

Rethinking Philosophy in an Oriental Way

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Abstract

The question to be posed in this article is whether there is such a thing as an 'oriental philosophy', and if so what are its main features and distinctive marks, and most important of all, can we rethink philosophy in an oriental way? This question was answered by Muslim philosophers when they encountered the vast heritage of Greek science and philosophy and, having themselves imbibed the gist of Greek philosophy, tried to maintain and transcend it to reach what they called Oriental Wisdom. Having traced the history and development of this idea in Islamic philosophy, we have tried to answer the question as to how it is possible to apply the principles of the so-called Oriental Philosophy first to broaden and deepen our conception of philosophy, and again to achieve a unified conception of philosophy which might embrace both the eastern and western traditions of thought.

Key Terms: Oriental Philosophy, Islamic philosophy, Avicenna, Ghazzālī, Suhrawardī, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn 'Arabī, Averroes, the deorientalization of philosophy, contemporary relevance

Introduction

"Rethinking" is embedded and inherent in the very nature of philosophy if it is not to turn into a fragile and stereotyped dogma. But the way or the method of rethinking is all too important. As a matter of fact, it is all that matters in respect of the theme under discussion. So the all-important question is: How should we rethink philosophy? My solution is that we can rethink philosophy in an oriental way. In my

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humble opinion, this is the only way, or at least the best way to save us from the blind alley with which western philosophy is confronted and which, as philosophy, the west has always ignored.

It is almost a platitude to say that philosophy is a Greek term meaning the love of Sophia or Wisdom. But the etymological derivation of this word has come to signify that philosophy is Greek, not only in nomenclature, but also by birthright. This is all that the books on the history of western philosophy inculcate. The idea perhaps might be traced back to Aristotle, who sought the origin of every philosophical issue in his Greek predecessors, whom he considered as crude and presumptuous *physilogo*i and estimated himself as the culmination of the philosophical enterprise in his day. Non-Greeks, or Berbers, were moreover esteemed as below the dignity of being considered as philosophers.¹

This has been more or less the attitude of westerners with regard to philosophy at least in philosophical circles. Hegel, the father of modern philosophical historiography, and the analogue of Aristotle in our age could be quoted as an example. Surveying the whole gamut and vista of philosophy over the millennia in the eastern lands, whether China, India or Persia, he was not able to spot a single philosopher, even of a diminutive stature.²

Islamic civilization was the intellectual heir of Greek culture and civilization. In an unprecedented translation movement, nearly all the great Greek philosophical and scientific works, together with all their major commentaries, were translated into Arabic, mainly in a famous institution called *Bayt al-Hikmah*, or the 'House of Wisdom'.³ To give an indication of the extent of this translation movement, suffice it here to mention that all the works of Aristotle (with the possible exception of the *Politics*⁴) were translated into Arabic for the first time and Muslims, now in possession of this vast intellectual treasury, together with the cultural and intellectual bequest of other civilizations, started to rethink philosophy in a fresh way. They did not take the philosophical presuppositions of Greek philosophers for granted as self-evident. Rethinking Greek philosophy profoundly, they came up with new solutions, of which we allude to certain instances for exemplification.

Avicenna

Avicenna (369-428 / 980-1037), one of the great Muslim sage-philosophers, although paying deep respect to Aristotle, unlike

Averroes (known in the Latin West and also by Dante in his *Divine Comedy* as ‘the Commentator’) did not consider him as the culmination or the last word in philosophy.

While he was composing his *magnum opus*, *Kitāb al-shifā’* (*The Remedy*), (translated into Latin as *Sufficientia*) at the age of forty, Avicenna envisaged an alternative system of philosophy other than the Aristotelian. In the prologue of this book, Avicenna makes it clear that he has compiled this work according to the principles laid down in Peripatetic philosophy. But at the same time he mentions that he has expounded philosophy “in a manner more consonant with human nature and as dictated by my express judgment, in which I have not taken into consideration the views of my partners in this art [i.e. Peripatetic philosophers]. Unlike my other books I have not been afraid to oppose them. I mean the book I have written entitled *The Oriental Philosophy* [*al-Ḥikmah al-mashriqiyyah*]. As to the present book, it is more detailed and elaborate and I have tried to corroborate the views of my partners in Peripatetic philosophy. But he who desires to know the truth without any taint and blemish should consult my other book.”⁵

From Avicenna’s statement it is evident that in his mid-age he had already devised another framework for philosophy which he had designated as ‘Oriental Philosophy’ and had compiled a work under this appellation. The book is no longer extant, but fortunately the first part of it, which comprises the introduction, has been recently recovered and published. In this introduction again Avicenna complains about the bigotry of those who study philosophy with the eye of fanaticism, desire, habit and attachment. He has no scruples to divulge his differences with the people instructed in Greek books: “We have no fear if we reveal to the philosophers something other than what we have written for the common people, the common people who have been enamored of the Peripatetic philosophy and who think that no one has enjoyed the Divine Mercy except them.”⁶

Of course Avicenna admits that Aristotle had discovered many things that his teachers and predecessors did not know, distinguished between various sciences, arranged the sciences in a better manner than before, discovered the truth of many subjects, and was superior to those who came before him; but those who came after him should have brought to order the confusion in his thought, and should have mended whatever cracks they found in his structure. However, those who came after him could not transcend what they had inherited from him.

“Bigotry over whatever he had not found became a shield, so that they remained bound to the past and found no opportunity to make use of their intellects.”⁷

Avicenna again stresses the point that “...often we gained knowledge from non-Greek sources....Under these conditions we longed to write a book containing the important aspects of real knowledge. Only the person who has thought much, has meditated deeply and is not devoid of the excellence of intellectual intuition can make deductions from it. We have composed this book for ourselves, that is, for those who are like ourselves. As for the commoners who have to do with philosophy, we have provided in *The Remedy* [*Kitāb al-shifā*] more than they need....Soon in the supplement we shall present whatever is suitable for them beyond that which they have seen up to this time. And in all conditions we seek the assistance of the Unique God.”⁸

Fantastic guesswork has been done by good orientalists, who were not as good philosophers, about identifying the nature and substance of Avicenna’s Oriental Philosophy. L. Gauthier identifies it with *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), which he calls “La tendance mystique de l’orient.”⁹ A. M. Goichon identifies it with the medical school of Gundishapur and its connection with experimental tendencies.¹⁰ L. Gardet considers it a more Pythagorean, Platonic, Plotinian and less Aristotelian strand in Avicenna’s philosophy.”¹¹

Pines, more justly pinpoints the arbitration of Avicenna between the oriental and occidental philosophers in his non-extant work *Kitāb al-inṣāf* (*The Book of Equitable Arbitration*), which was pillaged among other works of Avicenna during the sack of Isfahan by the Ghaznavid emperor Mas‘ūd, and which concerned adjudication regarding thousands of philosophical issues at odds between the ‘Orientals’ (or ‘Easterners’) and the ‘Occidentals’ (or ‘Westerners’).¹²

Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, more aptly consider the word ‘oriental’ to be a symbolic term signifying the realm of light rather than just a geographical designation. The orient (*sharq*) symbolically alludes and is etymologically related to *ishrāq* (illumination) and hence signifies the ‘Orient of Light’. It means a fleeing away from the prison of sense and matter, of the journeying toward the realm of the spirit and the Divine. A close study of the later works of Avicenna corroborates this view and reveals that Oriental Philosophy is not a ratiocinative, abstract thinking, but is more bolstered by a sort of enlightenment,

unveiling or intellectual intuition, akin to what we find in Eastern traditions.¹³

Avicenna did not live to see the development of his envisioned Oriental Philosophy. He himself was beset with so much political and intellectual antagonism that on the one hand he lost his very precious *Kitāb al-inṣāf* (*The Book of Equitable Arbitration*), which was destroyed by his arch enemy the Ghaznavid, Mas'ūd, who had appointed some generals to attack Isfahan and caused Avicenna to wander in exile in the last years of his life. But more important was the emergence of a torrential anti-philosophical and anti-Hellenic movement, which in the name of faith was ready to defy reason at whatever cost. One of the great anti-philosophical movements supported by the Seljuk emperors, and for the propagation of whose doctrines the famous Nizāmiyyah universities were established in major cities of eastern Islam, was Ash'arism, the doctrine of the followers of Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī. Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111), whom we are going to discuss in what follows, was one of the greatest proponents of this school. His anathematization of philosophy caused it to be banished from most of the Islamic world, and yet, as we shall see, he played a vital role in the development of the Oriental Philosophy.

