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Suhrawardī's Ishrāqī ['illuminationist'] epistemology

The Ishrāqī movement is a tradition within Arabic and Persian philosophy that began in the 12th century with Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardī (1154–1191) and continues to be influential in contemporary Islamic philosophy. Its advocates defend a range of metaphysical, epistemological, logical, and practical doctrines and methods. This entry introduces two epistemological theses characteristic of Suhrawardī's Ishrāqī philosophy: (1) all knowledge ultimately depends on a kind of knowledge by acquaintance, and (2) all forms of knowledge presuppose self-knowledge.

Background

Suhrawardī's philosophy is often understood as beginning with a critique of Avicennism (Ziai, 1990). In particular, Suhrawardī's rejection of Avicenna's distinction between 'existence' and 'essence' is often considered a pivotal point in the history of Ishrāqīsm. While the metaphysical aspects of this dispute are interesting and vital for the history of philosophy, here I will only highlight the epistemological implications of this debate.

Avicenna often relied on a purported distinction between the existence of something and its essence. At first glance, this distinction does not seem too problematic. To use an anachronistic example, we can say that although dinosaurs do not exist anymore, their essence remains unchanged. (Avicenna (2005, bk. 1; chapter 5). For a detailed overview of the distinction in Avicenna's philosophy, see Bertolacci (2012)).

However, Suhrawardī attacked this Avicennan view from several angles (Suhrawardī (2000, secs. 68; 111–4; 141). Rizvi (2000)). In short, he argued that while we can make a conceptual distinction between the existence of something and its essence, we have no basis for assuming that this distinction corresponds to a real distinction in the objects themselves. More importantly, this reflects Suhrawardī's general attitude towards a host of metaphysical concepts, which he called "beings of reason" [*i'tibārī 'aqlīya*, sometimes translated as 'intellectual fictions' (Walbridge 1999, 21–22)]. These concepts may pick out characters of our representation of the world, but they do not characterize the referent objects of those representations. In later medieval philosophy, it became customary to understand merely logical concepts as beings of reason [*entia rationis*]. But Suhrawardī argued that metaphysical concepts such as "existence," "unity," "form," etc. are also beings of reason in that they merely characterize how we represent the world with our concepts but not the world itself. To use a language popularized by Kant in the Western tradition, Suhrawardī raises the question of "objective validity" against the basic concepts of Avicennian metaphysics. Roughly, to acknowledge that this question has application is to acknowledge that there might be a gap between what is necessary for our thinking and uses of reason, and what is the case in the world.

Suhrawardī's initial worry was well-received even by the followers of Avicenna (Rizvi 1999; 2013). Accordingly, it became an acknowledged problem for the epistemology of metaphysics that we cannot simply infer the reality of a concept from the fact that our reason compels us to use the concepts. While this development was not solely influenced by Suhrawardī, he and his followers played an important role in highlighting the problem of objective validity in post-classical Islamic philosophy.

However, Suhrawardī's positive solution for determining the objective validity of a concept was very controversial, and understanding it will take us to the substantive aspects of Ishrāqī epistemology. For him, such questions can ultimately be answered through "knowledge by presence."

Knowledge by presence [*‘ilm ḥuḍūrī*]

In the medieval Arabic and Persian tradition, philosophers commonly distinguish between two forms of knowledge: (a) knowledge as assent and (b) knowledge as conception. The former roughly corresponds to what we call propositional knowledge – it is the knowledge constituted by believing a true statement based on some rational ground. For Avicenna, knowledge by assent “comes about only by means of syllogism and whatever is like it” (Avicenna 2010, 3). But, as he also points out, knowledge by assent presupposes another kind of knowledge, i.e., knowledge by conception [*taṣawwūr*]. The latter, he tells us, “is knowledge that comes first and is acquired by means of definition and whatever is like it” (Avicenna 2010, 3; translation modified). Knowledge by conception “comes first” because it is a condition for the possibility of forming assents. For example, knowledge of “Iranians drink wine” is possible only for someone who already knows the correct conception of <Iranian>, <drinking>, and <wine> (Wolfson (1943); Black (1990, 72–79)).

Suhrawardī accepted this as an analysis of rational knowledge (Suhrawardī 2000, 6 (8)). But he argues that there is a more fundamental form of knowledge that is neither an assent nor a conception. He calls this “knowledge by presence” (Suhrawardī 2000, secs. 114–117). Characteristically, this is a non-propositional and non-conceptual form of knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge that one gains just by virtue of standing in a special relation to the object of knowledge. According to Suhrawardī, all propositional and conceptual knowledge is ultimately grounded on this form of knowledge. He offers at least two types of argument for this claim: First, that all knowledge depends on self-knowledge while self-knowledge is necessarily knowledge by presence. Second, all propositional knowledge presupposes knowledge of objectively valid concepts of essences, but the latter can be achieved only if we know the Platonic forms by presence. I will unpack these two arguments below.

