

**The Symbol of Light as Sapiential Signifier in Suhrawardī's
Hikmat al-Ishrāq and Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār***

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Introduction

Abū Hāmid Muhammad Al-Ghazālī and Shahāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī both utilize the allegory and symbol of light as the central theme around which their respective metaphysical and cosmological schemes are laid. This fact alone makes a comparative study of some of the key texts of these thinkers potentially fruitful. Moreover, this comparative approach is fruitful because of the manner in which the differences between the Platonist Suhrawardī's Philosophical Sufism and Ghazali's Sufism anchored in Jurisprudence and Theology (an approach F. Griffel appropriately calls Ghazali's "Philosophical Theology") serve to illustrate key questions at the heart of the dialogue among the intellectual sciences in classical Islam. While these two figures agree in their strong appraisal of an immediate, intuitional epistemic mode best understood as a paradigmatically "sapiential" form of knowing, the totality of the metaphysical message for each finds divergent modalities of expression. This divergence stems crucially from their disagreement about the nature of the philosophical endeavor, and the place for its discursive aspects along with its intuitive and illuminationist ones in the exposition of spiritual doctrine. The mode of spiritual tasting (*dhawq*) that is the quintessence of epistemic possibilities for Ghazālī is posited in his work as accessible through spiritual practice alone, and finds articulation largely within a framework whose bounds are at times in tension with the doctrinal worldview of Ash'arite Kalām, but are also in conversation with the attendant orthodoxy offered by forms of mainstream Jurisprudence

(*fiqh*). For Ghazālī, philosophy in the Avicennian tradition is not a path to true certainty in and of itself, and is distanced from the spiritual path as such. On the contrary, Suhrawardī denounces certain types of ratiocination as being inappropriate for the position that true philosophy occupies, and while he does hold that the immediate knowledge of Sufis who are not interested in discursive aspects of philosophy is very valuable, his four-fold typology of knowers outlines a series of epistemic possibilities that enshrines the perfection of both discursive philosophy and illuminative knowledge as complete knowledge.

An evaluation of the differences between the two thinkers then shows us that in terms of method and its end, both lay out gnostic possibilities that are at the height of what is offered by the Islamicate traditions, but that Suhrawardī's more nuanced articulation of epistemic possibilities serves the twofold function of uniting mysticism with philosophy and also acknowledging the exalted position of those who attained gnosis through spiritual method and without access to or interest in philosophical discourse. Thus, the dichotomy between Sufism and philosophy can be shown from the perspective of Islamic intellectual history as being provisional and not representative of a necessary relation, and its reification is instead tied to particular historical contexts in which various kinds of exteriorizing academic pursuits were opposed to a turn towards sapience. The symbol of light serves as a key point of similarity between Suhrawardī and Ghazālī in their metaphysical expositions, but far beyond a mere rhetorical commonality, it serves as a symbol and signifier for a worldview

which privileges gnosis and sapience as both the quintessence and fundamental ground of all possible knowledge.

Methodological Approach:

The endeavor of Islamic intellectual history involves the employment of methods and terminologies that present a typology of Islamic thought wherein the traditions of philosophy (*falsafah*), Sufism (*tasawwuf*) and dialectical theology (*kalām*), seem at odds with each other, ever-vying for coveted authoritative ground on all matters intellectual. While such categories are necessitated by the bounds of an analytic and academic approach, their limitations are shown upon careful examination of the texts of the Islamic intellectual traditions, and the permeability of these categories is evidenced through the manner in which the personalities producing these works, made use of similar concepts and imagery oriented toward common goals of self-transformation and realization. As analytical tools, however, typologies of Islamic intellectual thought still have the potential to be profoundly useful to the intellectual historian, so long as the employment of these categories is achieved in a way that is informed by an understanding of the intellectual and historical context within which different enunciations of epistemological and metaphysical principles were formulated in competition or relation with one another, and variance among discourses that were within the Islamic intellectual umbrella could be seen as representing paradigms of doctrine and method, representing the different constellations that constitute disciplines of the Islamic intellectual Tradition.

An adequate understanding of the intellectual and historical context in which tensions of similarity and dissimilarity draw fault-lines delineating the Islamic intellectual tradition is informed further by treating the metaphysical texts of philosophers, Sufis, and dialectical theologians in conversation with one another and not only in isolation. A historical tableaux is incomplete if it seeks to portray its figures as simply borrowing or lifting from more 'original' sources, but instead requires a phenomenological component of textual comparison, whereby common concepts and images across multiple texts are understood in terms of their varied uses. This key methodological consideration brings forth a response to questions about how to approach the texts of Ghazālī and Suhrawardī which privileges the image of light as a key symbol that crosses from author to author and anchors types of sapiential and gnostic practice which appear as concomitants with both Sufi and Philosophical textuality, especially when in the less ratiocinative manifestations of the latter discipline. Ghazālī, as a historical precursor who was known to Suhrawardī, was no doubt a bona fide influence on Suhrawardī; but it must be emphasized that intellectual historians frequently overstep bounds when speaking of influence as if it were determination, and instead it is an ethical imperative on the part of the student of Islamic thought to maintain that the relation of influence among figures does not entail a further function of overdetermination or imply necessarily substantive prefigurement.

While it must be kept in mind as a principle for the academic study of Islamic thought that the great figures did not limit themselves to one or another discipline or discursive vein at the exclusion of the others, this principle does not preclude the possibility of hierarchy among the multiple textual modalities employed by a particular figure, where such a hierarchy further functions in pointing toward a predominant orientation and a core theoretical vision. Thus, while Suhrawardī's writings include large sections on fine points in logic and physics, and while Ghazālī's writings centered around practical, jurisprudential ethics (*fiqh*), dialectical theology (*kalām*), and polemics (e.g. against philosophy (*falsafah*) and *Ismā'īlism*) form a voluminous body, it can still be said that there is a core metaphysical and epistemological doctrine in each thinker which stands above the expressions and formulations produced in their other vocations or modes of writing. The evidence for such a claim, as well as the key to understanding its consequences and implications, lies in the core symbol and allegory of light and its use as it appears in Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (*Niche of Lights*) and throughout Suhrawardī's oeuvre, especially his magnum opus *Hikmat al-Ishrāq* (translated by Walbridge and Ziai as *The Philosophy of Illumination*, although the term *Hikmat* refers also to wisdom, which is to say philosophy in its original, plenary sense as signified by the Greek 'love of wisdom'). Therefore, it is appropriate to focus on Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and his spiritual autobiography *al-Munqidh min-al-Dalāl* (*Deliverance from Error*), in which he presents a lucid account of key issues informing his epistemology at

length, and to place these texts directly in comparison with Suhrawardī's *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*. In so doing, salient metaphysical doctrines which animate the philosophical point of view in accordance with the paradigm of taste and sapience will be seen to emerge between the two thinkers, and a critical reconstruction of their spiritual epistemologies can be possible. Though Ghazālī's *Munqidh* will provide some methodological points of entry into the conviction that sapience is possible and desirable as the greatest epistemic (taking the starting perspective of the noetic possibilities of man) good, it can be treated as a prolegomenon or as a groundwork for the metaphysics and ontology of light that is presented in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. The latter text goes further and can be termed more esoteric, and if one takes the *Munqidh* as a sort of foundation, the *Mishkāt* can be seen to provide a rich set of corollaries, implications, and further questions that are then picked up in the course of the ishrāqi project of Suhrawardī, epitomized by his *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*. Suhrawardī does not set out to abrogate the insights of Ghazālī, but he resolves some of the very questions raised explicitly or implicitly in the *Mishkāt* by way of a philosophical turn that was to shape the future of the Islamic philosophical tradition. All of this was achieved on the basis of the philosophical foundation, first principle, and symbol of light.

Interpretive Bounds: Paradigms in Islamic Intellectual Traditions

To contextualize the conceptual contours of the relevant intellectual traditions of both of these thinkers further, it is beneficial to consider what it is

that distinguishes traditional Islamic intellectual traditions of a certain kinds from one another, while also providing a principle for coherence among the cluster of “Islamic” disciplines. While outward sciences like *fiqh* contain an intellectual dimension, utilizing logical principles to articulate causality for example in the methodological field of *‘usūl al-fiqh*, the outward sciences nonetheless must be seen as transmitted (*naqlī*) and reliant on authority, whereas the intellectual (*‘aqlī*) sciences properly speaking are principally concerned with individual realization (*tahqīq*) irrespective of historically entrenched authorities.¹ While Sufism and Islamic Philosophy thus fall definitively within the bounds of Islamic intellectual traditions by virtue of their emphasis on the rational and supra-rational functions of the intellect as the means toward realization, the paradigmatic distinction between modern and traditional intellectuality appears in that the latter preserves a total notion of the intellect, through which not only rational and supra-rational modes of knowing are affirmed as possibilities. Thus envisaged, modern intellectuality engages in a dualist view of reality, where the epistemic act can only be conceived of as rational in one type of case and empirical in another, but there is no true unification of the rational and empirical modes of knowing, and moreover there is a more fundamental dualism between knowing and being, or subject and object that cannot be reconciled.

¹ Chittick, William, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World*, Oneworld Publications, 2007 pp. viii, 2.

While the Islamic intellectual tradition through its preservation of the sapiential possibility is able to present a unification of reality and its knowing - of metaphysics as the science of the real and epistemology as the science of knowing - it is important to emphasize that this paradigm is distinct and fundamentally opposed to the modern attempts of idealist philosophical exposition to relate being and knowing more closely. An illustrative formulation of the principle of idealism in modern philosophy is the notion that "being is dependent on the knowing of it", and it is crucial to insist that the collapsing of the distinction between metaphysics and epistemology that is achieved in the Islamic intellectual and paradigmatically sapiential tradition does not posit such a dependency relation between two distinct domains.² Rather, the nexus between being and knowing as posited by the sapiential traditions annihilates the possibility of any primary separation and subsequent relation of subordination between the two. It can be said instead that, according to the sapiential paradigm, if we agree that being is dependent on the knowing of it, it is only in the nominal sense in which a being and knowing are co-dependent linguistically as concomitants, but at the same time are united as referent. Meaningful discursive language and the knowledge that can be obtained thereby, considered ontologically, is at a level removed or separated from that of

²Brown, Curtis, "Internal Realism: Transcendental Idealism?" in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12 (1988): 145-55. Brown takes the formulation from Ralph Barton Perry, and is able to apprehend the importance of Nagel's ascription of a form of idealism to modern thinkers such as Davidson and Wittgenstein.

what is metaphysically prior, and requires immediacy and taste (*dhawq*) in order to be known and truly encountered.

Thus, it is most crucial to understand that Ghazālī and Suhrawardī can only truly be appreciated and placed in fruitful relation to one another when considered as productive figures exemplifying a broad paradigm of an Islamic Intellectual tradition that is chiefly characterized by sapience as a mode of knowing not separate from a mode of being. Since this is the guiding condition of the relevant tradition over time, by approaching Suhrawardī's work as a particular philosophical exposition, theory and defense not only of an individual view but of a core understanding of reality that is paradigmatic one can then appreciate how he expounds on the more terse discourse on light provided by Ghazālī. Though Suhrawardī's work comes a century later than Ghazālī's and is influenced thereby, his presentation of a complete metaphysical and ontological picture works out and anticipates problems that could be posed to the Ghazālīan notion of an ontology and epistemology of lights as proffered in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, and does so while privileging sapience as the guiding method of his own work, keeping in line with the Sufi Ghazālī.

