and Metaphors,” in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961) p. 114.

⁴³ Avicenna, “*Healing: Metaphysics X*,” in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961) p. 110.

⁴⁴ Avicenna, “On the Proof of Prophecies,” op. cit., p. 115.

c. To appreciate the significance of Avicenna's prophetology, it is essential to briefly explore the history of the concept of the active intellect. Aristotle, in *De Anima*, Book III, Chapter 5, postulates a transcendent active intellect.⁴⁵ He maintains that "in fact mind, as we have described it, is what it is by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another which is what it is by virtue of making all things: this is the sort of positive state like light; for in a sense light makes potential colours into actual colours."⁴⁶ Here, the creative intellect or the productive mind (*nous poietikos*) is contrasted with the mind as passive (*pathetikos*), the conforming mind.⁴⁷ One becomes aware of the active intellect and can be inspired by it, once the conforming intellect is delivered from the grip of falsehoods and illusions produced by unexamined and dependent modes of thinking and action. The active intellect shines like light on potential intelligibles, causing them to become actualized by attracting the passive mind towards itself. The intimacy with the active light is, therefore, an overcoming of illusions resulting in the perception of things themselves (i.e., actual intelligibles).

Islamic philosophers, including Avicenna, modify Aristotle's account of the transcendent active intellect by synthesizing it with the Platonic view that what makes things intelligible, their form, has a separate ontological status. The latter thesis resists assimilation to the Aristotelian account because, for Aristotle, forms do not exist independently of sensible objects; they can be separated from them only in thought.⁴⁸ The Aristotelian active intellect, as a result, brings light to the human perception of the essential attributes of things; it does not impart those attributes to the mind and the things. Avicenna and his fellow Muslim philosophers, however, maintain "that the mind is constituted by its nature to function in different ways at the same time; being perceptive of intelligible substances on the one hand, and speculative about sensible objects on the other."⁴⁹ In other words, Islamic philosophers view the

⁴⁵ See also Book II, Chapter 7. Although Aristotle is often credited with positioning the creative other of thought outside the soul, it may be argued that it was Socrates who originally conceived thought as an exchange between the soul and a transcendent being. In accounts of Socrates' life, there are frequent references to Socrates' *daimon*, a divine being who descends upon him and inspires him in a negative way, telling him not to do such and such a thing. See Plato's "Apology" 40a, "Euthydemus" 272e, and "Theaetetus" 151a. See also Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, trans. Amy L. Bonnette (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) I, 1, 4.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, "On the Soul," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. W. D. Ross (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 430a 14–17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 430a 25.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 427–9.

⁴⁹ Mehdi Ha'eri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) p. 9.

training which results in the intimacy with the active intellect as more than getting at the way sensible things are. For them, the active intellect is also the divine being that infuses the sensible world with intelligibility; it is the angelic giver of forms (*wāhib al-suwar, dator formarum*), corresponding to Plato's Demiurge.⁵⁰ The philosopher who has attained intimacy with the active intellect not only possesses clear perception of sensible objects, she can also receive forms directly from the source (rather than through the sensible intermediaries).

The development of this unifying approach to Plato and Aristotle is also indebted to the influence of Neo-Platonism on Islamic philosophers. A crucial text evidencing this influence is the *Theology* attributed to Aristotle. Although doubts have been expressed about its authorship, this text – which is a paraphrase of Plotinus' last three *Enneads* – has contributed immensely to the development of an Islamic spiritual dimension in philosophical psychology. In a particularly influential portion of the *Theology* – *Ennead* IV, 8, 1 – Plotinus describes the philosopher's solitary journey, which climaxes in her union with the divinity and then ends by her return to the limited human domain.⁵¹ In the *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Henry Corbin writes that in this *Ennead* "the mystical philosophers [including Avicenna] found both the exemplar of the Prophet's celestial assumption (*mi'rāj*),⁵² which is reproduced in its turn in the Sufi experience, and the exemplar of the vision which crowns the efforts of the divine Sage, the Stranger, the Solitary."⁵³ It should be noted that the Islamic philosophers do not adopt the Plotinian exemplar without modification. For instance, they interpose angelic intermediaries between God and the world. Consequently, the Plotinian ideal of union with God is transformed into the spiritual conjunction (*ittisāl*) of the wise with the angelic active intelligence.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Plato, "Timaeus," in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962) 29e–30c.