Al-Ghazzālī

Philosophy did not have a smooth and even career on Islamic soil. It was beset with predicaments of a horrendous nature and was assailed in the name of orthodoxy from many fronts including the theologians, Sufis, exoteric scholars and Muslim jurists. But the most fatal blow was dealt by the Ash'arite theologians who considered everything inherited by Muslim scholars from Greek, be it science or philosophy, to be sheer heresy. They defended a sort of fideism, which over-emphasized the role of faith at the expense of reason. Theirs was an outrageous kind of voluntarism which stressed the role of volition, human or Divine, at the cost of the demands of knowledge and wisdom. They not only downplayed the role of reason in matters of faith and religion, but sometimes even set forth theories which ostensibly contradict certain of the main tenets of the revealed truth, for example that God could take the pious believers to hell and the heathens and disbelievers to paradise contrary to what He has promised in the Quran.

But the most blatant stroke meted out by Ash'arite theologians came

from the famous al-Ghazzālī, who in his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) condemned philosophers as heretics on seventeen counts and infidels to be excommunicated on three issues.¹⁴ This severe attack on philosophy rendered by one of the greatest theologians, to whom has been bestowed the honorific title *Hujjat al-Islām* (The Proof of Islam), was sufficient to banish philosophy once and for all from the Islamic community, except in his own homeland, where it was able to survive notwithstanding the torrential assaults from sundry quarters.

Paradoxically enough, Ghazzālī, in spite of his vehement attacks on philosophy, which conduced to its obliteration in the lands of Sunni Islam, was indirectly instrumental in paving the way for an authentic sapiential or ‘oriental’ wisdom. A cursory glance at his autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (*Deliverance from Error*), would prove this point.

At the request of a friend, Ghazzālī explains to us how he spent his whole life in search of truth and ultimately found it, and moreover what has been his criterion for discriminating truth from error in such an endeavor. According to Ghazzālī, the difference of opinion among mankind concerning religions and philosophical schools is so vast that many people have submerged and drowned themselves in this deep and unfathomable ocean. He tells us that from the prime of youth till his maturity he had always been engaged in audaciously scrutinizing the opinions of everyone he met to sift out the truth in them from the error and falsehood.¹⁵

Most people inherit their beliefs from their fathers, through hearsay and imitation, or from their teachers through inculcation and indoctrination. In such circumstance the discrimination of truth from error is an onerous task. “My object of desire was knowledge about the realities of things. So I had to seek first what was the reality of knowledge itself. It appeared to me that certain knowledge is that in which the reality of the known object is disclosed to me in such wise that there remains no possibility of, or even the possibility of conceiving of, doubt, error or illusion. This immunity from error should be, moreover, associated with such certainty that if someone were to challenge me and were to refute me by turning a stone to gold or a rod into a serpent, that would not engender any doubt in me in the least. If I know for certain that the number ten is more than three and if somebody tells me, ‘No! The number three is more than ten!’ and tries to prove it

by claiming to change a rod into a serpent and indeed he does it instantly and I witness it with my own eyes, I would never doubt the certainty of my knowledge. I only get amazed at how he was able to do it. But as to doubt with respect to what I have come to know with certainty, that is impossible.”¹⁶

Let us follow Ghazzālī in his premises and track him down to his final conclusions, because they are so crucial and vital in the development of the Oriental Philosophy.

That which is mentioned above is an *a posteriori* proof for the necessity of laying firm and solid foundations for certain and indubitable knowledge. In addition to this he puts forth certain *a priori* proofs which serve to establish more sound and valid criteria for certainty, which they experience as an awakening to a state of ecstasy or in the state of annihilation.¹⁷ It is a sort of death referred to in the saying of the Prophet, “People are asleep, and when they die, they awaken,”¹⁸ and alluded to in the following verse, “We shall remove from you your veils and your vision on that Day will become discerning.”¹⁹

Ghazzālī recounts how in his quest for truth he was so much perplexed that for two months he suffered a severe disease because he wanted to dispel the shadow of doubt, but it was only possible by rational argumentation, which in that state had lost its validity. He again tells us how he was relieved of the affliction of doubt, not by reasoning, but by a light by which God illumined his heart, a light which is a key to Divine sciences.

After being cured from the disease of doubt “by Divine grace and through His abundant generosity,” Ghazzālī continued his search for truth among the four categories of claimants: theologians, the Bāṭinids (*al-Bāṭiniyyah*, believers in an inerrant *Imām*), philosophers and Sufis, because according to Ghazzālī truth could not be found outside these four groups within the Islamic community.²⁰

We are not going to elaborate in detail his extensive comments on these four classes of claimants to truth, except in so far as it concerns the issue at stake in our discussion, i.e. the development of Oriental Philosophy. As for the theologians, Ghazzālī maintains that even if dogmatic theology is necessary for defending Islam against its enemies, it is not sufficient for the attainment of truth because it is mostly based on the false pre-suppositions of its opponents or on burlesque imitation, or on blind consensus, none of which would conduce to the knowledge of truth.²¹

Ghazzālī, moreover, is very harsh on philosophers and proves himself a dogmatic opponent of philosophy and things philosophical. He claims that after studying philosophy he came to the conclusion that most of it was pure heresy and disbelief, and if there was anything true therein, it was due to the fact that philosophers had furtively stolen it from the people of truth in order to propagate their error and in order to embellish their falsehoods. Philosophers, according to Ghazzālī, are either atheists, who do not believe in God, or naturalists who, while believing in God, attribute everything to the workings of nature. The third class of philosophers whom he calls the Divines (such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) are either disbelievers or heretics, or innovators of sciences such as logic, whose validity one should not deny, even if its acceptance leads one to accept their hideous mistakes and their outrageous blunders.²² Ghazzālī declares the philosophers to be heretics on seventeen points and atheists (disbelievers) on three.²³ His unflinching attacks on philosophy were cause enough to banish it once and for all from the Islamic soil, except of course from his homeland where philosophy was able to meet and combat its denigrators on their own ground.

Ghazzālī was also the avowed adversary of the Bāṭinids, whose teachings were staunchly preached by the Fāṭimids of Egypt who were the sworn arch-enemies of the Abbasids of Baghdad, the latter having commissioned Ghazzālī to write his famous *al-Faḍā'ih al-Bāṭiniyyah* (*Ignominies of the Bāṭinids*)²⁴, severely criticizing their doctrine, which we will pass over, having nothing to do with our discussion, the way Ghazzālī has dealt with the problem.