Argument from self-knowledge. According to Suhrawardī, always and necessarily, one ‘apprehends’ [*idrāk*] one’s proper self fully and completely (2000, sec. 116). Consequently, he notes that “organs such as the heart, liver, and brain” are not part of the self strictly speaking because one does not always fully and completely apprehend them (Ibid. Suhrawardī (2012, sec. 28)).

Further, he argues that this proper self cannot be veridically apprehended via a mediated representation (2000, sec. 115). That is so because the proper self, which is always known, must be represented as a subject which is also the object of knowledge. He argues that this identity between the subject and the object of self-knowledge cannot be apprehended if a representation mediates the relation between the subject and the object. Thus, to apprehend oneself as the apprehending subject, one needs to know oneself in a mode that does not rely on any representations whatsoever. For “all that apprehends its own essence and ego” (i.e., for all self-knowing subjects), the apprehension in question “occurs neither by an attribute nor by something superadded, of whatever sort” (2000, 116; translation modified).

But if self-apprehension results in knowledge not mediated by any representation, then self-apprehension cannot be characterized as knowledge by conception or knowledge by assent. For knowledge by conception requires the representation of a “definition or whatever is like it.” And as we saw, knowledge by assent requires knowledge by conception.

To say that self-knowledge is not a kind of knowledge by assent also means that it is not a form of knowledge that comes about “by means of syllogism and whatever is like it.” But, for Suhrawardī, that falls short of saying that self-knowledge is groundless. Since self-knowledge is knowledge, it is grounded but not in any other representation or item of knowledge. Rather, self-knowledge is self-grounding. Hence, he writes, self-knowledge “is simply the evident itself – nothing more” (2000, 116).

Thus, Suhrawardī identifies self-knowledge with the starting point of his metaphysics. Following Avicenna, Suhrawardī holds that we should start metaphysics with a concept that we cannot clarify any further because no other thing is “better known.” For Avicenna, concepts such as “the existent,” “the thing,” and “the necessary” enjoyed this status (Avicenna 2005, 22). For Suhrawardī, self-knowledge by the presence of a self-conscious being has this foundational epistemic status. Thus, in the technical *Isḥrāqī* terminology, he identifies this self-knowledge with what he calls “the light,” i.e., the first concept of metaphysics (2000, sec. 117).

In short, Suhrawardī argues that we must account for another kind of non-conceptual and immediate knowledge that explains the possibility of our self-knowledge as subjects. This is possible only through knowledge by “presence,” that is, a knowledge that a subject *S* can have of an object *x* just because *S* stands in a special relation to *x*, and not in virtue of *S*’s representing *x* to itself, and not in virtue of an inference from some other item of knowledge to *x*. He holds that self-knowledge by presence is thus foundational. (For a detailed study, see Kaukua (2015))

Argument from the possibility of knowing the Platonic forms. In addition to self-knowledge, Suhrawardī seems to identify other items of knowledge which are also foundational and known via presence. In particular, he argues that we can know the Platonic forms via presence.

Suhrawardī argues that Platonic forms cannot be the same thing as “universals” in the sense used in logic (2000, sec. 168). Put simply, to think of the Platonic forms in the logical sense is to think of them as general predicates of possible judgments. For example, the form of humanity would be a predicate of possible judgments that apply to particular humans. Suhrawardī argues that if we construed the Platonic forms in this logical sense, Platonism would be subject to the third-man argument: “the form would have another form, and so to infinity” (2000, sec. 167; Walbridge 2001, 61–68).

However, Suhrawardī remains a steadfast realist about Platonic forms. He insists that we cannot explain our knowledge of the essential features of the world without our knowledge of the Platonic forms. He notes that “the Forms of Plato are luminous [*nūriya*]” (2000, sec. 149). As a technical term, to say that the Platonic forms are “luminous” is to say that they make knowledge of the essences of things possible (2000, sec. 117). Thus, he thinks we must accept realism about Platonist forms to explain the possibility of knowing the essences of things.

But how do we know which Platonic forms are real? As we saw, Suhrawardī thought we could not know this by just trying to define the forms. A definition at best gives us a logical universal, but as we saw, Suhrawardī rejects that conception of forms. Put differently, to say that we know a Platonic form via a definition is to say that we know the Platonic form via a representation of it. But that causes many familiar issues for Platonism: What is the relationship between the representation and the form? Is the representation of the form applicable to the form and its instantiations equally? Is there a higher-order form of the relationship between the representation and the form?

Suhrawardī thinks these questions are misguided because they try to account for our knowledge of forms by introducing a third thing (i.e., the representation). Instead, he argues, we must say that we know the Platonic forms by presence (2000, sec. 171). To know a Platonic form is not the same as having a representation of the form. Nor is it a kind of knowledge inferred from another item of knowledge. Instead, to know the form is to stand in a special relation to it. And again, for him, this is not to say that knowledge of the Platonic forms is groundless. Instead, it is to say that knowledge of the Platonic forms is a brute knowledge relation. To put this in his terminology, to say that Platonic forms are “luminous [*nūriya*]” (2000, sec. 149) means that, similar to self-knowledge, Platonic forms are self-evident. “Light,” he tells us, “is that which is evident in its own reality and by essence makes another evident” (2000, 117).