Suhrawardī's philosophizing is ultimately tied to a program of spiritual realization, and calls for understanding not only through the rational faculty but furthermore through a spiritual hermeneutics of taste that is reflected in the subject's spiritual journey through the levels of reality, and from the dark Occident to the luminous Orient which is the subject of his metaphysical theory

as well as the goal of the spiritual quest. In taking the Qur'ānic symbol of light as the point of departure for a hermeneutic project which yields a theory of reality, in *Mishkāt al-Anwār* Ghazālī also prefigures a program of spiritual realization which emphasizes asceticism and taste as the path of knowing beyond the sensory level of reality. Suhrawardī's project in *Hikmat al-Ishrāq* provides a nuanced, Platonist ontology of lights which appears as the fruit of Ghazālī's work, but the Ishrāqī philosopher brings out the texture of the same, singular fabric of reality that both thinkers speak of, and thereby provides a more expansive and specific picture of the levels of reality from Orient down to Occident. In keeping with Ghazālī's epistemological aim of providing seekers with a theory of reality that is quintessentially knowable through the means available by to the individual (with the condition of the grace of God), Suhrawardī goes further in providing a typology of knowers which better appreciates discursivity and philosophical method, and also in expositing the nature of the intermediate levels of reality including the Imaginal Realm (*Mundus Imaginalis*), and thereby providing a map for spiritual ascension, which amounts to epistemological and ontological ascension as well. A thorough consideration of the Ishrāqī philosophical system as inaugurated by Suhrawardī principally through *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, with particular emphasis on the ontology of lights and the Imaginal realm, will serve to ultimately deepen our understanding of Ghazālī's work, the metaphysical and ontological cornerstone of which is the Neoplatonic *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, and the epistemological point of departure for

which is the *Munqidh*. Thus, a comparative approach taken herein first considers the mature Ishrāqī work of Suhrawardī, and then contextualizes the proto-Ishrāqī metaphysics in Ghazālī. going on to evaluate the similarities and differences between Suhrawardī and Ghazālī's spiritual epistemology through reading *Mishkāt* and *Munqidh* in this context.

Chapter One

Metaphysics of Light: Suhrawardī's Philosophy as Islamic

Platonism

Introduction (Suhrawardī's Works, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, Problem of Universals and Platonic Ideas)

Suhrawardī stands out as one of the most significant figures of Islamic philosophy, as the founder of the influential Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) school. Through four major philosophical works written in Arabic, multiple shorter didactic treatises in Arabic and Persian, and finally numerous symbolic narratives in Persian, Suhrawardī laid out a complete philosophy which challenged the rationalistic tendencies of Peripateticism and demonstrated the compatibility and complementarity between mystical and rational modes of knowing.³ His magnum opus, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (The Philosophy of Illumination), is organized in an innovative manner, starting with a section on logic which is critical of Peripateticism on certain points, followed by an elaborate metaphysical exposition which describes a complex ontological order of Lights. As Corbin notes, the work ends in ecstatic union, as the vision of reality which Suhrawardī expounds is at each turn a support for the spiritual journey of souls on earth,

³Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Three Muslim Sages*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1964, p. 63-64

back to the abode of the Divine.⁴ His vast philosophy is characterized first and foremost by a fundamental, symbolic distinction between light and darkness, and a vision of reality in which the darkness of the material world and lower realms of reality is in contrast with the illuminative, metaphysical order which is its principle.⁵ The 'Orient of the Lights' is the symbolism used by Suhrawardī to refer to that metaphysical order, which occupies the 'above' in a vertical hierarchy of levels of reality, while the dark Occident is below. To transcend the realm of bodies and behold the 'Orient of the Lights' is the culmination of the philosophical quest.

Presenting Suhrawardī's Metaphysics - An Overview of the Ontology of Lights

Suhrawardī's entire metaphysics and ontology begins with the self-evident reality that is light. He defines light as "evident by its own reality and by essence makes another evident"; in other words light is that which is manifest to itself and by virtue of which other things are made manifest.⁶ Light knows itself by itself. In the Islamic philosophical tradition, the notion of substance is defined as a quiddity such that whenever it is existentiated, it is existentiated not in another thing or locus. Accidents, on the other hand, are quiddities that require a locus of manifestation in order to be existentiated.⁷ From this perspective, with

⁴Corbin, Henry, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Keegan Paul International, 1993, p. 212.

⁵Aminrazavi, Mehdi, *Suhrawardī and the School of Illumination*: Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997, p. 31.

⁶ Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn, *The Philosophy of Illumination, A New Critical Edition of the Text of Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, with English trans., notes, commentary and introduction by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai, Provo (UT): Brigham Young Press, 1999 p. 81.

⁷Ibid., p. 77.

the distinction between substance and accident in view, Suhrawardī explains that light can be both either substantial or accidental, and that the substantial light is pure, immaterial light, whereas accidental light is the material light which is visible to the eye and inheres in bodies.⁸ From another view, all things can be categorized as either light or not-light. Under the category of light, there are lights which are for-itself (*li-nafsih*) or not-for-itself (*li-ghayrih*), and the latter category refers to the accidental, material light (such as that of a candle), while a thing that is a light-for-itself (*nūr li-nafsih*) is a pure, substantial light, and is immaterial. Those things that are not-light are also further distinguished by the categories of substance and accident, and also dwell in the material world in which accidental light exists.⁹ Material bodies are in the category of ‘substance which is not-light’, and Suhrawardī explained these “dusky substances” (*barzakh*) as essentially characterized by extension, and in doing so rejected the Aristotelian understanding of body as hylomorphism. For Suhrawardī’s philosophy, there is no priority among bodies, and they cannot be essentially luminous, for if luminosity was an essential characteristic of light then all bodies would have been luminous. This serves as a proof further that sensible light, which takes bodies as its locus of manifestation, is accidental.¹⁰

With these categorizations in mind, the context within which Suhrawardī’s metaphysics of light deals with the levels of reality extending

⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 79-79.

¹⁰ Ibid.

down to the material realm becomes more clear, and the epistemic aspect of light can be introduced briefly. All light that can be pointed to is accidental light, and therefore pure light cannot be pointed to and has no spatial dimensions.¹¹ Suhrawardī's philosophy is in accordance with the Platonic distinction between the material and immaterial in which the immaterial is hierarchically above and ontologically prior to the material, and so the notion of the immaterial light becomes central to Suhrawardī's metaphysics. True knowledge and consciousness are explained by reference to the immaterial light, as Suhrawardī explains that whatever perceives its own essence is an immaterial light. Presence, as the opposite of dispersion, along with unity are what constitute knowledge.¹² Suhrawardī explains that all that intellects its own essence is an immaterial light, and so he is affirming the indivisibility, presence, and self-consciousness of the metaphysical entities that are the incorporeal lights. Bodies, as extension, are essentially constituted of parts which are absent from one another, and therefore bodies cannot know themselves due to their dispersion and lack of presence. Accidental light similarly cannot know itself as it lacks presence, since it is in the category of that which is for-other-than-itself (*li-ghayrih*), requiring as it does another locus in order to exist.¹³ This clarification regarding the issue of self-knowledge among various types of entities is important in order to establish the epistemological point of view of the knowing

¹¹ Ibid., p. 79.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

subject, and to ground this epistemology in the metaphysical order. For Peripatetics, immateriality and substance are the two conditions for knowledge, but for Suhrawardī it is important to note that in order to know, an entity must only be substantial and a light. Although he disagrees with the Peripatetics on this point, he utilizes Avicennan arguments to show that self-knowledge is not achieved by way of an image, but rather is immediate and essential to the nature of the immaterial light. If one maintains that self-knowledge occurs through verification that an image is the self, then in order for this verification to be accurate it must paradoxically already be assumed that knowledge of the self has been attained, which is absurd.¹⁴ Knowledge, as a modality of light, pervades the hierarchy of reality in Suhrawardī.

Having introduced the concept of light as the self-evident, conscious reality that characterizes the metaphysical order, here it is appropriate to explain the ontology of lights in Suhrawardī's metaphysics, which is the context within which the archetypal order, the Illuminationist version of the Platonic Ideas, is found in his philosophy. The Light of Lights (*Nūr al-Anwār*) is the Divine Reality that is the luminous source of the hierarchy of reality. Starting from light as the self-evident reality that forms the fabric of his metaphysics, Suhrawardī shows the existence of the Light of Lights.¹⁵ As the existence of light is self-evident, we can then see that a light can be either contingent or luminous in-itself. If a light is

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 80-81.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 87.

contingent, then one asks the further question as to what grants that light its luminosity? The source for the luminosity of a light is either contingent or necessary, and so while one can begin at any given contingent light and continue this process in which a source is identified for that given light where the source itself is contingent, the causal series must eventually terminate in a necessary source of light. Therefore, something that is luminous in-itself must exist, and this is the Light of Lights, or God.¹⁶ Suhrawardī further shows the Oneness of the Light of Lights, arguing that if it were claimed that there are two perfect lights, then these two lights would have to be distinguishable from one another, in order to not be the same entity. In that case, each of these two distinct entities would be lacking something that the other has, and so this privation or need is an absurdity if claimed on behalf of the perfect.¹⁷ While describing the Divine Reality, it is of note that Suhrawardī upholds the ontological priority of Divine Knowledge over Divine Love. Divine Love is originated when God knows Himself, and so it is that as God is Absolute Light, and with the nature of light as that which is evident to itself and thus known to itself, Divine Knowledge is upheld in *Ishrāqī* philosophy as the foundation of all Divine Names and the source of all attributes.¹⁸ The love that then appears in creation is based ultimately on knowledge.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 88-89.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

Relating the Light of Lights to the hierarchic order which emanates from It, it is important to bear in mind that for Suhrawardī there is no accident attached to the Light of Lights, whether that accident be light or darkness, for God is not composite and cannot admit of an aspect of darkness.¹⁹ An *Ishrāqī* principle states that nothing issues forth from The One, the Light of Lights, but one, because each aspect has only one effect.²⁰ The Light of Lights does not admit of any duality or multiplicity, as God is not composite. Suhrawardī cites the Qur’anic verse where God states that “Our command is but one” in order to further elucidate this principle.²¹ What is then the one reality created by the Light of Lights is the Most Proximate Light (*al-Nūr al-Aqrab*), which is brought into being through the illuminationist relation (*iḍāfah ishrāqiyyah*). Though the Proximate Light is light in its essence, it is distinct from the Light of Lights because the Light of Lights is necessary, while the Proximate Light is a contingent reality. Although the Proximate Light is contingent because it requires something other than itself in order to be existentiated, namely the Light of Lights, however it is necessary or self-sufficient by virtue of the Light of Lights and the nature of the latter.²²

From the aspect of the Proximate Light’s necessity, or dominance then comes the second light; that aspect of contingency of the Proximate Light, which

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 99.

is privation, then existentiates the ninth, all-encompassing sphere (*al-barzakh al-muḥīt*)²³ That very aspect of contingency is the key to explaining multiplicity, as it is the aspect of *barzakh* that is necessary for multiplicity to come into existence.²⁴ Otherwise, from the aspect of its light-ness, nothing comes from a light but a light. The gradation and hierarchy of the substantial lights proceeds in the manner of vertical causality, where the only distinguishing feature among each of the higher lights which proceed from the Most Proximate Light, called the Dominant Lights (*al-anwār al-qāhīrah*), is that each lower light that is existentiated by the higher is less perfect due to lesser degree of intensity with respect to the lights above it. There is no material aspect in the order of substantial lights, as veils only occur at the level of bodies, and so it is the case that the lower lights can behold the higher and vice versa.²⁵ Each light in this longitudinal order of lights is related in a particular manner to the light above it and the light below it. Although the lower light does perceive and behold the higher light, it cannot encompass it, and its relation to the higher is one of love. The higher light, in contrast, maintains a relation of dominance with regard to the lower light. Therefore, the two aspects of love and dominance serve respectively as the passive and active ordering principles for the entire hierarchy

²³ Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn, *Opera Metaphysica et mystica II*, ed. and intro. by Henry Corbin, Tehran: Mu'assisah-yi Muṭālī'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Farhangī, 1993 [reprint of the 1952 ed.], pp. 142-146.