Then Ghazzālī recounts that after having scrutinized the tenets of the mentioned schools and finding them insufficient, he approached with zeal and ardor the path of the Sufis and read capriciously many volumes written by celebrated Sufis. But he came to know that the path of the Sufis cannot be trodden except by knowledge and action and by removing all the obstacles standing in the way to the ultimate union and by emptying the heart from everything other than God and by embellishing it with the constant remembrance of God. "So it appeared to me that their most characteristic trait cannot be achieved through mere knowledge and erudition but through tasting (*dhawq*) and spontaneous spiritual state (*ḥāl*) and through the transformation of one's qualities and character traits. What a difference between merely knowing the definitions of health, satiety and their causes and

prerequisites and to be healthy and satiated; or to know the mere definition of drunkenness (and that it consists of a state wherein the up-going vapors from the stomach overpower the deposits of the mind) and to be inebriated and drunk. Nay, the drunkard does not even know the definition of drunkenness; the sober person on the other hand knows the definition of drunkenness and its basic elements whereas there is nothing of drunkenness to be found in him. A physician too, while diseased, knows the definition of health and its causes and its medicaments, but he lacks health. Likewise there is a great difference between knowing the reality of renunciation (*zuhd*), its conditions and causes, and to be in a state of renunciation and to be averse to this world.”²⁵

“So I came to realize that they (the Sufis) are the folk of (spiritual) states and not of mere words; and that what it was possible for me to gain through formal knowledge I had already attained. There remained only what could not be obtained through erudition and learning, but could only be gained through tasting (*dhawq*) and spiritual initiation (*sulūk*).”²⁶ This is the favourite passage of William James, which he quoted extensively and which formed the basis of his *magnum opus*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which was originally delivered in the series of Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh.²⁷ Here Ghazzālī is not talking merely about religious experience as James has construed it; he is articulating a form of superior knowledge, higher than the rational or discursive knowledge delineated by the Peripatetics, according to whose doctrine to know something was merely to know about its causes and about its *a priori* conditions. To know something is to taste it (it is sapiential knowledge, from the Latin *sapere*, to taste) and to realize it (hence it is called the science of realization or *‘ilm al-taḥaqquq*) and to be transformed by it; it is not the knowledge of mere words (*‘ilm al-qāl*) but of spiritual states (*‘ilm al-ḥāl*). He praises the Sufis very highly because their doctrines are based on such ultra-rational knowledge, which Ghazzālī has dubbed ‘knowledge by tasting’ (*al-‘ilm al-dhawqī* or *‘ilm al-adhwāq*) and which entered into the mainstream of Islamic epistemology and was later incorporated by Suhrawardī as the highest degree of knowledge and wisdom.²⁸ According to Ghazzālī, moreover, sapiential knowledge is the only key to open the gate of prophecy and to decipher the Divine mysteries embedded in it. Briefly stated, he who has not been endowed with something of sapiential wisdom (*al-dhawq*) will not attain to the reality of prophecy except the mere name.²⁹

Let us appraise the achievements of Ghazzālī in the light of what we have called, following in the wake of Avicenna, the Oriental Philosophy. Ghazzālī rendered a great service to Oriental Philosophy by introducing the Sufi sapiential wisdom both into the mainstream orthodoxy of Islam and especially into the mainstay of Islamic philosophy, but alas at the expense of utterly banishing discursive philosophy and its ancillary natural sciences.

As a matter of fact, Avicenna was moving in the same direction of piercing through the veil of ratiocinative discursive philosophy to the direct vision of the absolute truth, but retaining at the same time all the boons and blessings of discursive reason.³⁰ Ghazzālī meanwhile rendered a great service to philosophy by setting the framework for the Illuminationist philosophy by writing his famous *Mishkāt al-anwār* (*The Niche of Lights*), in which he compiled and interpreted the Quranic verses and prophetic traditions concerning light.³¹ This was to become the foundation for the metaphysics of light of Suhrawardī, who incorporated Ghazzālī's sapiential vision into his philosophical system.

Suhrawardī

Perhaps the most complete discussion of the nature of the Oriental Philosophy was presented by Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (549-587 / 1153-1191), the founder of the famous school of Illumination (*al-Ishrāq*), which as we said is symbolically connected with the east, or the 'orient of light', just as the west, where the sun sets, is the symbol of spiritual darkness. Suhrawardī has written many works and treatises in which he has expounded both the essentials and the details of the Oriental Philosophy both in Arabic and in Persian, his mother tongue. His most famous book in Oriental Philosophy is *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (*The Philosophy of Illumination*)³², which can also be rendered as *The Philosophy of the Easterners*, and which might be considered a continuation and the culmination of Avicenna's Oriental Philosophy. Here we shall point out some of the most essential features of the Illuminationist school of Suhrawardī as laid down in his *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*.

The first point to be mentioned with regard to Suhrawardī's conception of *ḥikmah* (translated as philosophy, but also meaning sagacity and wisdom and equivalent of the Greek *sophia*)³³ is that it surpasses the bounds of space and time. As against the Aristotelian conception, it is neither eastern nor western. Each seeker after truth has

a share in the Divine light which is *ḥikmah*. Everyone who exerts himself to attain it, shall have a taste of it. It is not the monopoly of a single race, nation or community; otherwise the gate of the Divine Mercy would be closed. God, the bestower of knowledge and wisdom, is not stingy so as to deprive certain people of His eternal bounty. The worst age is the one in which “the itinerary of thoughts has been cut off and the gate of revelations has been closed.”³⁴

Suhrawardī again has a new theory with regard to the development of the history of philosophy, which itself reveals another aspect of his *ishrāqī* (Illuminationist) wisdom. Philosophy was revealed by God to mankind through the prophet Hermes (identified with prophet Enoch in Judaism and Christianity and with prophet Idrīs in Islam). This wisdom was then divided into two branches: one going to Persia and the East and the other being bequeathed to Egypt and thence to Greece and the West. These two sources, that is, the east and the west, exemplified by Greece and Persia, finally merged together in the Islamic philosophy. Among the Western sages he mentions Hermes, Agathedemon (Seth), Asclepius, Pythagoras, some of the pre-Socratics, Empedocles, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Among the Eastern sages he names certain Persian priest-kings such as Kayūmarth, Furaydūn, Kai Khusraw, and strangely enough the Buddha. Among the Muslim sages he classifies the well-known philosophers such as Fārābī and Avicenna who occupy a secondary rank compared to such great mystics as Bayazīd Baṣṭāmī, Ḥallāj, Junayd and Abū Sahl Tustarī.³⁵

A second feature of Illuminationist philosophy is its emphasis on symbolism. The truth cannot be conveyed except through signs and symbols (*ramz*). Symbolism is the language of Being itself. *Ramz* can also be construed as allusion. “The procedure of the master of philosophy and the Imam of wisdom, the Divine Plato, was the same, and the sages who preceded him like Hermes, the father of philosophy, followed the same path. Since the sages of the past, because of the ignorance of the masses expressed their sayings in secret symbols, and the refutations made against them have concerned the exterior of these sayings, not their real intentions.”³⁶ Suhrawardī vehemently reprimands Aristotle for not comprehending the real significance of these symbols and for having reduced them to their literal and outward meaning.³⁷