In short, Suhrawardī is a foundationalist about our knowledge of Platonic forms, too. He argues that we can know things about the essential features of the world only if we know the Platonic forms. But we can

know Platonic forms only by being “present” to them. He assumes that we know some of the essential features of the world. He thus holds that our knowledge of the world ultimately depends on a type of knowledge by presence. (For a detailed reconstruction of this, see Yazdi (1992). For historical context, see Griffel (2021, 355–69); Kaukua (2013)).

Metaphilosophical implications

Ishrāqīsm is often introduced as a metaphilosophical position that assigns a central role to “mystical” experiences as a constitutive part of philosophical knowledge. Suhrawardī’s Arabic magnum opus, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, starts with a reflection on the methodology of philosophy by making a distinction between “intuitive” and “discursive” philosophy (2000, sec. 5). He claims that someone who only knows “intuitive” philosophy is better off than someone who only knows the “discursive” part of philosophy, though, in the best case, one would know both. We can clarify this metaphilosophical view by relying on the epistemological theses discussed above.

Suppose we accepted the view that self-knowledge and knowledge of Platonic forms must be explained in purely relational terms, viz., as knowledge by presence. As we discussed earlier, it is easy to see why, in that case, self-knowledge and knowledge of Platonic forms become foundational to philosophy. The latter allows us to know the essential features of the world. The former makes knowledge of our own essence possible. (Further, according to a long tradition in Islamic theology, self-knowledge can make knowledge of God possible (Kaukua 2015, 130)).

But how do we acquire this type of relational knowledge? This might look especially worrying since knowledge by presence was contrasted with types of knowledge that were clearly “acquired,” by either using a syllogism, a definition, or whatever could be like them. If Suhrawardī is right, then knowledge by presence of the self and the Platonic form is central to philosophy. But how do we come to stand in relation of “presence” to these items of knowledge?

I suggest that the answer in the case of self-knowledge will be different from the answer in the case of knowing the forms. As far as self-knowledge is concerned, Suhrawardī does seem to insist that as self-conscious beings, we always already know ourselves by presence. In other words, with self-knowledge, the special relation that constitutes knowledge is already there. However, we can still make sense of a philosophical inquiry into the foundations of knowledge because it is one thing to be in the presence of something and another to be attentive to it. Likewise, it is one thing to attend to what is present to us and another to analyze it rationally. According to Suhrawardī, one must go through a long process of meditation and ascetic practices to attend to their knowledge of themselves as presence (Aminrazavi 1996). Furthermore, one could also rely on rational tools to analyze and reflect on what one knows by presence (2000, 5).

As far as knowledge of the Platonic forms is concerned, Suhrawardī can maintain that although knowing the Platonic forms does not come about using syllogism or definitions, it requires an effort on the part of the inquirer because one needs to place oneself in relation to Platonic forms. Indeed, he suggests that this is how Plato came to know the forms. After noting that we cannot know the Platonic forms by assent or definition, he writes:

The faith of Plato and the master visionaries is not built upon such rhetorical arguments, but upon something else. Plato said: "When freed from my body I beheld luminous spheres." [...] Of himself, Plato said that in certain of his spiritual conditions he would shed his body and become free from matter. Then he would see light and splendor within his essence. He would ascend to that all-encompassing divine cause and would seem to be located and suspended in it, beholding a mighty light in that lofty and divine place. (2000, 171)

As indicated earlier, the “light” here refers to Platonic forms. According to Suhrawardī, the “spiritual conditions” which allow “shedding” bodily modes of cognition and direct acquaintance with the forms

require extensive ascetic and meditative practices (2000, 279-80). Thus, according to Suhrawardī, we can know the forms by presence only if we place ourselves in a special relation to them, a task that requires meditation and cognitive and emotional labor of an ascetic sort.

We can now be more precise about at least one sense in which Ishrāqīsm takes a type of “mysticism” as constitutive of philosophy. According to Suhrawardī, we can solve the problem of objective validity for basic concepts of philosophy only if we know the objects of philosophical knowledge immediately. But we can know the objects of philosophical knowledge immediately only if we attend to how we relate to ourselves and only if we bring ourselves in direct relation to Platonic forms. These two tasks, according to Suhrawardī, require meditation and ascetic work.

Hence, Suhrawardī insists that “discursive philosophy” is essentially incomplete (2000, 5) because even if we knew the definition of all our philosophical concepts via sustained rational analysis, we would not know which concepts are objectively valid. Further, this explains Suhrawardī’s contention that someone who only knows “intuitive philosophy” is better off than someone who only knows “discursive” philosophy (ibid.) because, albeit unarticulated and unanalyzed, the former group is at least in possession of knowledge that is fundamental for philosophy.

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