²⁴ Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, p. 95.

²⁵ Ibid.

of reality for Suhrawardī, and all cosmogonic processes can be related back to the function of love and dominance.²⁶

With the Proximate Light at the head of the longitudinal order of lights after the Light of Lights, the hierarchal lights which are existentiated from the Proximate Light are called the Most Exalted Dominating Lights. As this order continues longitudinally, with immediate relations of love and dominance between successive lights in the order, then out of different aspects of these lights and out of participation and relationships between them are other things existentiated. Therefore the eighth sphere (*barzakh al-thawābit*) comes out of the darkness of the Most Exalted Dominating Lights as a collective, while from the collective aspect of their dominance is generated the order of Platonic Ideas, which in Suhrawardī's philosophy means the latitudinal order of lights, also called the Lords of Idols.²⁷ Still above the purely material realm, it remains to be mentioned that the hierarchy among the Most Exalted Dominating Lights also generates the Imaginal Realm, which is neither purely sensible nor purely intellectual or immaterial, but contains elements of both intellectual and sensible reality.²⁸

Thus Suhrawardī's ontology of lights includes a longitudinal order of substantial lights wherein vertical causality pertains amongst the members of the order, and a latitudinal order of substantial lights that is existentiated by the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

²⁷ Corbin, Henry, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Keegan Paul International, 1993, p. 212.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 214-216.

active, masculine aspect of the Most Exalted Dominating Lights. This latitudinal order functions as the Platonic Ideas, governing over the species of the lower, sensible world.²⁹ Through the aspect of poverty, corresponding to the passive or feminine aspect of the Most Exalted Dominating Lights, the existentionation of the sphere of the fixed stars occurs; in this way Suhrawardī is able to explain the existentionation of that which is below through what is above, showing through symbolic language how the entirety of the cosmic and metaphysical order is saturated with meaning. As that eighth sphere, that of the fixed stars, represents the boundary between the immaterial and material orders of reality, the seven spheres below are existentionated through the latitudinal order of lights, which is to say the Platonic Ideas or Lords of the Species.³⁰

IV. The Platonic Ideas in Suhrawardī's Philosophy of Illumination

It is critical that this greater synoptic view of the Great Chain of Being in its Illuminationist manifestation is kept in mind when considering the foundations of the Platonic Ideas in Suhrawardī's metaphysics. Suhrawardī distances himself sharply from the Peripatetics in Islamic philosophy on this point of Platonic Ideas, and in *Hikmat al-ishrāq* he cites that he had once been "zealous in defense of the Peripatetic path" in denying the order of lights and the archetypes, until he himself did witness "the heavenly essences and lights that

²⁹ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 199-200; also p. 92, p. 143.

³⁰ Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn, *Opera metaphysica et mystica I*, ed. and intro. by Henry Corbin, Tehran: Mu'assisah-yi Muṭāli'āt va Taḥqīqāt-i Farhangī, 1993 [reprint of the 1945 ed.], p. 451-461.

Hermes and Plato beheld”.³¹ The true Oriental Theosophy, in Suhrawardī’s eyes, is distinguished from Peripateticism precisely because the greatest sages had not only succeeded in mastering discursive thought as had the Peripatetics, but further had “detached themselves from their bodily temples”, and beheld “that there are dominating lights, that the Creator of all is a light, that the archetypes are among the dominating lights”.³² That highest class of true sages “possessing insight and detachment” bear witness to this, and “the allusions of the prophets and the great philosophers point to this.”³³ Here Suhrawardī also cites Plato, Socrates, Hermes, Agathodaemon, and Empedocles in this category of mystic philosophers, and so it is that Suhrawardī places his Oriental Theosophy in the sapiential tradition that has been called Perennial Philosophy. The role that Platonic Ideas play within the hierarchical structure of reality as governing entities of the material world is crucial to the completeness of Suhrawardī’s metaphysical view. Suhrawardī’s use of the language of Zoroastrian angelology in naming the lights and specific archetypes further indicates his intent of gesturing towards the universality of the hierarchical chain of being in which immaterial intelligences are ontologically prior to the sensible world.

From the Platonic Ideas- which are called “the Divine Ideas” (*al-muthul al-ilāhiyyah*), “the Lord of Species” (*al-arbāb al-anwā’*), or “The Immaterial Forms” (*al-ṣuwar al-mujarradah*) and “The Luminous Ideas” (*al-muthul al-nūriyyah*) -, all

³¹ Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, p. 108.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³³ *Ibid.*

composite realities come into existence. Each species in the world has its own particular “Lord of Species” (*rabb al-naw’*), that governs all particular instances of the species in the material realm.³⁴ The Lord of Species can be explained as that which is the self-sufficient essence of each species, and all instances of that species in the world come out of that species. While this is the relation between the material world and the Platonic Ideas as Suhrawardī envisions them, Suhrawardī further theorizes fully the relationship between the Platonic Ideas themselves, which is more subtle and concerns the precise nature of the latitudinal order of lights in the Orient of the pure substantial lights.

Whereas the longitudinal lights had been explained in terms of vertical causality, where the aspects of the various lights above a particular light contributed to the particularity of that given light, there are no causal relations between the Platonic Ideas. However, this does not mean that there is not any hierarchy among them.³⁵ For example, the archetype of a flower and that of the human being both share the vegetative soul (using Aristotelian terminology here), but man’s archetype also has both animal soul and intellectual soul additionally. Since the archetype of the flower lacks these, it is less complete and hierarchically below the archetype of the man. This hierarchy should not be confused with causal priority in the sense where one archetype comes into being sequentially following another or from another, as the entire order comes into

³⁴ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. I*, pp. 459-461.

³⁵ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. I*, p. 68; also p. 463; *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 155-56, p. 165.

being at the end of the hierarchy of intellects. Thus, for Suhrawardī, the Platonic Ideas appear as archetypes which complete the hierarchy of the intelligible world, and the Most Exalted Dominating Lights have ontological priority with respect to the Platonic Ideas. We have expressed that the ninth sphere is existentiated through the aspect of privation in the Most Proximate Light, and the eighth sphere is existentiated by the aspect of privation in the collectivity of the Most Exalted Dominating Lights. What remains below the sphere of the fixed stars, which are the bottom seven spheres, is left to be existentiated by these Platonic Ideas.

Another important point in Suhrawardī's understanding of the Platonic Ideas is that he maintained that the Platonic Ideas are universals, but not in the sense of mental concepts posited as universals. Conceptual universals are realities existing in the mind, whereas Platonic Ideas are existent external realities with their rightful place in the Great Chain of Being.³⁶ In other words, philosophy for Suhrawardī deals with ontological realities that are self-sufficient, that intellect themselves and others, and so are of the intelligible realm. The relation between universal and particular that is of prime importance in the case of Platonic Ideas is that all of the instances of the universal exist in the universal. The Platonic Ideas can be called universals because they are the root and reality of things which are their instances, and this notion in particular is etymologically

³⁶ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 158-160.

indicated by the Arabic term used for universal, which is *'kul'*.³⁷ In a less metaphysical sense, the relationship between logical universals and their instances can be utilized to illustrate how Platonic Ideas can be called universals: logical universals have the same relationship with each of their instances, which is to say for example one dog is no more dog than another dog. In the same way the Platonic Ideas are related as universals in a relationship to each of their instances in a uniform manner.³⁸ Lastly, Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī further explains that the application of the term universal to the Platonic Ideas is appropriate because of the dimensionless immateriality of mental universals, as Platonic Ideas similarly share in not having qualities such as density, mass, etc. While Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī's point is well taken, I further claim that such an explanation can be a stumbling block to understanding the true nature of Platonic Ideas as universals, because it goes against the symbolic spirit of Suhrawardī's philosophy. Mental and logical 'universals' are given the moniker provisionally, it would seem to me, as the sense of universality which they cannot imitate is that of the Platonic Ideas, which are able not only to be transcendent with respect to material reality but contain the reality of all of the particulars which inhere therein. The abuse of the notion of form in Peripateticism, through the doctrine of hylomorphism whereby matter and form are combined in body, is a key target of Suhrawardī's criticism; his doctrine of Platonic Ideas is best understood in the context of the

³⁷ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. I*, p. 463.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Occidental darkness of bodies, and of instances with respect to their universal archetypes. Mental concepts are not transcendent, unlike the Platonic Ideas.

Though the nature of the realm of the Platonic Ideas as substantial lights residing in the intelligible realm is elucidated clearly in Suhrawardī's works, he is not unaware of the possibility of skepticism or criticism regarding this metaphysical vision. Thus he explains that there are two routes for proving the existence of Platonic Ideas: the first is the way of witnessing (*shuhūd*), and the second is the way of intellectual reasoning. He maintains that the way of witnessing is the more powerful of the two, and further that the reality of the Platonic Ideas cannot be negated by a lack of success for intellectual reasoning in coming to affirm them.³⁹ Further, there are two categories of intellectual proofs, that 'by which we are satisfied' and that 'by which we are not satisfied'.⁴⁰ That 'by which we are not satisfied' can make us convinced without truly proving something to us, resulting in a kind of faux-certainty. Among the ways of proof for the existence of the Platonic Ideas which are in the category of those 'by which we are to be satisfied', Suhrawardī mentions proof by way of the principle of the most noble contingent (*qā'idah imkān al-ashraf*).⁴¹

This proof turns out to be a powerful and sophisticated argument, where the centrality of the Illuminationist principle of the most noble contingent shows us again just how crucial the hierarchic structure of reality is to the traditional

³⁹ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. I*, pp. 460-64; *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 155-157; also *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 162-165.

⁴⁰ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, p. 161.

⁴¹ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. I*, pp. 434-35; *Opera Vol. II*, p. 154.

worldview of Islamic philosophy. The originality of Suhrawardī's exposition of this principle is not due to any explanatory deviance from the tradition of Islamic philosophy, rather it is in his explicitness in bringing out a quality inherent in the structure of reality. The principle states that "if a baser contingent exists, a nobler contingent must have already existed".⁴² He explains further that "if the Light of Lights had necessitated the basest darkness through Its unitary aspect, no aspect would have remained to necessitate that which was more noble. If it were supposed to exist, it would require the absurdity of an aspect more noble than the Light of Lights to necessitate it".⁴³ The principle can then be applied to the level of the material world, where one can consider the example of a seed that will grow into a tree. Just as the trunk grows upward and not haphazardly to the side, the leaves also turn out to maintain a particular structure and form, and we can in general see that there are certain patterns by which the movement from potential to actual occurs in the case of the seed and the tree. This movement from potentiality to actuality in fact occurs throughout the cosmos, and in order for the potential to become actualized, there is need for a cause which is of the same nature as the entity in question, and is also in actuality itself. Thus, the very fact that there is an actualization of potential in the material world means that there is an archetype in a realm above the material world that governs this process. In the hierarchy of causality, the inferior is in need of the

⁴² Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, p. 107.