A third feature of Illuminationist philosophy is the construal of being (*wujūd*) as light (*nūr*). According to Suhrawardī all reality is nothing

but light, which possesses various degrees of intensity. It needs no definition, for to define is to explicate the less evident by the more evident and nothing is more evident than light, "light is evident by itself and by manifesting makes everything evident."³⁸ Needless to say, the ontology of light is a true phenomenology and evades such abstract concepts as the secondary intelligibles. According to Suhrawardī, the phenomenology of light had been at the core of the sacred doctrines of the ancient sages.³⁹

Another main feature of Suhrawardī's Oriental Philosophy is that it has vertical and longitudinal rather than horizontal and latitudinal dimensions. In other words it is hierarchical in the sense that some kinds of philosophy are superior in worth and dignity than others. The best kind of philosophy is the one based on direct intellectual intuition or sapiential wisdom, based on the formal training of the soul. It is founded on direct intellectual vision, contemplation and spiritual illumination; hence it cannot be destroyed by the doubts of skeptics.⁴⁰

Following Plato, he calls this sapiential wisdom theosis (*ta'alluh*) and the possessor of such wisdom a theosopher (*ḥakīm muta'allih*). Moreover he includes all the eastern sages and most of the Pre-Socratics among this category, and also the semi-mythical ancient Persian Kings such as Jamasp, Farshaushtar, Buzurgmehr and others.⁴¹ But strangely enough his list also comprises all the great Sufi saints of Islam, which means that for Suhrawardī authentic Sufism, which is based on direct intellectual vision of reality and on purification of the soul and ultimate illumination and union, is a pure oriental metaphysics.

Next in the hierarchy of philosophers are the adherents of Peripatetic philosophy. Peripateticism is a kind of discursive philosophy, based upon ratiocination and conceptual abstraction and on deductive inference. It is not based on direct intellectual vision. The masters of this kind of discursive philosophy are Aristotle and his followers in Islam such as Fārābī and Avicenna. Suhrawardī blames Aristotle for having reduced the sapiential theosis of his master Plato to pure ratiocinative and discursive philosophy. For Suhrawardī, the philosopher *par excellence* is Plato who has merged into a unique synthesis both the intuitive and the discursive philosophy. He claims that he has achieved the same synthesis in Islamic philosophy.⁴²

This latter distinction between the intuitive (à la Suhrawardī) and the discursive is very significant for rethinking philosophy in an oriental

manner. The sapiential wisdom is not based on ratiocination and conceptualization alone, but it is primarily based on spiritual realization, direct inner intellectual disclosure. If philosophy is the search after truth, it should ultimately end in the realization of the truth, and that is what is underlined in all traditional schools of the Oriental Philosophy. But we should at the same time bear in mind that for Suhrawardī, this “oriental” philosophy does not merely have geographical significance. We should not forget that Plato for him was the master of Oriental Philosophy.

If Aristotle and Hegel deprived the non-Greeks and Easterners from having tasted the flavor of philosophy, this would mean that they had a very narrow conception of philosophy and reduced philosophy to its discursive connotation. But if we take the sapiential philosophy based on direct intellectual intuition and spiritual illumination and the science of realization, then we can see all its luminaries in the East: in China, in India, in Japan, in Korea, in Persia. If on the other hand we take philosophy in the purely deductive, syllogistic, discursive and ratiocinative sense, then we could say it started in Greece and continued in its cultural inheritor, that is, Europe. Discursive philosophy, if not bolstered by sapiential wisdom, will end in skepticism. Moreover, knowledge of the deeper realities, such as knowledge of the Self, of Ultimate Reality, knowledge of the universal principles, of the Absolute, of the *Ātma*, is only possible through sapiential wisdom; discursive philosophy only roams afar about them but is never able to attain them.

Islamic philosophy continued the path delineated by Suhrawardī and its illustrious career could boast of such great sage-philosophers as Mullā Ṣadrā, whose philosophical system called *al-Hikmah al-muta‘āliyah* was the culmination of the unique synthesis between ratiocinative and sapiential philosophy.

The lesson which Suhrawardī has to teach us is a total revision in our conception of philosophy. The history of philosophy in the West has been a gradual distancing from sapiential wisdom, even in its Greek phase. We see this decline even in one generation and its total denigration by the Sophists. One might see certain glimpses of philosophy in the medieval sages, but had Suhrawardī been alive to see the flourishing of modern philosophy, he would have seen the correctness of his hypothesis that philosophy not propped up by sapiential wisdom would end in skepticism and in nihilism. He would

have seen most of the great achievements of modern philosophy as trivial, not being based on the search and the realization of the truth.

We saw that Suhrawardī mentioned the Buddha among the great sages of Oriental Wisdom. Had he lived longer (he was martyred at the age of 37) to study the Indian and Chinese classics such as the *Upanishads* and the *Tao Te Ching*, he would again have been much amazed at the depth, plenitude and richness of their sapiential wisdom, and he would have been more deeply confirmed in his hypothesis that true sapiential wisdom has been – and if not harassed by the torrential skepticism of the West – is still oriental.

Oriental Philosophy in Islamic Spain

What makes our story of Oriental Philosophy more interesting is the fact that it was hotly debated in the western lands of Islam, especially in Andalusia. As was the case with Suhrawardī, the discussion of Oriental Philosophy in Islamic Spain was greatly influenced by the thought of Avicenna and Ghazzālī. We cannot elaborate the point in detail and will suffice with making a brief reference to three prominent figures with regard to the problem of the Oriental Philosophy, i.e. Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 580/1185, known in Latin as Abubacer), Ibn Rushd (520-595 / 1126-1198, Averroes) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240). In the process of this discussion we will see how Ibn Ṭufayl criticizes his predecessors both from the eastern and western lands of Islam from the vantage point of Oriental Philosophy.

Ibn Ṭufayl

The only book available to us from Ibn Ṭufayl’s philosophical corpus is the philosophical romance *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*⁴³ (*The Living Son of the Awake*) which he wrote in imitation of Avicenna’s treatise by the same title⁴⁴, and of course with different content. Ibn Ṭufayl wrote the treatise at the request of a friend who asked him to unfold and divulge something of the mysteries of the Oriental Philosophy which *al-Shaykh al-Imām al-Ra’īs*, Abū ‘Alī Sīnā (Avicenna) mentioned in his books. Ibn Ṭufayl promises him to do that and adds, “He who is seeking the Truth in which there is no equivocation and ambiguity, it is incumbent on him to look for it in Oriental Philosophy, and he should make every endeavor to attain it.”⁴⁵

What is the Oriental Philosophy according to Ibn Ṭufayl?