⁵¹ "Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-centered; beholding a marvelous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine; stationing within It by having attained that activity; poised above whatsoever within the Intellectual is less than supreme: yet, there comes the moment of descent from intellection to reasoning, and after that sojourn in the divine, I ask myself how it happened that I can now be descending and how did the Soul ever enter into my body, the Soul which, even within the body, is the high thing it has shown itself to be" (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna [New York: Pantheon] p. 357).

⁵² Please refer to fn. 68.

⁵³ Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993) p. 18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160. See Majid Fakhry's "Three Varieties of Mysticism in Islam," in *Philosophy, Dogma, and the Impact of Greek Thought in Islam* (New York: Variorum, 1994) pp. 195–6, for a defense of the claim that the Neoplatonic and Peripatetic predecessors of Islamic philosophers considered God as the object of conjunction.

d. Avicenna's exegesis of the light verse is a working out of the meaning of this verse in view of his distinction between the philosopher and the prophet. God is light, the "niche" is the material intellect (*al-'aql al-hayulāni*) – the lowest level of human intellect, and the "lamp" is the acquired intellect (*al-'aql al-mustafād*) – the intellect of the philosopher and the prophet. The glass separating the niche from the lamp symbolizes the intermediate levels of the intellect, that is, the stages in the development of the intellect preceding the acquired intellect's conjunction with the active intellect. The intermediate intellects include the habitual intellect (*al-'aql bel malaka*) and the actual intellect (*al-'aql bel-f'el*). Active intellect is symbolized by the fire that illuminates the fine oil of the intellectual power, endowing it with an understanding beyond what the intellect could obtain on its own resourcefulness. This fire, of course, is not God (as could be claimed by Alexander of Aphrodisias⁵⁵), because it is not a unity. The true God is unified and gives unity to the manifoldness of the active intellect.⁵⁶

e. Comparing Ghazali's phenomenology of light to that of Avicenna, it becomes apparent that both place the subject in a regiment to improve her soul. This regiment involves the acquisition of practical and theoretical virtues and culminates in the conjunction with *spiritualia*. The prophet institutes the elements of this regiment, which is comprised of the laws and the practices of religion. The ideal subject learns to appreciate the various meanings of "light" that are beyond natural light, by submitting herself to the conditioning for wisdom in religious practice.⁵⁷

Ghazali's interpretation of the light verse and his account of the significance of "light" depart from those offered by Avicenna in that Ghazali curtails the role of intellect.⁵⁸ In his spiritual autobiography, the "Deliverance from Error," Ghazali argues that "[b]eyond intellect, there is yet another stage. In this another eye is opened, by which he beholds the unseen, what is to be in the future, and other things which are beyond the ken of intellect in the same way as the objects of intellect are beyond the ken of"⁵⁹ lower faculties. An analysis of the details of Ghazali's mystical psychology and cosmology is beyond the reach of this essay. It suffices to say that Ghazali rejects the Islamic philosophers' commitment to

⁵⁵ Avicenna, "On the Proof of Prophecies," op. cit., p. 117.

⁵⁶ Avicenna, "On the Proof of Prophecies," *Ibid.*, pp. 117–18.

⁵⁷ See the excerpts from Avicenna's "Healing: Metaphysics X," op. cit., pp. 101–110, where Avicenna lays out the importance of religious law and practice for the cultivation of the soul to the point of divine intimacy.

⁵⁸ In my essay, "Is 'Islamic' Philosophy Islamic," in *Voices of Islam*, vol. 5, eds. V. Cornell and O. Safi (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007) pp. 23–41, I offer a response to Ghazali's attack on Avicenna's philosophy.

⁵⁹ "Deliverance from Error," op. cit., p. 64.

the ontologically distinct realm of Platonic forms and to the Neo-Platonic hierarchy of souls and intellects. In their place, he postulates a purely Islamic cosmology, and assigns to the power of imagination, instead of the intellect, the key to the spiritual realm:

God most high, however, has favoured his creatures by giving them something analogous to the special faculty of prophecy, namely dreams. In the dream state, a man apprehends what is to be in the future, which is something of the unseen; he does so either explicitly or else clothed in symbolic form whose interpretation is disclosed.