⁴³ Ibid.

more noble, and whenever there is a particular inferior reality, then so long as the existence of a more noble reality is possible, then the most noble must necessarily exist; it is impossible to have the lower while the higher does not exist. Now, when a species is taken into consideration in the material world, with its movement from potential to actual, we see that the archetype is possible in the higher level of reality, and thus the higher must necessarily exist since when we see potential turned to actual, it is necessarily the case that the higher must be actualized in order that the lower has become actualized.⁴⁴

These proofs for the existence of Platonic Ideas as a level of reality wherein immaterial, conscious, and self-sufficient entities reside and govern the levels of reality below the sphere of the fixed stars, are set forth while anticipating other criticisms as far as where the causality for the lower, material entities should be posited among the higher. One line of argument accepts Suhrawardī's claim that a higher cause must exist for the lower, but why is it that God does not directly cause the lower species of the material world? Why can we not posit the Active Intellect as the giver of forms, as is done by Peripatetics in following Avicenna, or say that the essential unity in each species is caused by the spheres? The simplest of these objects to respond to first is the notion that the spheres cause the essential unity of each species. This is not possible because the spheres themselves are created by higher entities, and namely the longitudinal lights are responsible for the creation of the eighth sphere of the

⁴⁴ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, p. 143; *Opera Vol. II*, p. 154; *Opera Vol. I*, p. 435-35.

fixed stars, while the Most Proximate Light is responsible for the creation of the all-encompassing ninth sphere.⁴⁵ As for the claim that God is the direct cause of the multiplicitous species of the lower realms, this is problematic because it requires there to be compositeness or multiplicity in the Divine. Suhrawardī rejects the Peripatetic notion of 'Ilm 'Inā'i, which means that when God knows something, then this knowledge is equivalent to the being of the particular thing in the world.⁴⁶ Divine Knowledge would then be the direct cause of everything, because for Avicenna God's knowledge is fundamentally creative. Suhrawardī rejects the Peripatetic schema as far as the question of the cause of the forms goes, and here it is important to note not only his rejection of *al-'ilm al-'inā'ī*, but also his rejection of the Peripatetic notion of the Active Intellect.⁴⁷ In the Avicennian view of the cosmos, there are ten intellects, with each intellect existing as a species of its own, a simple entity that shares nothing in common with the other intellects. The angel Jibril is then known as the tenth intellect, and that which is the giver of forms (*wāhib al-ṣuwar*) Suhrawardī rejects the notion that the order of the intellects can be limited and enumerated as only ten, and also criticizes the Avicennian notion by posing the question as to where the tenth intellect receives the forms from. If the Active Intellect is the giver of forms, then it received the forms either from above or below its own ontological level. If we say that it gets the forms from below the tenth intellect, then the lower would be

⁴⁵ Suhrawardī, *Opera*, Vol. I, p. 133.

⁴⁶ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 150-152.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

a cause of the higher, which is absurd and does not answer our initial question which was about the cause of order and essential unity of the species in the multiplicitous material world. If we then hold that the Active Intellect gets the forms from above its own ontological level, then we are saying that the Divine is the direct cause for the forms in the Active Intellect, and this is what would then either commit us to the absurd claim that there is multiplicity in the Divine, or else the contradiction that there is multiplicity in the Active Intellect, which the Peripatetic theory holds to be a simple entity.⁴⁸

Consequent to his rejection of the Peripatetic view of Divine Knowledge, the intellects, and the account of forms, Suhrawardī's own doctrine is shown to be one in which the order of the lower worlds come from substantial lights and their interactions. There is here a curious dilemma which arises from his understanding of Platonic Ideas, however, which he does not treat explicitly. Since God is not the direct cause of multiplicity, and instead God only creates the Proximate Light, through the channel of which multiplicity comes into existence, then the Platonic Ideas as immaterial substantial lights are outside of God. Suhrawardī's perspective in this regard preserves the Platonic Ideas as extra-Deical, but then one can object that such a view does not adequately explain how it is that God is not in need of the Ideas while they reside 'outside' of Him. I claim that for the Illuminationist thinker, such objections can be resolved through various argumentative strategies. For one, use can again be made of the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

principle of the most noble contingent, as having substantiated the existence of the Platonic Ideas as possible realities on one level of reality, the Ideas represent the 'baser contingents' with respect to some other entities that are more noble and ontologically prior to them, and must exist. Each possible link in the hierarchic chain of intelligences above the Platonic Ideas can thus be posited as necessarily existing by the application of this principle, until we reach the Most Proximate Light. The existentionation of the Most Proximate Light by the Light of Lights then shows that in fact the Divine Reality contains in its knowledge all that is effected in the chain which it begins. Due to the unity of the Divine Essence, Divine Knowledge cannot be posited as a truly existent ontological entity separate from the Essence, and so the Platonic Ideas which are contained in Divine Knowledge are not apart from the Divine Reality, which encompasses all as the Transcendent Principle. Thus I hold that it is only a failure to understand Suhrawardī's symbolic metaphysics in light of the nature of Divine Reality as both transcendent and immanent which ultimately results in positing a false dilemma inherent in Suhrawardī's understanding of the Platonic Ideas vis-a-vis the Divine Reality.

Finally, the world of souls appears as a crucial piece to the explanation of how Platonic Ideas govern species of the world. The world of souls is also called the governing lights (*al-anwār al-mudabbirah*) or the *Ispahbudiyyah* lights, but they are different than the dominating lights. Souls are in a relationship to bodies characterized by mutual causal influence, which is to say that effects upon bodies

are felt by souls, and vice versa, though souls govern bodies. In contrast, Ideas are not influenced by the bodies which they govern, and the pure immateriality of the Platonic Ideas means that they have no attachment to bodies.⁴⁹ While a given Idea governs all bodies and souls of an entire species, the soul only belongs to one particular body and is able to govern it. Although souls are in their essences immaterial, souls have various faculties and require bodies for their functioning and the proper function of these faculties. Souls are existentially and governed through the aspect of luminosity among the Platonic Ideas, whereas the Platonic Ideas' aspect of poverty and privation in the face of the Light of Lights provides the existentiating cause for bodies.⁵⁰ Each substance that is a material species has a corresponding Idea in the Platonic realm.

Avicennian Criticism of Platonic Ideas and Suhrawardī's Response

In espousing his metaphysical schema, Suhrawardī made explicit several points which had previously proved obscure to those who misunderstood and thus rejected Platonic metaphysical formulations. A key misunderstanding and rejection of Platonism was set forth in Avicenna's criticism of Platonic Ideas, and in fact his rejection of Platonic Ideas is based on a rejection of an understanding of the Ideas which is not itself commensurate with the real archetypes as set forth by Suhrawardī. Avicenna explains that if it is claimed that the reality of a species, for example the human being, is the archetype of that species, then you

⁴⁹ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. I*, pp. 459-460.

⁵⁰ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, p. 143.

are saying that species qua itself (e.g. 'man' qua 'man') is essentially immaterial. If this is the Platonist premise- and Avicenna understood that it is in fact the premise that Platonists hold- then it is therefore impossible to have a material instance of a given species. On this reading, to posit the Platonic Ideas commits one to the notion that man qua man is immaterial, and so a particular material instance of man is incommensurable with the archetype of man. But this argument is shown by Suhrawardī to fail because the concept of the archetypes upon which it relies is inaccurate, and misrepresents the relationship between a given archetype and its instances. Suhrawardī explains that the archetype of a species and the instances of that species do not have to have the same rules, and this can be understood as analogous to the manner in which something that is considered to be a substance becomes an accident in our knowledge of that thing. There is no division in man where the relation between the archetype and the individual instance can be posited as existing on the same level of reality, and Avicenna's misreading of the Platonic Ideas is due also in the misapplication of the principle of individuation, which functions on the level of matter. Therefore, the Platonic Idea, as an immaterial substantial light, does not need to exist on the same level as its material instances in order for the essential unity of the species to be upheld. The shared essence of all members of a species is not described by way of the logical universal and complete enumeration of essential qualities in the process of definition; rather, it is only by reference to the ontological reality

that is the Platonic Idea governing the species that the essence of its members can be pointed toward.

Distinguishing 'Ālam al-Mithāl and al-Muthul al-Aflāṭūniyyah al-Nūriyyah

With the hierarchy of lights having been taken into consideration, and the place of the Platonic Ideas therein considered in addition to the relation between the Platonic Ideas and the species of the sensible world which they govern, the one crucial distinction we have yet to delineate is that between the *Mundus Imaginalis* ('ālam al-mithāl) and the Luminous Platonic Ideas (*al-muthul al-Aflāṭūniyyah al-nūriyyah*) in Suhrawardī,⁵¹ In particular Suhrawardī explains that “the hanging forms are not Platonic Ideas, for Platonic Forms are luminous and fixed, while some of the hanging ideas are luminous, and some of them are dark”.⁵² In order to understand from whence *Mundus Imaginalis* within Suhrawardī's hierarchy, it is important to first understand that *Mundus Imaginalis* is a realm that is neither purely intelligible nor purely sensible, and contains elements of each of these two possibilities. Like the “the world of souls”, which is also governed by the Platonic Ideas, *Mundus Imaginalis* is beyond the spheres, and Corbin explains that it is a Place of No Place, the crucial site for events such as Prophecy.⁵³ One way to consider this question of the origin of *Mundus Imaginalis* is then to return to the Illuminationist principle of the most noble contingent, whereby apprehending the ontological level of the hanging ideas,

⁵¹ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 230-31.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 230-31.

⁵³ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 214-15.

wherein both immateriality and materiality are admitted, necessarily means that the immaterial Platonic Ideas must cause the hanging ideas. The critical role of this liminal ontological realm in the work of Suhrawardī is such that, having been introduced, it now requires an extensive explanation. By carving out the specifics of the intermediate realm in his theory of reality, Suhrawardī effectively describes the spiritual path in its cosmic fullness, in such a way so that practical Sufism and its ethical considerations can be placed in a properly metaphysical context and provided grounding thereof in such a manner that would prove crucial to seekers thereafter. The spiritual components of Ghazālī's *Mishkāt*, and the ethical prescriptions contained therein and articulated in the context of the ontology of light, are better appreciated through the description of the Imaginal found in Suhrawardī, which provides a roadmap for spiritual wayfaring which is justified within an Ishrāqī ontological framework.

Chapter Two

Suhrawardī's Imaginal Realm in Close Ontic Focus

Suhrawardī's profound metaphysical theory is couched in the context of a support for the spiritual journey of souls on earth, back to the abode of the Divine. In his Platonist view of reality, the darkness of the material world and lower realms of reality are in contrast with the illuminative, metaphysical order which can be beheld when the sage ascends beyond the cage of bodily existence by way of spiritual purification and insight. The 'Orient of the Lights' is the symbolism used by Suhrawardī to refer to that metaphysical order, which occupies the 'above' in a vertical hierarchy of levels of reality, while the dark Occident is below. To transcend the realm of bodies and behold the 'Orient of the Lights' is the culmination of the philosophical quest for Suhrawardī, and it is in this context that he theorizes the intermediate realm between the purely material Occident and the purely immaterial Orient, which is *Mundus Imaginalis*.⁵⁴ Far from 'imaginary', in the modern and pejorative sense of the term, the Imaginal realm in Suhrawardī serves various explanatory functions in a greater theory of reality that accounts for the various grades of reality, wherein

⁵⁴ Corbin, Henry, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, Swedenborg Foundation, Westchester, 1995, pp. 1-2.

the higher levels causally determine the lower levels through many interrelations of light and its rays. This world of images is without the density of the sensible material realm, but also without the pure freedom from form that is characteristic of the realm that can be considered as properly metaphysical. Therefore, it is uniquely positioned within the greater picture of Illuminationist philosophy as a site of contact between the lower and the higher, and a conduit through which an understanding of the higher can be provided to those who seek.

