

JOHN WALBRIDGE, *The Science of Mystic Lights: Qutb al-Din Shīrāzī and the Illuminationist Tradition in Islamic Philosophy*, Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs XXVI (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). Pp. 313.

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This book is a significant contribution to the study of post-Avicennan systematic philosophy in Islam. Specifically, its stated “main subject” is to investigate “the influence of [Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī’s (1154–1191)] master work *The Philosophy of Illumination* [*Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*]” (p. 3) in the philosophical works of Qutb al-Din Shirazi (1236–1311), a leading physician, astronomer, and mathematician of the period who worked under Nasir al-Din Tusi in the newly established scientific center in Maragheh endowed and supported by the great Mongol Il-Khan, Hülegü. Its publication appears at a time marked by the need for more nonpolemic analytic studies of depth on the philosophical side of post-Avicennan Islamic thought, and should help us revise older opinions concerning both the decline (*inḥiṭāt*) of philosophy in Islam and its transformation to eclectic mysticism. This book should also help alter a current misrepresentation of the philosophy of illumination—the main non-Peripatetic philosophical system in Islam—as “theosophy,” “Oriental wisdom,” “transcendent theosophy,” and the like.

Walbridge, claims that his reconstructed system of philosophy—specifically his “Science of Lights” (*‘ilm al-anwār*) (pp. 32–39, 43–44, 73–78)—is a more sound theoretical method, than the Peripatetic to probe the nature of things, as well as a better way to achieve practical goals. This philosophical position, as shown by Walbridge (chaps. 3 and 4), is upheld by Shirazi, who also (1) refines and explains the arguments in great detail in his *Commentary on the Philosophy of Illumination*, especially in comparison to the “standard” Avicennan Peripatetic position, which he knew well, evidenced by the fact that he wrote commentaries on both the *Ishārāt* and the *Najāt* (pp. 179–80); and (2) incorporates simplified Illuminationist arguments in his voluminous encyclopedic Persian work, *The Pearly Crown*, considered by Walbridge to be “a popular work intended for the educated layman,” where “the more esoteric controversial philosophical topics were omitted” (p. 81).

What needs to be emphasized here is that Suhrawardi’s intention in constructing the philosophy of illumination is to *refine* philosophical investigation and neither to refute philosophy nor to transform it into mysticism, which is why parts of the Peripatetic principles and techniques are integrated into the Illuminationist system. This same “scientific” intention, Walbridge maintains, is also shared by Shirazi. The combined system, for example, includes philosophical arguments relating to redefinition of the logical foundations of epistemology—specifically first argued in the Illuminationist critique of Aristotelian essentialist definition, *horos* and *horismos* (Avicenna’s *al-ḥadd al-tāmm*) (pp. 54, 101–4); construction of a cosmic system of “intellects” (depicted as “lights”) differentiated both in rank and in kind, taking the place of both Avicenna’s ten intellects of the spheres and Plato’s Forms (pp. 55ff.); defining the Illuminationist ontological position of the primacy of essence over existence (pp. 30–31, 46ff., 98ff.); the construction and addition of an “intermediary” (*barzakh*) realm, named *mundus imaginalis* by Corbin or “world of image” by Walbridge (p. 127) (*‘ālam al-khayāl*, *aw ‘ālam al-mithāl*), to the standard three realms of Peripatetic cosmology (intellect, soul, matter) (pp. 49–50, 69ff., 194ff.), as well as in relation to many other philosophical issues.

Walbridge’s discussion of Suhrawardi’s Science of Lights (chap. 2), Qutb al-Din’s Illuminationist views (chap. 3), and the Illuminationist attempt to provide “scientific” explanations for nonstandard phenomena—Walbridge calls “a group of topics bearing on religion: the nature of time and the preternity of the world . . . dreams, and revelations” (p. 126), treated in chapter 4—are, in general, precise and convey philosophical sense. However, I wish to point to the usage “mystical intuition” (pp. 34 ff.) which seems ambiguous to me and may confuse the philosophically minded reader. “Intuition,” as used by Suhrawardi and explained by Shirazi, is similar in sense to Plato’s “intellectual vision” and in form to Aristotle’s *agkhi-noia*, and is meant more as a philosophical idea of primary intuition of time-space. It further conveys the sense of an immediate, atemporal relation between the knowing subject and the manifest object. It may also, for example, be further compared with Kant’s notion of “immediate relation to objects,” to Husserl’s *Aufklärung*, and to Brouwer’s “primary intuition.” I think therefore the author would have been justified to drop the epithet “mystical,” or use “philosophical,” or “primary” instead. This is an important distinction as we endeavor to uncover the philosophical foundation of Illuminationist concepts, particularly since the term “mystical” in the medieval Islamic context usually means Sufism which cannot, however, be associated with Suhrawardi’s systematic construction of the philosophy of illumination.

Among the important features of the book is “Appendix F: An Epistle of the ‘Allāma al-Shīrāzī Ascertaining the Reality of the World of Image and Answers to Questions of a Certain Scholar” (pp. 196–271). Walbridge has here edited the Arabic text, *Fi Tahqīq ‘Ālam al-Mithāl wa Ajwibat Asʿila Baʿd al-Fuḍalā*, and provided an English translation. Given the rarity of editions and translations of Illuminationist texts, this part of the book is a welcome addition to our scholarship on the subject.

In conclusion, whether the Illuminationist plan defined by Suhrawardi and elaborated by Shirazi and the other 13th-century Illuminationist philosophers and commentators, notably Saʿd ibn Mansur Ibn Kammuna and Shams al-Din Shahrazuri, is successful or not, requires further investigation. Walbridge's in-depth study does, however, help establish several points essential to our revision of the older opinion concerning "decline" of science and philosophy in Islam after the 12th century. First, the study demonstrates that Suhrawardi's major Arabic work, the *Philosophy of Illumination* (chap. 2), is a coherent system that can be meaningfully discussed within a philosophical frame using accessible technical language. Secondly, the study further demonstrates (chaps. 3–5) that Shirazi, a revered scientist and creative member of the Maragheh School, accepted Suhrawardi's views as sound rational philosophical principles, which strengthens the position that the Illuminationist system is more philosophy and less esoteric theosophy. This latter point, I believe, is especially significant because interpreting the Illuminationist school of Islamic philosophy only in esoteric, theosophical terms does tend to obscure the historian's investigation and thus cause a serious limitation. The limitation caused so far, appropriately stated by the late Fazlur Rahman (*The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* [Albany, N.Y., 1975], vii), has been "at the cost . . . of its purely intellectual and philosophical hard core, which is of immense value and interest to the modern student of philosophy." Walbridge's publication is therefore additionally significant because it allows the "modern student of philosophy" to gain some access to a neglected and misrepresented part of Islamic philosophy.