In his extremely rich introduction to his philosophical novel, Ibn Ṭufayl sets out some of the main features of what he considers to be the Oriental Philosophy. He who tries to expound the secrets of the Oriental Philosophy should be well-versed both in discursive philosophy on the one hand and the science of unveiling (*kashf*) or sapiential wisdom – which is the same as spiritual vision (*mushāhadah*) – on the other. He who has reached that stage has realized a state that “no tongue can describe and no expression can expound.”⁴⁶ A person who has not tasted it is ignorant of it and cannot speak meaningfully about it. A person who has tasted it is so much overwhelmed by spiritual joy and exhilaration that he can utter only “ecstatic utterances”, such as Hallāj who said, “I am the Truth,” or Abū Yazīd Baṣṭāmī who proclaimed, “There is nothing in my garment save Allāh,” or another who enunciated, “O Glory be to me! How great is my rank,” or like Abū Ḥāmid Ghazzālī who, having attained to such lofty spiritual rank recited the following verse:

“It was such as it was, what I cannot recollect
Have good opinion about it and
never ask about the legend.”⁴⁷

Ibn Ṭufayl draws on Avicenna’s description of the Sufī stations from the last two chapters of the *al-Ishārāt wa-’l-tanbīhāt* (*The Book of Directives and Remarks*) where he says:

“When initiation and spiritual exertion reach a certain point he [the aspirant] is overtaken by ravishments of Divine light, extremely delightful like a resplendent lightning which flashes upon him and all of a sudden dies out. When the initiate fixes his attention on spiritual exercises such occurrences become more frequent until they occur even without spiritual exertion. Whenever there gleams a light he is taken thence to the paradise of sanctity. Then he is reminded of something of the world yonder and is overtaken by a Divine rapture. He is well-nigh to behold the Truth (God) in everything. Then his spiritual exercises make him reach such a point where his present instant (*waqt*) becomes an everlasting peace and tranquility. What was once a snatched moment becomes an intimate disposition, what was once a faint gleam turns into a blazing conflagration (a luminous

meteor). His attainment of Divine learning (knowledge) becomes firmly established as if it were continually (constantly) accompanying him. His inmost secret becomes like a polished mirror, which is held up facing the Absolute Truth. In such a state the heavenly pleasures gush forth upon him. He becomes extremely exalted because of what he contemplates of Divine signs. From such a sublime and majestic rank he has his gaze fixed on God and sometimes his gaze turns upon himself and he vacillates between the two gazes until he loses the sight of himself and beholds the Divine Threshold alone. If he regards his self (soul) he regards her in as much as she is regarding (God) and there the Union is attained."⁴⁸

Ibn Ṭufayl then goes on to explain that such a state is not reached by mere theoretical, conceptual or ratiocinative thought or through syllogistic reasoning and apodeictic demonstration but only through tasting and sapiential wisdom. In order to make his point clearer he draws upon the simile of a man who is born blind with a very perspicacious mind, a sound intelligence and a strong faculty of recollection, who is brought up in a city. Because of his high intelligence he knows all the dwellers of the city. He knows many species of animals and plants. He can recognize all the alleys, roads and market-places and the living quarters of the city. He can easily walk through the city without a guide. He can recognize every person he meets and greets them upon first meeting them. He can even discriminate between colors by the mention of their mere names. Let us moreover suppose that all of a sudden his eyes open and he is able to gain his sight. He immediately starts to walk through the city and starts to roam about in its quarters. He does not find anything different from what he believed in his former state. He will encounter colors and will find them in accordance with the same signs, which he used to describe them. He has now attained two great qualities absent in his former state: increase in clarity and extreme delight through the direct vision of things. According to Ibn Ṭufayl, the state of discursive reasoners and the folk of rational argument "who have not attained to the rank of *walāyah*, i.e. Divine proximity"⁴⁹ is like the state of the blind who know things but who are destitute of direct vision of realities. The second state is peculiar to those who have reached the stage of sanctity, i.e. have attained to the rank of Divine friendship and proximity.⁵⁰

It is very interesting to note that for Ibn Ṭufayl, as for Ghazzālī and Suhrawardī, the attainment of unveiling (*kashf*), direct vision (*mushāhadah*) and tasting (*dhawq*) are all dependent upon treading and accomplishing the path of spiritual initiation unto the final stage of annihilation and union which is the core, kernel and ultimate end of both all religions and all forms of sapiential wisdom.

Here again Ibn Ṭufayl makes a very important clarification. Some people might wrongly think that the difference between discursive and sapiential philosophy consists in the fact that the former deals with physics or the science of nature and the other has as its subject matter the realm of entities beyond nature.⁵¹ In other words in their opinion the difference between the two consists in the difference between ‘physics’ and ‘transphysics’. This is not the case at all. Both of the two methodologies can have ‘metaphysics’ and not ‘transphysics’ as their subject matter with this difference that the one tries to approach reality through conceptualization, while the other through immediate vision. The latter deserves to be called a Divine state that God bestows upon whomsoever he desiderates among his creatures.⁵²

Ibn Ṭufayl’s criticism of Ibn Bājjah is indeed precisely that the latter has no immediate taste of sapiential and hence oriental wisdom and has therefore not exceeded the bounds of discursive philosophy. He adduces a quotation from Avicenna’s *Maqāmāt al-‘Arifīn (Stations of the Gnostics)* to prove his point and also resorts to the simile of the blind man (symbolizing discursive knowledge) to prove that sapiential knowledge differs from discursive and ratiocinative knowledge only in distinctness, clarity and the immediacy of direct vision.⁵³

Another proof for the fact that Ibn Sa’igh (another name for Ibn Bājjah) had not attained to a stage higher than discursive philosophy is that he harshly denounces the noetic exultation accruing from the intellectual vision and attributes it to the concocted images of human fancy. One should tell him, “You shall not find sweet the savor of something you have not tasted! Please do not trample on the neck of veracious saints.”⁵⁴

The next target of Ibn Ṭufayl’s criticism from the point of view of Oriental Philosophy is the *Magister Secundus*, al-Fārābī. He states that most of his works available in Spain are his logical works. His philosophical works are full of doubts and ambiguity. For example in *al-Madīnah al-fāḍilah (The Virtuous Community)* he asserts that wicked souls will suffer an everlasting chastisement whereas in his

as-Siāsah al-madaniyyah (On Civil Government) he maintains that they dissolve and perish after death and that only the perfect and virtuous souls survive after death. Again in his book on ethics, while expounding on human happiness, he claims that such felicity is possible in the life here below and can solely be realized in this nether world, and immediately adds, “Opinions other than this are the delirious ravings of superstitious old hags.”⁵⁵

Commenting on this, Ibn Ṭufayl remarks that by such assertions Fārābī has made people despair of the infinite mercy of God, and moreover would make the righteous on a par with the wicked. “This is a blunder which cannot be forgiven and a headlong stumbling which cannot be remedied.”⁵⁶ Worst of all is his erroneous belief concerning prophecy, which in his opinion has to do with the imaginative faculty of the prophet, and as such he has lowered the rank of prophets as compared to philosophers, “in addition to many other things which we need not mention here.”⁵⁷

Ibn Ṭufayl’s criticism of Avicenna is very mild and concerns his Peripatetic writings such as *Kitāb al-shifā’*, in which he elaborates on the teachings of the philosopher from Stagira. He never fails to remind us time and again of Avicenna’s Oriental Philosophy on the basis of which he has penned his work.

“As to the works of Aristotle, Shaykh Abū ‘Alī (Avicenna) has undertaken to elucidate and expound them. He followed his school and in his *Remedy [al-Shifā’]*, he tried to tread the path of his philosophy. But he has explicitly mentioned in the introduction of this book that according to him Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) is different from what is found in this book. He has compiled this work according to and in compliance with the Peripatetics and has emphasized that he who wants to seek Truth without any ambiguity and equivocation (*jamjamaḥ*) should search for it in his *Oriental Philosophy*. He who studies *The Remedy* attentively and the corpus of Aristotle, will find that in most cases they are in agreement, even if there are things in *The Remedy*, which are not to be found in Aristotle. If one takes *The Remedy* and all the works of Aristotle according to their exterior and literal meaning, without penetrating their inner secrets and their esoteric aspects, one will never attain to perfection, as Shaykh Abū ‘Alī himself has remarked.”⁵⁸

It is unfortunate that Ibn Ṭufayl did not have *al-Ḥikmah al-mashriqiyyah* (*The Oriental Philosophy*) itself at his disposal, which might have been extant at that time, and parts of which, especially its very significant and pace-setting introduction, survive even today.