The graded reality of the great chain of being is the context in which the reality of the dark bodies of the material realm can be understood; the entities of the material realm thus have their principle in the metaphysical realm and being determined thereby, through the immaterial, substantial lights corresponding to the Platonic Ideas. There are various monikers which signify Suhrawardī's *Mundus Imaginalis*, including 'the immaterial configurations' ('*Alam al-ashbah al mujarrada*), 'the world of the hanging ideas' (*al-mithal-al-munfassir*), and "the detached world of *Mundus Imaginalis*". For the Peripatetics, only intellectual forms could be considered immaterial, therefore other all other forms were seen as material. In contrast, Suhrawardī argues that Imaginal forms pertain to a world that corresponds to these forms, a world which is not itself purely material nor purely immaterial. While Imaginal forms were discussed before Suhrawardī in the Islamic intellectual tradition, Suhrawardī contributes for the first time a complete, systematic articulation of *Mundus Imaginalis* as a separate

realm. For the Peripatetics, Imaginal forms are accidents in the category of generic quality that are contained in the brain. Suhrawardī criticizes this, providing as a counter-example the instance of the form of a mountain. When the form of a mountain is encountered in the mind as an image, then if that large form as an instance of material form would be contained in my brain, an absurdity ensues whereby we would be committed, on the Peripatetic understanding, to claiming that the density and mass of the object are contained or imprinted therein.⁵⁵

Therefore, in Suhrawardī's philosophy *Mundus Imaginalis* is considered ontologically as posterior to the world of Platonic Ideas, as neither material nor part of the Platonic Ideas where the latter are immaterial, substantial lights. According to Suhrawardī, the faculty of imagination in the individual human soul is the manifestation of the immaterial Imaginal forms that are contained within *Mundus Imaginalis*. It is important to note here that in Suhrawardī's philosophy, the personal imagination of the individual subject is not differentiated from the external, independent Imaginal realm. The discussion of these Imaginal forms in Suhrawardī retains importance currency in our contemporary age, in which the perspective of scientific materialism is common in the West. As far as perception is concerned, the question can be asked of scientific materialists and those who hold positivistic points of view, as to how perception can be material. Without denying a causal relation between the

⁵⁵ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, p. 241

material body and the apprehension of visual forms, it still remains clear that a reduction of the phenomenon that is the form which appears to the mind cannot be reduced to material causality nor can it be held to be material itself. What is the nature of the forms in the Imaginal realm? Suhrawardī brings forth the example of a mirror: things that we see in a mirror are not material, rather they belong to the Imaginal realm, and are manifestations of forms in the *Mundus Imaginalis*.

The mirror is the locus of manifestation through which people have access to the Imaginal Realm. The subtlety in this point is that the claim that the mirror is the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) for the form is not the same as saying that the mirror is the locus (*mahal*) itself. By maintaining that the mirror is the locus of manifestation for Imaginal forms, Suhrawardī preserves the autonomy of the Imaginal realm within his greater ontological schema, while explaining how the higher levels of reality can have their images on the lower realms. The forms are not contained in the mirror, as the latter is a substantial material body, with density and mass. Instead, the Imaginal forms that appear in the mirror have extension but are subtle and are contained in the Imaginal realm. In the locus of manifestation that is the mirror, Imaginal forms are higher realities which manifest themselves without being material.

This discussion of the mirror has a significant symbolic function in Suhrawardī's philosophy, particularly as it pertains to the soul's movement from within the crypt of the world to that which lies beyond. With the appearance of

the immaterial Imaginal form in the locus of manifestation of the mirror, the locus of the soul is able to attain illumination through the form of the mirror. Suhrawardī likens the process to lightning being conducted to a particular material locus, where the illumination happens immediately at that place to where the lightning has been conducted. The soul's encounter with the Imaginal form has this illuminative capacity. Ultimately, the soul reaches the Imaginal forms in the *Mundus Imaginalis*, not in the mirror because the latter is material. Seeing the Imaginal form in the mirror is the preparation for the soul's eventual journey to the *Mundus Imaginalis*.⁵⁶

The reason that the forms of *Mundus Imaginalis* don't need bodies is that they exist by and in themselves, meaning as substances that are self-sufficient (though not in the sense that they are free from the causal hierarchy, which they are not) and therefore do not require a locus. Suhrawardī concludes that Imaginal forms are immaterial realities, that are substances although on the level of manifestation in the world they are accidents. They are hanging ideas, immaterial but not fully so. Suhrawardī clarifies the manner and extent in which the Imaginal realm is immaterial by contrasting it to the purely immaterial realm of Platonic Ideas, as he explains that "the hanging forms are not Platonic Ideas, for Platonic Ideas are luminous and fixed, while these ideas are hanging, dark, and luminous. Sometimes they are luminous, sometimes they are dark." (Vol. II

⁵⁶ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, p 211-215; also Shāhrazādī, Qutb al-Dīn, *Sharh Hikmat al-Ishrāq* p. 475.

p.230) He explains that his theory of the Imaginal realm was arrived at through intellectual intuition and realization, as he writes: "I have had many intuitions in which I have realized that apart from the dominating lights and the immaterial intellects, there exists the Imaginal realm."⁵⁷

Suhrawardī's understanding of *Mundus Imaginalis* is further commentated upon and interpreted in the school of Ishrāqī philosophy which he founded, and one such influential interpretation is provided by Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī, who writes:

Verily, it is obvious that we have certain Imaginal forms in our perception, and these Imaginal forms, because of the impossibility of the imprinting of that which is large in that which is small, they cannot be of material reality. They are also not in the external material world, because if that were the case every person would see them. They are also not nonexistent, for if they were nonexistent we would not be able to perceive them. In addition, from the point of view that Imaginal forms have certain attributes of matter such as form and quantity, it could not be said of them that they are among the intellects. Therefore, there has to exist a level of existence in which they could be found, and that world is *Mundus Imaginalis*, which is below the level of Platonic Ideas. From the point of view that it is not material, it is higher than matter, and from the point of view that it has quantity and form, it is below the intellects. The Imaginal forms have more immateriality than the material things and less immateriality than the intellectual realities.⁵⁸

This exposition is an example of the systematic nature of Ishrāqī thought, and the thoroughness with which the Imaginal realm has been theorized therein. Any reduction of the phenomena of Imaginal forms to lower levels of reality is resisted, and the analysis of the Imaginal forms yields the result that these forms

⁵⁷ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, p 232.

⁵⁸ Shīrāzī, Qutb al-Dīn, *Sharh Hikmat al-Ishrāqī*, p. 470.

that are apprehended cannot belong to the imagination in the negative sense of the term, which indicates mere subjective fancy. Instead, the qualitative aspects of the forms, as well as their numerical multiplicity preclude their belonging to the world of immaterial substantial lights, wherein inhere simple entities that are without extension.

Thus the Imaginal forms that are perceived must have a place that is not in the external material world, and reference to this place as below the orders of longitudinal and latitudinal lights which make up the properly metaphysical Orient is elaborated by Ishrāqīs as in accordance with the vision of reality achieved through spiritual practice and philosophical endeavor by the Ancient Platonists. Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī emphasizes this point citing the same figures as Suhrawardī, explaining that the hanging forms cannot be identical to Platonic Ideas, and that this was the position of the visionary sages such as "Plato, Socrates, Pythagoras, Empedocles, and other predecessors", who also "conceived of Platonic luminous intellectual forms" while relating accounts of witnessing "hanging Imaginal forms that are not in matter, that receive light and are dark." Thoughts, or the world of mind, function "as a locus of manifestation for those Imaginal, immaterial forms existing in *Mundus Imaginalis*" according to Shīrāzī, and the great chain of being can be divided into two worlds, with the first, luminous portion including the Divine Realm and the realm of intellects, while the world of forms is divided further into "the world of material forms in the sense of the spheres, elements, and the realm of earth, and *Mundus Imaginalis*,

that is the world of apparitions." Suhrawardī himself relates that he has "had trustworthy experiences indicating that there are four worlds: the worlds of the dominating lights, of the managing lights, of the barriers, and of the dark and illumined suspended images."⁵⁹ Here by barriers it can be understood that he is speaking of bodies, and he further goes on to explain that jinn and devils come forth from the hanging ideas.

With the Imaginal Realm being thus positioned and described as lacking qualities of both the dense material realm and the purely intelligible realm, Suhrawardī utilizes the Imaginal Realm toward providing theoretical explanations for a number of spiritual and philosophical realities. The intuitions of the sages and the Prophets, the reality of dreaming and mirrors, and the problem of bodily resurrection are some examples of phenomena which are explained metaphysically by way of *Mundus Imaginalis*. The particular case of bodily resurrection is a crucial issue of importance to Islamic Philosophy due to the religious and Qur'anic basis for the position that bodily resurrection does indeed take place. Ibn Sina could not explain bodily resurrection through philosophical proof, and instead said that he accepted the doctrine of bodily resurrection only because it came through the medium of prophecy. On the other hand, Suhrawardī provides a philosophical understanding of the doctrine of bodily resurrection, wherein he claims that bodily resurrection takes place in

⁵⁹ Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, p. 149.

Mundus Imaginalis, wherein the body is an Imaginal form.⁶⁰ This is a philosophical position which is in accordance with an understanding of the spiritual journey of souls in the world, and is accompanied by a hierarchic division of practitioners of religion. He divides people into two groups - those who have reached salvation and those who are damned. Among the people who have reached salvation there is a further subdivision into two groups - the most perfect ones and the intermediary ones. For the intermediate levels of the people who have reached salvation, paradise will be formal, and so the vivid forms such as flowing rivers which are related in the literal word of the Qur'an have their correspondence in the outward aspect of heaven for these people. But the most perfect ones have gone beyond the level of forms, and will experience pure intellectual pleasures, where they will become unified with the intellects and pure lights. For the damned ones, resurrection will be also be formal, as for the intermediary ones who have attained salvation. In opposition to the intermediary level of the people who have reached salvation, the forms of the damned ones are not of light but are dark. The bodily resurrection of the damned ones and the intermediary ones among the saved thus both occur the Imaginal realm.⁶¹

When describing the characteristics of *Mundus Imaginalis*, Suhrawardī explains that "The resurrection of images, the lordly forms, and all the promises

⁶⁰ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 229-230.

⁶¹ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 234-235.

of prophecies find their reality through it."⁶² Thus, *Mundus Imaginalis* functions as a site by which the unseen is communicated to the sensible realm. Whenever Prophets and Saints receive inspiration or revelation, it is from *Mundus Imaginalis*, and when we sleep, our dreams are also from *Mundus Imaginalis*. Suhrawardī sets forth three proofs in particular to support the demonstrate that dreams have to occur in the Imaginal realm and not the material realm. First, Suhrawardī explains that very large entities that can be dreamed of, such as the example of the mountain, could not be contained in the mind as material forms.⁶³ Further, he explains that the fact that the images that we see in dreams are not there when we awaken shows that those images are not from an external material place. Lastly, Suhrawardī notes that when we wake up from seeing the forms of *Mundus Imaginalis* and come back to the material world, this process does not happen due to a cause of material motion, which is to say not through one of the types of movements such as by gravity, force, etc. Therefore *Mundus Imaginalis* is not material.