The special faculty of prophecy is restricted to God's chosen prophets. Imagination (i.e., the faculty of dream), however, is analogous to it and can be prophetic, e.g., apprehend extra-intellectual objects.⁶⁰ As the mystic cultivates her soul by means of ascetic religious practice, she becomes capable of attending to the prophetic phenomena themselves and (in the case of prophetic representations and symbols) recognizing their proper meaning and value.⁶¹

⁶⁰ "Deliverance from Error," *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁶¹ Ghazali's intellectual successor, Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī, the founder of the Ishrāqī (illuminationist) tradition, develops this notion of spiritual imagination as well as the phenomenology of luminous beings espoused by Ghazali. Suhrawardī's main work is *Philosophy of Illumination*, trans., John Walbridge & Hossein Ziai (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University press, 1999). For a discussion of the relevance of Suhrawardī's contributions to the Islamic phenomenology and the treatment of the power of imagination, see my "The Sublime Visions of Philosophy: Fundamental Ontology and the Imaginal World (*Ālam al-mithāl*)."
Islamic Philosophy and Occidental Phenomenology on the Perennial Issue of Microcosm and Macrocosm, ed. A. T. Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006) pp. 183–201. See also Fazlur Rahman, "Dreams, Imagination, and *Ālam al-Mithāl*," in *Islamic Studies*, 3, 1964. Later, Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzī revives Avicenna's intellectualism while also preserving the insights gained by Ghazali, Suhrawardī, and his Ishrāqī predecessors. For relevant aspects of Mullā Sadrā's position, refer to his *On the Hermeneutics of the Light Verse of the Qur'an*, trans. Latimah-Parvin Peerwani (London: ICAS Press, 2004).

f. For Hegel, as we have seen, the symbolic expressions of the transcendence, that is, prophetic phenomena, point to the transcendent by annihilating themselves, showing their own inadequacy. Just as the Kantian sublime is that which “cannot be contained in sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason,”⁶² the Hegelian symbolism of the sublime is a label for that form of art which indirectly represents the divine spirit by its sensuous inadequacy to do so.⁶³ Hegel identifies Jewish prophetic poetry as the paradigm of such art and considers Zoroastrian “pantheistic” scripture as a precursor to it. For Hegel, prophetic symbolism introduces the divine law into the historical development of humanity and propels mankind forward to its perfection, culminating in the German romantic subject’s consciousness of her own freedom. Through the examination of the Islamic phenomenology of luminous substances, I have shown that the symbolism of the sublime should not be, *pace* Hegel, a mere relic of the history of humanity. In fact, an unprejudiced attention to the relevant phenomena indicates that Hegel construes prophetic symbolism too narrowly and that full human realization may yet establish a connection with and an inspiration by the transcendent divine. In other words, prophecy presupposes the Hegelian cultivation and liberation of the subject and has significance beyond its Hegelian function as the mere expression of the divine law. The latter, to use Ghazali’s phrase, is “but a drop in the ocean of prophecy.”⁶⁴

⁶² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) 245/99. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant distinguishes the reflective judgment of taste from that of the sublime. He writes: “In presenting the sublime in nature the mind feels agitated, while in an aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in restful contemplation. This agitation (above all at its conception) can be compared with a vibration, i.e., with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object,” *Ibid.*, 258/115. The imagination presents an object, which it cannot contain as a totality according to the conceptual repertoire of understanding; this results in a feeling of repulsion, but then reason and its idea of the supersensible engage the presentation of the imagination and a harmony is struck; a feeling of pleasure ensues. The vibration or the oscillation between repulsion and attraction determines the presented object as sublime. What is expressed in this experience is the un-presentable, the power of “pure and independent reason,” *Ibid.*, 258/116. In other words, what is presented is that which makes possible the presentation of the ordinary phenomena. Reason’s purposiveness without purpose (*Ibid.*, 221/66) unveils the phenomena in the judgments of taste (about the beautiful) and in the sublime it is itself presented indirectly, *Ibid.*, 246/100.

⁶³ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Vol. 1, op.cit., p. 363.

⁶⁴ “Deliverance from Error,” op. cit., p. 66.