Criticism of al-Ghazzālī

In the introduction to *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* one can find a very modest, judicious and unprejudiced appraisal of Ghazzālī's views. According to Ibn Ṭufayl, one can find many contradictions in both Ghazzālī's ideas and writings.

“This is due to the fact that he addresses the common run of men. He binds in one place and unbinds in another. He anathemizes certain things and arrogates the same things elsewhere. He calls philosophers unbelievers in *The Incoherence* [*al-Tahāfut*] on account of their denial of the bodily resurrection and for their demonstration of reward and punishment specifically for the spirit. Again in his *Balance* [*Mizān*] he emphatically asserts that this is the belief of the great masters among the Sufis. Again in his *Deliverance* [*al-Munqidh*] he says that his creed is the creed of Sufis and that he has taken this stance after a long search and probation.”⁵⁹

According to Ibn Ṭufayl, Ghazzālī, has excused himself in his *Mizān al-'amal*, from such ostensible inconsistencies by saying that he has maintained three kinds of views: (1) views which he shares with the multitude (*al-jumhūr*); (2) opinions which were addressed to different questioners and initiates; (3) views which are confidentially and intimately known only to oneself and are only shared by one's inmates in creed. Ghazzālī further adds, “Were it not but for the fact that what I say makes you doubt your inherited beliefs, even that would greatly benefit you (even that would be a great advantage to you) because he who does not doubt does not look, and he who does not look, will not observe, and he who does not observe shall remain in ignorance and perplexity.”⁶⁰ Then he cites as an example the following verse,

Take what you see and leave aside
What you have heard,

When the sun dawns one can dispense
with the light of Saturn.⁶¹

Moreover, Ghazzālī has mentioned in his books that he has deposited the choicest secretes of his oriental wisdom in his well-known book *al-Madnūn bihā* (*Secrets to be Grudged*)⁶², which Ibn Ṭufayl woefully declares to have not reached Spain, all the books which circulated there with that title being spurious.

Deorientalizing Philosophy

Notwithstanding the great endeavors of some great philosophers to make way for Oriental Philosophy, there were strenuous efforts to counterpoise the balance in favor of Occidental Philosophy. We will mention here only the case of Ibn Rushd (Averroes), who deservedly earned the honorific title of ‘Commentator’ from Dante in the *Divine Comedy*.

Paradoxically enough, Ibn Rushd belonged to circle of philosophers whom Ibn Ṭufayl had gathered in the court of Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf, the Almohad ruler. The latter, who was extremely fond of philosophy, once asked Ibn Ṭufayl to write a commentary on the whole corpus of Aristotle, and it is evident that Ibn Ṭufayl, having turned away from Peripatetic to Oriental Philosophy would not have accepted the offer. Instead he introduced his student Averroes, to whom he addressed the following words:

“You are indeed more robust than me in determination. Take these works of Aristotle. I believe that you well deserve (to comment on) them because I know the exaltedness (eminence) of your intelligence and the clarity of your thinking and your patience. As for me, my old age and my engagement in the service of the Leader of the Faithful and (because of) the diversion of my attention (*ṣarf ‘ināyatī*), all of them deter me from executing this command.”⁶³

As we can see Ibn Ṭufayl, offers apologies for refusing to compile commentaries on the works of Aristotle, such as old age, his administrative engagements (he was the grand vizier of Abū Yūsuf), but most important of all, the diversion of his attention (to Oriental Philosophy).

A great difference between Avicenna and Averroes was the fact that the latter was merely a commentator and as such never deviated from Aristotle on even a single point. He never wrote a single treatise on a specifically philosophical subject, whereas Avicenna on the other hand never wrote a commentary on Aristotle, and when his biographer and disciple, Juzjānī, asked him to write a commentary on the works of Aristotle he said that he was not free to do so at that time, “‘But if you would be satisfied with my composing a work in which I would set forth what to me is sound in these sciences...I would do that....’ He sent for Abū Ghālib and asked him for paper and an inkstand, which he brought. The master wrote down the main topics in approximately twenty quires of octavo size, continuing on it for two days, until he had written down the main topics without the presence of a book or source to consult, but entirely from his memory and by heart. Then he placed these quires before him, took a sheet of paper, examined each problem and wrote a commentary on it. He would write fifty pages every day until he had finished all of the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.”⁶⁴

Apart from Avicenna’s oriental metaphysics, Averroes refuted everything ingenious and original in his philosophy on the pretext of not being found in Aristotle. Such innovations as the essence-existence distinction; the identity of essence and existence in God and their alterity in creatures (something which Averroes misconstrued and came to interpret existence as an accident of essence); the proof of necessity and contingency (which according to Gilson is the most metaphysical proof for the existence of God and the basis for all cosmological proofs); the axiomatization of the science of logic as a tool for the axiomatization of the sciences; the foundation of an axiomatic science of ontology, by establishing being *qua* being as the sole subject matter of metaphysics; the separation of general metaphysics (*metaphysica generalis*) from the special metaphysics (*metaphysica specialis*); along with many other problems were instrumental in unifying Avicenna’s discursive and Peripatetic philosophy and his oriental metaphysics.

The oriental inclination of the Peripatetic works of Avicenna such as the *Shifā’*, caused them to be accepted by the great doctors of the church such as Albert the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventura, Roger Bacon and Duns Scotus, and, even if criticized in certain points, were used extensively for the harmonization and reconciliation of faith on the one hand and reason as represented by Aristotle on the other. Prof. Etienne Gilson has even declared the existence of an Augustinian

Avicennism in the Middle Ages, which was the congruous harmonizing of the teachings of the great Latin Father and the Muslim sage, especially in the very knotty question of the relationship between faith and reason or reason and revelation and philosophy and religion.⁶⁵ Averroes on the contrary, by reviving an unadulterated and pure Aristotelianism was instrumental in spreading the conviction that philosophy was a discipline totally separate from and independent of religion and theology, with the inevitable result that scholasticism disintegrated into a religious faith without philosophy on the one hand and a philosophy without religious faith on the other, something which was tantamount to the total independence of religion and philosophy or faith and reason (reason and revelation) which, as the 'double-truth theory', came to be attributed to Averroes. Hence Latin Averroism became the target of severe attacks of the Doctors of the Church, such as St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure.

Ibn 'Arabī

Averroes was the contemporary of Suhrawardī, and this fact can explain a great deal about the development of philosophy in the eastern and western lands of Islam especially with regard to the issue of Oriental Philosophy. Averroes again was the elder contemporary and compatriot of the Greatest Master (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*). Ibn 'Arabī, about whose symbolic meeting with Averroes and its significance as regards Oriental Philosophy we have something to say later. It is very difficult to delineate even in a cursory outline the vast issues which Ibn 'Arabī has set forth and analyzed with regard to various aspects of human and Divine knowledge which make up a very profound and all-encompassing conspectus of epistemological issues. We only allude to certain deeper layers of human knowledge which are more relevant to oriental wisdom.

In his *Fuṣuṣ al-ḥikam (The Bezels of Wisdom)* and *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah (The Meccan Openings)* and elsewhere, Ibn 'Arabī, like Suhrawardī, Avicenna, Ghazzālī and others, makes a sharp distinction between two basic kinds of knowledge: that which can be acquired through the rational faculty and the process of demonstration (*istidlāl*) and theoretical thinking (*fīkr, nazar*); and the other which he calls gnosis (*ma'rifah*), which can come about through spiritual practice and the Divine Self-disclosure. He also refers to this second kind of knowledge as unveiling (*kashf*), direct tasting (*dhawq*), opening (*fath*),

insight (*baṣīrah*), witnessing (*shuhūd, mushāhadah*), knowledge by inheritance (‘*ilm al-warāthah*) and knowledge through realization (‘*ilm al-taḥaqquq*).