IV. Souls, Imaginal Perception and Other Uses of *Mundus Imaginalis* in Suhrawardī

One of the consequences of Suhrawardī's view of *Mundus Imaginalis* is that Imaginal perception has certain conditions and modalities. According to his philosophy, we have Imaginal organs corresponding to the material sense

⁶² Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, p. 150.

⁶³ Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, pp. 153-154.

organs. The Imaginal sense organs are independent of the material sense organs, and impairment or deficiency of material eyes, ears, etc. has no effect upon their Imaginal counterparts. The sound of the spheres is of an Imaginal nature, as there is no air between them and so hearing the sounds of the spheres on the material plane is impossible. "From the fact that these hanging ideas are perceived but their perception is not attributed to *sensus communis*, alignment is not a condition for seeing in an absolute sense, but rather only for the power of sight concerning material realities."⁶⁴ This is to say that visual perception, which does not occur when an object is obscured by another opaque material reality, is not the same as that kind of Imaginal perception that occurs through the Imaginal eye. Suhrawardī further discusses the Imaginal instrument of hearing, in explaining how it is that the sound of the spheres can be heard, in lieu of the ancients holding there to be any air between the spheres. He writes:

Verily for the spheres there are sounds that are not caused by that which is present among us, and we explained that sound is different from the waving of the air. All that we can say in that regard is that sound is only conditioned by the waving of air in the material world. But one cannot conclude from the fact that one reality is the condition for the existence of something in one position, that this would be the case in all cases. And it should not be said that what the people of intuition hear from thunderous sounds is caused by the waving of air in our brain, since the waving sound cannot be thought of in that realm in relation to our brains. Therefore, that waving in this case is the hanging idea of voice, which itself is a type of voice...for spheres there is hearing that is not conditioned by ears, and seeing that is not conditioned by eyes, and smelling that is not conditioned with the existence of a nose. The fact that senses are not limited and conditioned by their material means is already proved through the principle of the most noble contingency.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, p. 234.

⁶⁵ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, pp. 241-242.

Thus, not only does Suhrawardī distinguish between the two types of perception which occur as analogues in the Imaginal and material realms, respectively, but he goes further to substantiate a causal priority and relation between the two senses. By citing the principle of most noble contingency as proof for the fact that senses are not limited to the matrix of material causal factors, he positions *Mundus Imaginalis* in the greater ontological context of the science of lights, and shows that there is a particular symbolic character to material perception which points toward a corresponding, ontologically prior cause pertaining to a higher grade of reality. The Illuminationist principle of the most noble contingency states that "if a baser contingent exists, then a nobler contingent must have already existed",⁶⁶ and in order to illustrate the function of this principle in his metaphysics, Suhrawardī takes the example of the relationship between the dominating light, which is entirely corporeal, and the managing light, stating that the dominating light "being further from connections with darkness...is nobler" than the managing light.⁶⁷ This being the case, if we start our investigation from the point of view of material reality and sensible perception which functions on this particular plane of reality, then the principle of most noble contingent states that the senses of the material plane have their principle in an ontological plane which is above them, but which is still contingent and is

⁶⁶ Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, p. 107.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

not the Light of Lights, which is unitary in aspect and only existentiates the Most Proximate Light. Just as there is an Imaginal body that is not conditioned by causal features from the purely material realm, there must therefore be senses pertaining to that realm of *Mundus Imaginalis* which are themselves not subservient to material causes for their functioning.

Another usage of *Mundus Imaginalis* within Suhrawardī's philosophy is in the miracles performed by the Saints. The 'arif has the creative ability to say the word 'Be' (*kun*) in the Imaginal realm, and that sound takes the form of an Imaginal reality. He explains that:

The brethren of incorporeality have a special station in which they are able to bring into existence self-subsistent images in whatever form they desire. This is called 'the station of 'Be'. Whoever sees that station knows with certainty the existence of a world other than that of barriers. In it are self-subsistence images and managing angels, taking for themselves talismans and self-subsistent forms by which they speak and are evident. From there flow violent attacks and overwhelming seizures by astonishing images and sounds of which the imagination can in no wise tell. How very strange that a man hears that sound in a certain incorporeality and attends to it, finding at that moment that his imagination also listens to it, though that sound is from a suspended image! Whoever has experienced this in his divine trances as he ascends will not return until he has ascended from level to level of the agreeable forms. The more perfect is his ascent, the purer and more delightful will be his contemplation of forms. Thereafter, he will penetrate the world of light and finally reach the Light of Lights.⁶⁸

Thus, the sage is able to create forms in *Mundus Imaginalis*, and these forms can be apprehended in the material world by certain others, when they appear in a locus of manifestation befitting them. Managing lights make themselves

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 155.

apparent in *Mundus Imaginalis*, taking on Imaginal bodies, where the sage is able to encounter them. The hadith of Gabriel, in which the angel Gabriel appears to the Prophet Muhammad in a man's body within this material world, is an example of how the angels as higher realities are able to manifest themselves within lower realms by utilizing apparent bodies which are at the same time not identical to the angels themselves. While the sage can travel to *Mundus Imaginalis*, as he has transcended the material realm through spiritual purification and *Mundus Imaginalis* has been shown to be above the material realm, Suhrawardī nonetheless reminds the reader that the greater degrees of spiritual wayfaring lead beyond this intermediate, formal realm of *Mundus Imaginalis* toward the formless, substantial, immaterial Orient of the lights, and ultimately to the height of the great chain of being, the Light of Lights.

Thus, there is a crucial place in *Mundus Imaginalis* for souls, those who are saved but not among the highest, who have transcended all formal reality. The souls of spheres create hanging ideas so that these hanging ideas will be manifestations of the souls of those spheres for the pure among the wayfarers. Those forms that are created by the souls of the spheres are of the nature of light, as opposed to other dark forms which exist in *Mundus Imaginalis*. From the realities of the souls of the people who have reached salvation in *Mundus Imaginalis* comes into existence certain angelic forms, which represent faculties and virtues existing in their souls. And because of the correspondence that exists between the souls and the spheres, each virtue or angel is related to a sphere, and

those angels belong to the governing spheres. Suhrawardī describes the soul of each sphere on the basis of these qualities, as the angel in the Imaginal Realm has as its locus of manifestation the spheres. As he explains: "Certain intermediate souls possess illumined suspended figures whose loci are the spheres."⁶⁹ While the eschatological significance and functions of *Mundus Imaginalis* are thus treated in depth in Suhrawardī's works, he again in this context maintains the key point of spiritual significance in accordance with his hierarchically graded metaphysical exposition, namely that this is not the highest goal to which an aspirant can attain, as he explains that "the sanctified godly sages may rise higher than the world of the angels."⁷⁰

Finally, it remains to note that Suhrawardī also makes use of *Mundus Imaginalis* in order to provide a proof for the existence of the soul and its immateriality, something that is critical to his spiritual vision, and that of traditional Islamic philosophy. He argues that sometimes we find ourselves in our material bodies, and sometimes we identify ourselves with the Imaginal body that we have, for instance in a dream that is particularly encapsulating. Therefore, we can be identified by neither of the two bodies, because if we were to maintain that either one of the bodies were our self, then we would not be ourselves in the other body. Therefore, the soul is beyond the world of forms,

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 150.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

material or immaterial, and is a light.⁷¹ There are certain complications which arise with the consideration of souls with respect to *Mundus Imaginalis*, however. First, recall that the forms in *Mundus Imaginalis* don't require a material body for their existence in their particular level of reality. The substance that can be called soul, however, requires body in order to function and maintain its reality as soul. The aspect of transcendence for this substance is called spirit, and the same substance is properly called soul when it has corresponding body. Since dependence upon body, which is a darkness, is inferior to independence with respect to body, one can ask a question about the matter of ontological priority: are souls beyond *Mundus Imaginalis* or beneath them?

Later ishrāqi thought deals with this problem of souls in an original manner not explicitly mentioned in Suhrawardī. Figures such as Qutb-al-Dīn Shīrāzī and Shahrazūrī maintain that there are two types of Platonic Ideas, effectively positing a hierarchic division among the latitudinal lights. Ideas that issue forth from the aspect of the Most Dominating Lights of collective witnessing (*mushāhadah*) of the higher lights are the higher type of Ideas. From the aspect of illumination (Ishrāq) of the Most Dominating Lights comes the lower type of Ideas.⁷² Then, the higher type of Ideas produce *Mundus Imaginalis*, while the lower type of Ideas produce and dominate over the material realm and souls. While such an explanation is not explicit in Suhrawardī's exposition, the

⁷¹ Suhrawardī, *Opera Vol. II*, p. 244.

⁷² Shīrāzī, Qutb al-Dīn, *Sharh Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, p. 352; also Shahrazūrī p. 370.

attempt to resolve this problem by later thinkers of the Illuminationist school shows the originality of the Illuminationist tradition. The interpretation is not entirely satisfactory however, as while it is true that the Platonic Ideas are not without a hierarchy, in the sense that certain Ideas are more perfect than others (for example the Idea corresponding to man is more perfect than the Idea corresponding to a plant), such a hierarchy is not described by Suhrawardī in ontological terms in the sense of causality existing among the lights of the latitudinal order. Positing two types of Platonic Ideas in an Illuminationist context would have to be achieved in a manner which avoided such a claim of causality between the Ideas, and due to the nature of light and its rays in the Orient of lights, and in particular the inevitable causality that such a hierarchic subdivision of Platonic Ideas would imply, it is not clear how this is possible.

Conclusion

This exposition of Suhrawardī's philosophy has focused on the Ontology of Lights and the Imaginal Realm in order to show how the human subject is constituted as a knowing, seeking spiritual entity that can only be truly given meaning in full view of a graded, Neoplatonic vision of reality wherein spiritual progress as the ascension through levels of reality is the only true ethical good for the individual. This spiritual wayfaring is at the same time epistemic, and in expounding this theory of reality, Suhrawardī provides a notion of knowledge as light that allows him to point seekers in the direction of gnosis, and to distinguish the status of those who have attained esoteric truths, in a manner that

expounds upon and further grounds the sapience that Ghazālī claims as the epistemic warrant for his vision of reality as proffered in the *Mishkāt*. The Platonic Ideas play an important role in Suhrawardī's philosophy of Illumination not only because of their explanatory power for the highest workings of the rational mind, but because they are immaterial substantial lights which can be beheld at the end of the mystical quest, and so are the goal of the intellect in its totality. In the quest to know the Divine, the Platonic Ideas are understood in Suhrawardī as rungs high on the ladder of reality, which in their luminosity symbolize proximity to the Origin and goal that is the Light of Lights. The light-ontology presented in Ghazālī's *Mishkāt* can in many ways be seen as planting the seed from which the Platonist Ishrāqī elaboration was eventually to be produced, as tree or fruit. With Suhrawardī's Ishrāqī system and its core Platonist elements having been explained, a closer examination of Ghazālī's utilization of the symbol of light in his *Mishkāt* can be approached whereby it will be seen that Ghazālī can be better understood in light of the theoretical intricacy of the later Illuminationist philosophical tradition of Suhrawardī, and that the oversights and limitations which can be claimed in Ghazālī's typology of knowers and ontology of light can be remedied in light of the Platonist elaborations later set forth in Ishrāqī thought.