3.

I now return to Hegel’s critique of Zoroastrianism in order to use the above excursion into Islamic philosophy in the defense of Zoroastrianism (against the charge of pantheism). We have seen that the Islamic thinkers interpret the true meaning of “light” as transcendent to and the condition for the possibility of natural light. For Hegel, however, the appeal to that which is transcendent to the natural is only a stage in the development of the fully realized subject. This notion of transcendence is also available to Muslim thinkers as the referent of “the author of religious law (*sharī‘ah*).” But they have access to another sense of “transcendence” that becomes available to the subject as she cultivates her soul beyond the mundane concerns, that is, to those who achieve prophetic insight. Against Hegel’s reading of Zoroastrianism, I submit that this move to prophetic insight and to the second sense of “transcendence” is also available in Zoroastrian prophethood.

In the *Dinkard*, a ninth century encyclopedia of Zoroastrianism which contains paraphrases and quotes of some much older material, there is an account of prophet Zarathustra’s first theophanic vision. This vision takes place when the prophet has reached the age of thirty and has achieved an all around perfection presupposed for prophetic insight.

[T]here is manifested in him a mind more capacious than the whole world, and more exalted than every worldly possession, with an understanding whose strength is perfectly selected, an intellect of all acquiring power, and a sagacity of all-deciding ability; also with the much heedfulness of the kingly glory, and the full desire for righteousness, the efficacious diligence and authority, and even the superiority in mightiness and grandeur of the priestly glory.⁶⁵

These qualities map unto the theoretical and practical perfections postulated for the conjunction with the angel of revelation by the Islamic thinkers. *Dinkard* adds physical strength to the list, and it is unlikely that Ghazali or Avicenna would have objected to the addition of this quality.

According to the *Dinkard*, Zarathustra, at the peak of his personal perfection, has a vision of the messenger of God, archangel Vohu Manah (Bahman). The archangel engages the prophet in a dialogue that results in an invitation to transcend the mundane plane of existence and

⁶⁵ *Pahlavi Texts*, trans. E. W. West, ed. F. Max Muller (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965) p. 46.

to appear before Ahura Mazda and the other archangels who together make up the divine counsel of the seven.⁶⁶ “And Vohu Manah spoke to him thus: ‘O Zaratusht of the Spitamas! deposit this one garment which thou carriest; so that we confer with him by whom thou art produced and by whom I am produced, who is the most propitious of spirits, who is the most beneficent of existences, and who is he that I, who am Vohu-manah, am testifying.’”⁶⁷ Two important features of this passage deserve immediate attention. Vohu Manah declares that he is the messenger of God. Thus he can be situated in the same category as the Islamic angel of revelation, Gabriel. It is no accident that Vohu Manah bears a remarkable resemblance to the Islamic Gabriel, who is interpreted as the personification of the prophetic spirit and the active intellect for Ghazali and Avicenna respectively.⁶⁸ What is at stake here is more than a historical curiosity. We are dealing with a description of prophetic insight that traverses institutional boundaries and gets at the spiritual center of philosophical and religious aspirations. Here it also becomes more apparent that Hegel’s charge of pantheism concerning the luminosity of the divine in Zoroastrianism has missed its target. The Mazdean light signifies that notion of divine transcendence which follows upon the prophet’s perfection and his union with the divine spirit (Vohu Manah in Zoroastrianism). Thus Hegel terminates his inquiry prematurely. There is more to the divine realm than the spirit and its convergence with the individual and more to the Zoroastrian interpretation of “light” than natural light.

I now attend to the second important feature of Vohu Manah’s announcement. The angel commands the prophet to dispose of his garment, the symbol of his mundane existence and the veil covering his inner light. Another ninth century Zoroastrian text, *Zad Sparam*, gives a further detail of this theophanic vision essential to establishing the connection with the illumination of the prophet in Islamic philosophy: “When he came within twenty-four feet of the archangels, he then did not see his own shadow on the ground, on account of the great brilliancy of the archangels.”⁶⁹ The brilliancy of the divine thearchy, their dazzling

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁶⁸ It is also worthy of note that such a conference with the divine, facilitated by the messenger divinity, is also attributed to the prophet Muhammad. The prophet’s *mi’rāj*, which has a Qur’anic source (17:1) as well, has been a subject of much reflection by Islamic thinkers including Avicenna. For the latter’s interpretation of the prophet’s *mi’rāj*, refer to Peter Heath’s translation of his *Mi’rāj Nāma in Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina)* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992) pp. 109–143.