The second kind of knowledge, as mentioned, is conjoined with practice and good works. It is based on the realization of virtues. “In our view, knowledge requires practice and necessarily so, or else it is not knowledge, even if it appears in the form of knowledge.”⁶⁶ “In our view, God’s deceiving (*makr*) the servant is that he should provide him with knowledge that demands practice and then deprive him of practice.”⁶⁷ The first kind of knowledge is acquired (*kasb*) and the second kind is bestowed (*wahb*) and is a divine effusion (*fayḍ*). It is the science of the prophets and the friends of God. It is beyond the stage of reason (*warā’ tawr al-‘aql*), although it is not against reason and as such reason accepts it, especially in the case of him whose reason is sound (*sālim*), that is, he who is not overcome by any obfuscation, deriving from imagination and reflection, an obfuscation which would corrupt his consideration.

“Two ways lead to the knowledge of God, there is no third way... the first way is that of unveiling (*kashf*). It is an incontrovertible knowledge which is actualized through unveiling and which man finds in himself. He received no obfuscation along with it and is not able to repel it. He knows no proof for it by which it is supported except what he finds in himself. The second way is the way of reflection and reasoning (*istidlāl*) through rational demonstration (*burhān ‘aqlī*). This way is lower than the first one, since he who bases his consideration upon proof can be visited by obfuscations which detract from his proof, and only with difficulty can he remove them.”⁶⁸

In the introduction to the *Futūḥāt*, moreover, Ibn ‘Arabī emphasizes that there are three levels of knowledge. The first is the knowledge gained through reasoning which is a sort of self-evident knowledge obtained after considering the proofs. The second science is the science of states (*aḥwāl*) which cannot be reached except through tasting. Reason cannot define the states, nor can any proof be adduced for knowing them. One cannot for example define the sweetness of honey, the bitterness of aloes or the pleasure of sexual intercourse, love, beauty, ecstasy and so on....The third knowledge is the science of the

mysteries (*asrār*). It is the knowledge which is 'beyond the stage of reason'. It is knowledge through the blowing (*nafāh*) of the Holy Spirit (*rūh al-quḍus*) into the heart and it is specific to prophets or the friends of God..."⁶⁹

"Sound knowledge is not given by reflection, nor by what the rational thinkers establish by means of their reflective powers. Sound knowledge is only that which God throws into the heart of the knower. It is a divine light for which God singles out any of his servants whom he will, whether angel, messenger, prophet, friend or person of faith. He who has no unveiling has no knowledge (*man la kashfā lah, la 'ilma lah*)."⁷⁰

Such knowledge is also called knowledge through realization (*'ilm al-taḥaqquq*) and he who possesses it is called the realizer (*muḥaqqiq*), that is, he is the one who not only knows the truth and reality of everything, but who moreover has realized the reality of everything through the assimilation of the Divine Names and Attributes, which are the source and fountainhead for the reality of all things real. A person or scholar who has not attained to the stage of realization is a mere imitator (*muqallid*).

Another name which Ibn 'Arabī gives to this sort of knowledge is the knowledge by inheritance (*'ilm al-warāthah*) in contrast to the knowledge gained through erudition and book learning (*'ilm al-dirāsah*). Now in Islamic jurisprudence, not everyone is entitled to receive the bequest unless one has a very close blood affinity to the deceased. Similarly, in order to inherit knowledge from a prophet one should establish a very close spiritual kinship with him and make oneself spiritually entitled to receive the gift of the divine mysteries by following in his footsteps on the straight and narrow path to ultimate union; hence the significance of spiritual initiation and discipleship.

Ibn 'Arabī had a low opinion about ratiocinative and discursive philosophy and philosophy in general, which he considers to be mainly discursive, and which itself is a veil and obstacle in the way to ultimate union. But he himself has discoursed on many speculative issues, more than any discursive philosopher, with this difference that his discourses are based on and backed by the ulterior science of unveiling and realization.

One of the great merits of Ibn 'Arabī is that he, perhaps more than anyone else, has propounded the sapiential wisdom of the prophets and the friends of God (*Awlīya 'Allāh* = saints) and in general the sapiential

core and kernel of all religions. The twenty-seven chapters of his *Fuṣūṣ* are devoted to the twenty-seven prophets mentioned in the Quran and the Old Testament. In each chapter the sapiential wisdom specific to a certain prophet, who is the manifestation of an aspect of the supreme Divine Logos, is propounded on the basis of the esoteric interpretation of the verses of the Quran and the sayings of the prophet regarding him. Again the hierarchy and the rank of prophets, saints and friends of God with respect to multifarious kinds of gnosis and sapiential wisdom and the knowledge peculiar to each and the Divine Name or Names preponderating in his community and many other related issues are discussed in the 560 chapters of his *magnum opus al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*. In general, Ibn ‘Arabī’s works can be considered as the best and the most typical of the works expounding how Divine wisdom has manifested itself both in the universal aspect of creation and more specifically and pre-eminently in the wisdom of prophets and intimates and friends of God.

The Meeting of Ibn Rushd and Ibn ‘Arabī Symbolizing the Encounter between Oriental and Occidental Philosophy

Since in this article we mentioned Averroes as the representative *par excellence* of purely discursive and ratiocinative philosophy in Islam and Ibn ‘Arabī as the paragon exemplar of sapiential and prophetic wisdom, it is proper here to mention their magnificent encounter in Cordova, an encounter which is full of significance, for in it two personalities meet who symbolize the diverging paths that would be followed by the Christian and the Islamic worlds. In this meeting two men faced each other, one of whom was a follower of the edicts of reason and who became the most influential of all Muslim thinkers in the Latin West, and the other a gnostic for whom knowledge meant essentially ‘vision’ who became the dominant figure in Sufism, towering like a giant over the subsequent intellectual life of Islam.”⁷¹ In his *Futūḥāt*, Ibn ‘Arabī has given us a very beautiful account of this memorable event. The whole problem turns round the question whether purely discursive knowledge can have a salvific function:

“I went one fine day to the house of Abū ‘l-Walīd ibn Rushd [Averroes] in Cordova. He had expressed the desire to meet me personally, because he had heard of the revelations which God had accorded me in the course of my spiritual retreat and

had not hidden his astonishment concerning what he had been told. That is why my father, who was one of his intimate friends sent me one day to his house under the pretext of having to perform in some kind of commission, but in reality in order for Averroes to be able to have a talk with me. At this time I was still a beardless young man.

Upon my entering [the house] the philosopher rose from his place and come to meet me, showering upon me signs that demonstrated his friendship and consideration and finally embraced me. Then he told me, 'Yes.' And I in turn told him: 'Yes.' Upon this his joy increased in noting the fact that I had understood him. Then becoming myself conscious of what had provoked his joy I added: 'No.' Immediately Averroes shrank, the color of his features changed; he seemed to doubt that about which he was thinking. He asked me this question: 'What kind of solution have you found through illumination and Divine inspiration?' I answered him: 'Yes and no. Between the yes and the no souls take their flight from their matter and the necks become detached from their bodies.' Averroes became pale; I saw him trembling. He murmured the ritual phrase: There is no power and strength save in God,' because he had understood that to which I had alluded.