Chapter Three

The Symbol of Light in Ghazālī's *Mishkāt*

Qur'anic Origins of Light Symbolism: Scriptural Sources of Islamic Sapience

Having discussed Suhrawardī's philosophy at length, and examined how light is used as the anchoring symbol that features in his exposition of reality, it is pertinent at this point to pause and consider the scriptural basis of Islamic metaphysical articulation in terms of light: namely the famous light verse in the Qur'an [24:35], which appears in Surāt al-Nūr (Light). The verse is rendered as follows:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche, wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as a shining star kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West. Its oil would well-nigh shine forth, even if no fire had touched it. Light upon light. God guides unto His Light whomsoever He will, and God sets forth parables for mankind, and God is Knower of all things.⁷³

The power of such a verse did not go without notice in the Islamic Intellectual tradition, and Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* is written as a commentary on this verse. Ghazālī uses the light verse to produce a model for spiritual hermeneutics,

⁷³Nasr, Seyyed Hossein; Dagli, Caner K.; Dakake, Maria Massi; Lombard, Joseph E.B.; Rustom, Mohammed (2015-11-17). *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (Kindle Locations 41553-41555). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

as well as to produce a metaphysical theory which is motivated by the need to present the goal of the spiritual path and its noetic dimension to the capable seeker. Just as with Suhrawardī's *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, the intended audience is an esoteric one, and engaging with theological debates (as Ghazālī does throughout the *'Ihyā*) is not a major objective of the work. Instead, the presentation of an integral metaphysics serves to set forth a sort of Platonism that will need to be examined closely, but which mirrors the more elaborate ideas which are to come in Suhrawardī's articulation of Platonic Ideas, while falling short of doing so due to various constraints as well as the eschewing of philosophical discourse and forms of argumentation. Nonetheless, the light-verse is a direct scriptural mention of God as Light, and provides justification for articulating a vision of reality through the symbolism of light and darkness. The consequences of such a symbolism and such a notion of Divinity are manifold, but certainly they include understandings of Divinity and cosmology or cosmogony that are in line with those of the Islamic philosophical tradition, including the emanationism which Ghazālī refutes in his work against the philosophers, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (*Incoherence of the Philosophers*).

While the "Neoplatonic" character of the *Mishkāt* has appeared as an intractable problem to many Western Islamicists (W.H.T. Gairdner's famous paper was, after all, titled "Al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and the Ghazālī Problem"), I argue that in fact this apparent contradiction between Ghazālī as an orthodox theologically Ash'āri figure and the presence of such ideas which more

closely resemble something from certain philosophers or more ecstatic Sufis is due to an adherence not to a historically contingent and particularized school, but to membership under a broader sapiential paradigm. Thus, Suhrawardī's example is particularly illustrative in speaking the truth about Ghazālī, since we realize that when sapiential signifiers such as "light" find their way into Islamic intellectual texts, then the possibilities of their use ultimately include various formulations that are concomitant with core metaphysical principles of Platonism, where the latter term at least signifies a relation between principle and manifestation in which a pristine metaphysical plenary is juxtaposed with its increasingly dim reflections in a corrupted world below, and finally the distinct possibility of spiritual wayfaring and gnosis in accordance with climbing the rungs up the great chain of being.

Situating Ghazālī's Autobiographical Epistemology: The Deliverance from Error

While the contours of the Islamic intellectual tradition are inclusive of various disciplines and perspectives, al-Ghazālī is distinguished among his peers by his wide range of mastery of the sciences, both inward and outward, and moreover by the wide range of readers who came to accept his authority in multiple fields. The Sufism that he expounded through his works was based on a balance between the outward and legal aspects of religion on the one hand and the inward dimensions on the other. His expansive knowledge of *fiqh* and its associated disciplines is displayed throughout his magnum opus titled *Thyā ulūm*

al-dīn, or *The Revivification of the Sciences of the Religion*, but while this monumental work deals with a plethora of subjects, it is meant at least for a wide scholarly audience, and is not as metaphysically explicit as Ghazālī's later, short work which is our focus here, called the *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, or *Niche of Lights*. The scholarly work that has been done on Ghazālī's life by recent scholars such as F. Griffel is impressive in allowing us to plot a fairly precise timeline of his many scholarly works, but in truth the essence of his intellectual and spiritual development as Ghazālī himself saw it is readily available in Ghazālī's own spiritual autobiography *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (*The Deliverance from Error*).

As far as the biographical details of Ghazālī's life go, a young Ghazālī and his brother Ahmad, who went on to become a famous Sufi poet, were left under the care of a Sufi upon the death of their father.⁷⁴ Over time, he grew to excel in his academic career, and went on to study under the greatest scholar in the Muslim world at the time, the celebrated Imām al-Juwayni in Nishapur. Ghazālī later found the favor of the Seljuk vizier Nizām al-Mulk, and became the leading figure at the vizier's eponymous school in Baghdad. The crucial point in his personal narrative, both in the eyes of the great Ghazālī himself as well as à propos the topic of sapience, came sometime around 1095 AD when a profound spiritual crisis caused Ghazālī to leave his post in Baghdad and lead the life of a wandering ascetic. Though he did return to the Nizamiyyah for a short period of time, he ended his life in 1111AD back in his native city of Tūs.

⁷⁴ Griffel, Frank, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, p. 23-25.

Though the relatively accurate descriptive term for Ghazālī's *Munqidh* has been 'spiritual autobiography', S.R. Zamir insightfully points out that this term requires some qualification, and that for Ghazālī the work is "...primarily a detailed account of his epistemology; it is autobiographical insofar as epistemological questions are raised and replied to".⁷⁵ In this vein, Ghazālī narrates the particular parts of his life in such a manner as to shed light on the quest for knowledge of various sorts, and takes account of rational and supra-rational modes of knowing while describing his experiences with intellectual disciplines in the quest for certainty. His spiritual crisis is further articulated in clearly epistemic terms, and while he describes his lifelong quest for certain foundations of knowledge, he explains that "...I felt an inner urge to seek the true meaning of the original fitra, and the true meaning of the beliefs arising through slavish aping of parents and teachers...", and it is this inner motivation which guides his wayfaring.⁷⁶ The fundamental realization as he describes it is relation to the apodeictic certainty with which mathematical truths were known, that "...whatever I did not know in this way and was not certain of with this kind of certainty was unreliable and unsure knowledge, and that every knowledge unaccompanied by safety from error is not sure and certain knowledge."⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Zamir, Syed Rizwan, "Descartes and Al-Ghazālī: Doubt, Certitude and Light", p 223, in *Islamic Studies* Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 219-251.

⁷⁶ al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance From Error*, translated by R.J. McCarthy, Fons Vitae, Louisville, 1999, p. 55.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Though the similarities between Ghazālī's search for certainty and that of the modern philosopher Descartes have been duly noted by a number of scholars, we would turn again to R. S. Zamir and O. Bakar, who have both shown the relative inaccuracy in attributing the modern philosophical attitude to Ghazālī's project.⁷⁸ In support of the view that Ghazālī's search for certainty is distinctly non-modern in motivation and method, it must be noted that Ghazālī did not stop at attempting to utilize ratiocinative methods in order to produce. While giving mathematics its due, he sought out the spiritual method and sapiential kernel which was at the heart of Sufism. The foundational certainty that he sought would ground all sciences and function as an epistemic anchor; he explains specifically that "It may be that this state beyond reason is that which the sufis claim is theirs", citing the phenomena of unveiling that comes through Sufi practice as the noetic ideal.⁷⁹ Ghazālī insightfully acknowledges that the supra-rational possibilities of Sufism could only truly be denied in discursivity through a rational process of *reductio*, but that engaging in such an endeavor would already imply a subjugation to the epistemic hegemony and rules of rationality. Instead, he emphasizes that he did accept the reliability of rationality and sensory data, but not via the route of rational proof itself. Instead he writes that "...it was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast...that light is the key to most knowledge."⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Zamir, "Descartes and al-Ghazālī", p. 220-221.

⁷⁹ al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, p. 57.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

In masterfully articulating his own journey which culminates in achieving certainty through this non-rational process of taste (*dhawq*), Ghazālī uses the *Munqidh* to show how all rational and empirical knowledge must be grounded in a supra-rational principle which can only be uncovered in the heart and is tantamount to a light. While the use of light in this context is important in showing us how light is at the core of epistemology for Ghazālī (just as was to be the case for Suhrawardī), it is also important to bear this in mind when considering that Ghazālī also provides an typology and ranking of different sorts of knowers in the *Munqidh*. He cites four “categories of those who seek the truth”, which are: 1. The *Mutakallimūn* (dialectical theologians), 2. The Bātinītes (an amalgam of groups associated with esoteric knowledge and Imāmi, including the Ismāʿīlis), 3. The Philosophers (Peripatetics or *faylasūf*), and 4. The Sufis.

Ghazālī explains that he mastered the methods and ways of knowledge of all these groups, and points out limitations of each, while in the end claiming that the Sufis have the best method insofar as it allows access to the sort of certainty which is the longing that drives the narrative of his whole life’s journey. His censure of the subject of philosophy is worth noting, and although it is more fully articulated in his *Tahāfut* nonetheless it remains the fact that while Suhrawardī was to appreciate the limitations of Peripatetic, exclusively ratiocinative forms of philosophizing, unlike Ghazālī he is able to utilize the epistemic ground provided by the knowledge of the self as light in order to produce a full philosophical system. Ghazālī instead remains wary of

metaphysical speculation that can go awry from the camp of philosophers, and one of his key points of contention is that the treatment of bodily death and resurrection proffered by philosophers goes against the credal commitments of Muslims. He explains that for these philosophers, "...men's bodies will not be assembled on the Last Day, but only disembodied spirits will be rewarded and punished, and the rewards and punishments will be spiritual, not corporal."⁸¹

As has been discussed, Suhrawardī shows how this sort of contention can be satisfactorily dispatched by philosophers if their metaphysical schemata are appropriately calibrated such that human souls are theorized according to the reality of the Orient of Lights, and the Imaginal Realm is also taken as the site in which formal - if not entirely physical in the sense of bodies on the purely terrestrial level - and post-mortem events continue to occur at the death of the physical world as we know it and its entities. Though Ghazālī provided criticisms of Ibn Sīnā and Peripateticism that were not invalid from what would later be an Ishrāqī perspective, and he also provided epistemological and metaphysical paths to certainty and gnosis in the example of the Sufis that would be acceptable from the sapiential perspective of the Ishrāqī tradition, he was unable to connect his criticisms and findings into one philosophical framework as Suhrawardī came to do. Ultimately, in reading the *Munqidh* and *Mishkāt* together, the ontology and metaphysics of light that is provided in the *Mishkāt* must be coupled with the epistemological insights of the *Munqidh*. Due to the

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 66.

lack of an overarching philosophical system, the ontological and epistemological limitations of the perspective cannot be resolved at once, but in approaching these texts with Suhrawardī's systematic insights in mind, it becomes clearer that it is the common symbol of light as the signifier of sapience which connects the texts, where light functions at the ontological and metaphysical pole on the one hand as the fabric of reality, and at the epistemological pole on the other hand as the only true certainty, achieved by the soul which in being light at once can know that reality which it 'is'.