⁶⁹ *Pahlavi Texts*, op. cit., p. 157.

light, envelops Zarathustra, and as he has shed his bodily garment, he is already light (in intimacy with light) and shines with his intrinsic luminosity.⁷⁰ This luminosity is the light of the perfected soul who has been cleansed of mundane contaminations. The exact alignment of Zoroastrianism with the views of Ghazali, Avicenna, or other Islamic texts and thinkers is irrelevant at this juncture, because the prophetic phenomenon should be interpretable in different ways as long as its integrity is not undermined. What is relevant here is the articulation of a transcendence – the light of the Lordly presence of Allah or Ahura Mazda – that is the culmination of spiritual development and not a mere moment in its progress. Zoroastrianism contains this moment and should not, therefore, be dismissed as pantheistic.

In conclusion, I want to address rather briefly the declaration of the famous scholar of Zoroastrianism and the historian of religion, Geo Widengren, that Zoroastrianism is indeed pantheistic. He writes:

The cosmological basis of Gnostic religion is rooted in Indo-Iranian pantheistic speculation, wherein God and the world are regarded as one. The higher life principle in man, ... Iranian Manah, is identical to the spiritual principle in the Universe, ... in Iran the Great Vohu Manah. The higher element in man is thus a part of the Deity’s Spiritual Ego, while man’s body constitutes a part of the divine body, the world.⁷¹

⁷⁰ There is an interesting discussion of the disposing of the dark garment and the wearing of the garment of light in Hermetic, Gnostic, and Sufi literature in Henry Corbin’s “The Hermetic Idea of Perfect Nature,” *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. Nancy Pearson (NY: Omega Publications, 1971) pp. 13–25; see especially the discussion in association with Acts of Thomas, pp. 22–25. For a reference to the Zoroastrian garment of light see Corbin’s *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, trans., Nancy Pearson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977) pp. 34. Geo Widengren, in *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God* (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri AB, 1945), also devotes chapter three (pp. 76–83) to a discussion of the garment of light in Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Gnosticism.

⁷¹ Geo Widengren, *The Gnostic Attitude*, trans. & ed. Birger A. Pearson (Santa Barbara, CA: Institute of Religious Studies, UC Santa Barbara, 1972) p. ii. There may be some doubt as to whether the prophetic material in the ninth century texts are authentic. It may be argued, based on their date, that they are influenced by the Greek sources and that they do not reflect the original spirit of Zoroastrianism (see Philippe Gignoux, *Man and Cosmos in Ancient Iran* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per L’Africa e L’Oriente, 2001) pp. 54–63. See also his “Microcosm and Macrocosm,” <http://www.iranica.com/articles/ot_grp5/ot_microcosm_20040616.html> 16 June, 2004. I subscribe to the position advanced by Geo Widengren that, based on similarities with Indian thought, this material is genuinely Iranian. See Geo Widengren’s *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God*, op. cit., pp. 42–75. Henry Corbin, in *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, op. cit., p. 35, cites Greek sources that attribute this material to Zarathustra.

Widengren's "pantheism" means something altogether different from the meaning that interested Hegel. For Hegel, Zoroastrianism is pantheistic because God is seen as natural light⁷² and the rest of phenomena are visible and intelligible on its account. This, of course, misses out on the variety of luminous substances and the spirituality of divine light in Zoroastrianism. Widengren's claim that Zoroastrianism is pantheistic since it situates the human microcosm within the greater reality (i.e., macrocosm) of Vohu Manah benefits from a more sophisticated approach to Zoroastrianism by allowing a spiritual element in man and the cosmos. Nevertheless, I do not find it a fair assessment. Ahura Mazda, the one God, is transcendent to the reality of Vohu Manah, who is Ahura Mazda's messenger archangel, and it is this dimension of Zoroastrianism that is also manifest in the prophetological and theological explorations of Persian Muslim thinkers.

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⁷² Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Vol. 1, op. cit., p. 366.