***Mishkāt al-Anwār* and Light-Ontology in Ghazālī**

The *Mishkāt al-Anwār* has proved to be an enigmatic, later text for Ghazālī, dated after the famous and much larger *'Ihyā'*, and written as an esoteric commentary on the light verse of the Qur'an [24:35] as well as the hadith about God's veils.⁸² David Buchman claims that Ghazālī establishes "a metaphysics of light – which includes an ontology and an epistemology – and interrelated cosmological and psychological schemes based upon this metaphysics" from a Sufi perspective, and uses this edifice to interpret the light verse and hadith of veils.⁸³ While this is certainly Ghazālī's intention in the work, it is not clear that he achieves this objective to the same degree as Suhrawardī does in his articulation of the philosophy of illumination, where the precise contours of the hierarchic levels of reality are explicated with precision. Nonetheless, it is the

⁸² Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, translated by David Buchman, BYU Press, 1998, p. xvii.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, xvii.

case that Ghazālī's presentation of the notion of light is by way of a crucial definition that Suhrawardī is to make use of in his work, and also that his elaboration of the world of dominion is tantamount to a Platonist, proto-Ishrāqī metaphysics which is in accordance with the philosophical goal that comes through in Suhrawardī.

In describing light, Ghazālī acknowledges that the apparent meaning of light, for common people, is that of the apparent, visible manifestation in the realm of the physical world. Even on this outward level, light "consists of that which is seen in itself and through which other things are seen, such as the sun."⁸⁴ The definition which Suhrawardī makes explicit use of in his work is articulated by Ghazālī, who writes that "...light is that which is manifest and makes manifest", but while the title light can be given to the visible light that is seen, then Ghazālī makes the crucial epistemic observation that the "seeing light" is more worthy of the name still. While this distinction is made first on the plane of the visible and sensory world, it reflects first and foremost that gradation is a principle by which epistemic and metaphysical realities can be distinguished from one another and described, or otherwise approached through encounter and experience. The outward realities, both in terms of sensory knowledge as well as modes of knowing, are similitudes for increasingly inward forms of knowing and objects of knowledge. The imperfections of the outward eye are enumerated, but the key point is made that "It sees other things while not seeing

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

itself”, and further that freedom from imperfections is the true measure by which something can be affirmed as “light”.⁸⁵ True light, as in Suhrawardī later and in the *Mishkāt*, is crucially self-aware.

Just as with Suhrawardī, Ghazālī explores the theme of light not only by taking account of the sense in which light can be ascribed to various contingent, worldly entities, as relatively real to some degree or another, or of having epistemic efficacy of one degree or another, but more crucially by going forth toward the metaphysical realm beyond imperfections. This crucially entails delving into angelology in order to describe the levels of lights. Ghazālī articulates a hierarchy of lights that, in the epistemic aspect accounts for how light as knowledge flows downward from the Divine Reality and kindles the many grades of intellects, while in the ontological aspect flows downward to the most impoverished levels of reality. He articulates this Neoplatonic worldview in a manner strangely akin to the way in which Suhrawardī utilizes his principle of the most noble contingent, namely by showing that if there is hierarchy, priority, and light in the lower levels of reality, then that hierarchy can be traced through the chain of reality in ascension a fortiori, until the most luminous Source is reached. Ghazālī puts it thus: “If the heavenly lights from which the earthly lights become kindled have a hierarchy such that one light kindles

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

another, then the light nearest to the First Source is more worthy of the name 'light' because it is highest in level." ⁸⁶

Knowledge and the Knower in *Mishkāt*

In articulating the structure of reality and the greater possibilities for gnosis, Ghazālī must ultimately articulate for the seeker the state of the true gnostic, and in so doing he deals with the traditional Sufi questions regarding the state of annihilation(*fanā'*) and subsistence(*baqā'*) at the end of the path. Of the saint that has reached and surpassed the state of annihilation, he writes that "...he is conscious neither of himself in that state, nor of his own unconsciousness of himself..."⁸⁷ Though this statement is not unlike various Sufi formulations, it is significant in the context of self-knowledge and light as expounded by Suhrawardī, that light is aware and knowing of itself, and further that the seeker is able to transcend his or her bodily, sensory limitations only by virtue of the sort of intellection which involves true self knowledge, or knowledge of the self as light which knows itself. The termination of the spiritual quest as described by Ghazālī here then can be understood as self-knowledge, where a non-propositional mode of knowing beyond duality is achieved. This is further to say that the self or light as axiomatic principle in Suhrawardī's philosophy is fully realized in Ghazālī's notion of *fanā'*, where it is not an individual self attaining light through knowledge of particular, even

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

noble propositions and concepts, but rather an annihilation of the separative subject which is called provisionally as self. This extinction in the Divine Reality can be speculated as Self-Knowledge, as light knowing light, and true metaphysics borne of the sort of certainty that Ghazālī yearns for in the *Munqidh* is then understood as knowledge only if it is the case in which God alone, as the True Light, knows God.

Ghazālī explicates for the seeker his theory of knowledge and its provenance by connecting the realization of *tawhīd*, or God's Unity, with its source. He writes about this type of saintly knower that:

Hence, the monuments of this person who has realized God's unity come from the heaven of this world. His sensations, like hearing and seeing, come from a higher heaven, and his rational faculty (*'aql*) is above that. He climbs from the heaven of the rational faculty (*'aql*) to the utmost degree of the ascent of the creatures.⁸⁸

While it is crucial to Ghazālī's Sufi theory of reality that he explains the hierarchical order of reality and knowers in such a manner, his ascription of *'aql* to the saintly figures surely has deeper implications than the translation provided by Buchman- where *'aql* is equated with rational faculty - would allow. In particular, it is worth noting again that for Suhrawardī, the levels of knowers included, in ascending order: those who had the fire for knowledges and were neophytes, then the philosophers of discursive knowledge, then the mystics and Sufis of pure taste, and finally the true gnostics who have mastered both discursive knowledge and experiential knowledge. Ghazālī surely had the

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

experiential Sufi at the height of his hierarchy of knowers, as his disdain for the philosophical quest (in spite of his positive appraisal of the field of logic) meant that he did not endorse the philosophical method as a propaedeutic to the way of gnosis, unlike Suhrawardī.

In the *Mishkāt*, Ghazālī describes those who “are firmly rooted in knowledge” as those who “never see a thing except to see God before it”, and the righteous as those who “never see a thing except that they see God along with it”.⁸⁹ All that remains are those he calls the heedless and veiled. The epistemic process for those who are not heedless and veiled is described so that everything becomes manifest to inward insight through God, just as things become manifest to the eyesight through the outward light.

Ghazālī explains that “God is with everything and not separate from it. Then He makes everything manifest.”⁹⁰ This theological formulation serves a deep epistemic purpose as well, as Ghazālī explains that this is analogous to how light is with things and makes them manifest, except that in that Divine Light - through which everything becomes manifest - cannot conceivably disappear. In this way, he shows a bit of the influence of the philosophers, and though he does not talk of modality vis-a-vis being, it can be said that the Divine Light is spoken of in such a way in relation to other lights such that it might be called Necessary Light. Despite his disavowal of the Peripatetics on grounds that they violate

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

central Islamic teachings, his further statement regarding the Divine Light in relation to the cosmos (or the world of things) could be misread in a way similar to the rather ungenerous treatment that Ghazālī offers Ibn Sīnā, as he clarifies his discourse on the Divine Light: “Or, rather, it is impossible for it to change, so it remains perpetually with the things.”⁹¹

The upshot of these arguments are clear as far as the grounding of a light-based language of metaphysics is concerned. What is overcome is any form of dualism, and it is the central goal of *tawhīd* that Ghazālī’s metaphysics of light thus serves. He explains that through this line of reasoning:

...the way of drawing conclusions about God through separation is cut off. If we suppose that God’s light were to disappear, then the heavens and the earth would be destroyed. Because of this separation, something would be perceived that would force one to recognize that it makes things manifest. But since all things are exactly the same in testifying to the oneness of their Creator, differences disappear and the way becomes hidden.⁹²

Here he has considered the counterfactual case, in which the hypothetical case is considered in which God’s light were to disappear. The immediate effects are such that without a fundamental fabric of reality, as provided by the grades of lights which emanate from the Divine Light, the various contingent levels of reality would be impossible as well. As if noticing the potential pitfall of taking such an argument as a rigorous, logically construed, formal proof in Peripatetic fashion, Ghazālī immediately deals a deft argument against those who wish to

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., p. 25-7

apply dialectical and logically bounded methodologies to the theoretical discourse of Divine Reality and Light. He writes:

The obvious way to reach knowledge is through opposites. But when something neither changes nor has opposites, all states are alike in giving witness to it. Hence, it is not unreasonable that God's light be hidden, that its hiddenness drive from the intensity of its disclosures, and that heedlessness of it stems from the radiance of its brightness.⁹³

This key passage points beyond the path that is necessary for reasoning about particular, contingent realities when the goal in question is true knowledge of God, and by bringing light as well as the distinction between the manifest and unmanifest light of the Divine to the fore of the debate, it allows for a rational appreciation of the Source of light as being beyond the limitative categories of reason. The circular problem as to which science is prior, metaphysics or epistemology, is only mitigated by a common principle of knowing and being, so that the process of knowing is not separate from what "is". This passage works toward articulating this common ground through light. It achieves this by showing how an 'entity' (or at least a reality that is provisionally treated as an entity similar to others in some sense or another) that has a metaphysical nature which can only be described in such a way as to preclude the possibility of ordinarily important epistemic processes - namely those which rely upon oppositions - from facilitating its encounter, presents a concomitant epistemic simplicity in that all things *ipso facto* come to bear witness to it, and in at least one

⁹³ Ibid.

sense *know* it. Dialectics function by way of opposition, and concepts considered rationally must always be subject to an epistemic procedure which takes propositions as 'true' or 'false' in binary fashion, where each of the two scenarios presents an alternate scenario which serves as its opposite or counterpart. If this process cannot be applied to some entity or reality, then it would seem to follow that rational processes are entirely futile in the quest for true knowledge of that reality; since the single, Divine Reality is beyond change and opposition, Ghazālī here shows openness to the suggestion that discursive philosophy is rather useless in the endeavor to really know God, and his vindication of the Sufi path as the true means to apprehend Divine Light does not require a positive valuation of the Peripatetic philosophical method as propaedeutic, even while he praises the science of logic.

In the end, Suhrawardī's philosophy is able to respond to the challenge posed by Ghazālī. Suhrawardī provides a more fully developed metaphysics, ontology, and explicitly grounded ontology than Ghazālī is able to provide. While there are key insights and intuitions that Ghazālī has regarding the limitations of ratiocination and discursivity, his acknowledgement that different forms of knowledge are lights is not carried out far enough. Suhrawardī develops this thought within the context of a system in which discursive philosophy and its methods constitute a veritable propaedeutic for further ascension through knowledge and light, and while not providing a necessary condition for reaching great levels of saintliness, mastery of the discursive

sciences is a condition for reaching the height of sagacity. While this is definitely not the case in the thought of Ghazālī, it must be remembered that Ghazālī's utilization of the allegory and symbol of light provided an intellectual impetus which was influential for Suhrawardī's eventual *ishrāqi* project. Although many will debate the relevance of the different theological, juridical, political and philosophical commitments of the various thinkers which are emblematic of a colorful and grand Islamic intellectual tradition, the common link between Ghazālī and Suhrawardī must be acknowledged as one that is very strong, and further as one that is specifically predicated on a common membership within a sapiential paradigm that runs across multiple religious traditions. This paradigm of sapience in its Islamic form is chiefly concerned with supra-rational knowing and a metaphysics that eschews dualism in favor of a knowable, fundamentally Unity at the core of Reality. The sapiential signifier of light, drawn from the heart of the Islamic Sacred Scripture and Word of God, allows these two thinkers to articulate a program of spiritual transformation within a context of metaphysical Platonism.

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