Later, after our interview, he interrogated my father concerning me... He [Averroes] said: 'It was a case whose possibility I had affirmed myself, without however as yet encountering someone who had in fact experienced it. Glory be to God that I have been able to live at a time when there exists a master of this experience, one of those who open the locks of his doors. Glory be to God to have made me the personal favor of seeing one of them with my own eyes.'"⁷²

It is very interesting to note that Averroes was not known at all in the eastern lands of Islam and he was not mentioned even once by eastern philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā, who cites a certain Ibn al-Rashīd, who on closer scrutiny turns out to be a student of the Mu'tazilite Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, and not Ibn Rushd. The East had far surpassed the one-sided and dogmatic Aristotelianism presented in the works of Averroes. He was to find his homeland in the Medieval West where he reigned supreme for two centuries. But the case was different with Ibn 'Arabī, who found the spiritual climate of the West uncongenial and traveled eastward to Cairo, Mecca, Iraq and Anatolia and finally settled

in Damascus. Ibn ‘Arabī’s spiritual heritage was bequeathed to his posterity in the east and was assimilated into the mainstream of Islamic philosophy by his disciples such as Qunawī, Jandī, Farghānī, Kāshānī, Qayṣarī, Jāmī and others who were mostly Persians. Just as Suhrawardī absorbed the sapiential elements of Ghazzālī’s thinking into his own Illuminationist philosophy, it rested with Mullā Ṣadrā to reintegrate the sapiential and the prophetic wisdom of Ibn ‘Arabī into his so-called Transcendent Theosophy, which, while preserving all the merits of discursive philosophy, transcends it to attain to the highest peaks of quintessential wisdom in so far as is humanly possible. Transcendent Theosophy (*al-Hikmah al-muta‘āliyah*) is a unique dialectical (in the Platonic sense) synthesis of all the grades of wisdom into a single unity which reflects the wisdom of the principle in its multiple aspects. This sapiential wisdom has been transmitted from masters to disciples in myriads as a Divine and heavenly inheritance.

The Pertinence of Oriental Philosophy in the Contemporary World

One might ask the question: “What is the significance of Oriental Philosophy as delineated above for the contemporary scene which is more often labeled as the global age?” Is it not anachronistic to apply the principles of a bygone philosophy to the so-called post-modern age? To answer this question some clarifications and explications are in order.

1) Oriental Philosophy is something held in common by the great sages of history and as such it is universal in nature. Thus we are entitled to scrutinize the contemporary arena from the vantage point of the Oriental Philosophy. Moreover, in a global age such as ours where a global perspective is required, by adopting the oriental point of view, it is possible to take the wisdom of the east into consideration, and it is possible in addition to write a global history of philosophy on such a basis.

2) The age we live in, called the global age, differs from past ages in many respects, especially in that humans in former ages lived in self-enclosed communities, seldom aware of even the existence of other communities. This is quite different in our modern age where extensive studies and research have been carried out on multifarious aspects of different cultures such as history, religion, art, architecture, archeology and so on. The results of such studies are enough to fill great libraries. Science and modern research have removed the barriers that once

existed among different cultures. But the problem now is how to make use of this vast material made available by the painstaking labors of almost innumerable scholars the world over, and more importantly, how to interpret this heterogeneous material so divergent in nature. Some scholars considering the *prima facie* contrasts and disparities among these cultures see no internal unity and similarity among them and are more prone to discern the existence of a sort of essential conflict or clash among such cultures. But is this the case if we envision the matter from an oriental viewpoint? Oriental Philosophy based on sapiential wisdom is likely to discern a sort of intrinsic unity amidst this apparent diversity and, avowing the existence of extrinsic difference and disparity so natural in our world among the individuals of a single species or the species of a single genus, may penetrate deep into primordial principles and behold there a convergence and unity at the centre, which is as natural as the divergence and diversity on the periphery. Such unity for example can be observed in the apparently different teachings of the great sages of the so-called axial age, who either as great philosophers or as great prophets have had the greatest impact upon their respective cultures. It would be no exaggeration to say that it is as if they constitute various aspects of one primeval and primordial sapiential wisdom. We should emphasize here that according to the insuperable law of manifestation, an aspect or manifestation of a principle while disclosing that principle is not identical to that principle, and hence we when we say that those cultures are originally the manifestations of one primordial sapiential wisdom, it should be construed to mean that none of them can claim to be that primordial wisdom to the exclusion of others.

It should also be emphasized at this juncture that the appellation 'oriental' here is trans-historical rather than necessarily geographical. Some great western philosophers such as Plato, Parmenides, St. Augustine and St. Thomas are considered to be oriental or have worked their way toward oriental philosophy. Most great sages of the East, such as Lao Tse, Confucius and the writers of *Upanishads* for example, belong no doubt to the oriental tradition, whereas dogmatic theologians, eastern or western, have no taste of sapiential wisdom.

The Basic Features of the Oriental Philosophy

Now let us cast a brief glance at the very basic rudiments of this Oriental Philosophy, or what we have called sapiential wisdom, and ask

about its constituent features.

1) The knowledge of the Absolute or Absolute knowledge. One of the distinguishing marks of sapiential philosophy is the discrimination and discernment between the Absolute and the relative, the *Ātma* and *māyā* (in Hindu terminology); the Creator and the creation (in Abrahamic traditions); or the Tao as principle and as its manifestations; or in Platonic terms, the One (*to hen*) and other than the One (called the *Kosmos*); or in similar terms such as the Heaven (*Tien*) and the earth (in Chinese philosophy); or in the language of some Peripatetics, the Necessary Being and contingent existence. From such a perspective nothing is more preposterous than to deny the Absolute, or to make it relative, or to believe in more than one Absolute (*Ātma*) by absolutizing things that are by nature contingent and relative or, to speak in the terminology of Hinduism, that belong to the order of *māyā*. Such knowledge, being of the highest order, obviously has a salvific function.

2) Oriental Philosophy is not merely an abstract conceptualization or a dry, ratiocinative and discursive argumentation, or an eristic and disputative dialectic. It is based on a method (from the Greek *metahodos* = to be on the way to) of realization, i.e. it is a straight path from each individual to the Ultimate Principle, of which he or she is a manifestation. The way to realization presupposes of course the fulfillment of all virtues whether individual, domestic or communal.

3) Sapiential wisdom is the highest form of knowledge humanly possible and can be attained only through Love. In religions this manifests itself in different forms, such as love of God, love of the neighbor, love of fellow human beings, and in general love of all things including one's self in so far as they are manifestations of the Principle. As the poet sings, "I feel joyous because the world is joyous through him. I love the whole world, because the whole world proceeds from Him." Total love is associated with exalted and sublime virtues such as charity, hope, self-effacement and altruism.

4) Man (there is no difference in dignity between man and woman) in Oriental Philosophy is not a purely terrestrial and mundane being. Rather is he a Divine being, made in the image of God, being a theophany and reflection of all Divine Attributes and perfections. He bears in himself the spirit of God. He can find his ultimate joy, delight and felicity in God alone and not in the world. He is the medium and the mediator between the Heaven and the Earth. Man, moreover, is made

for the Kingdom of Heaven which he can attain, not through the physical birth, but through the spiritual rebirth.

5) Life in this world is ephemeral and transient leading ultimately to death, which according to the Easterners is not synonymous with total annihilation, but is the beginning of an everlasting life. As our life here on earth is incomparably superior to that of the embryonic state in the womb, so is our next becoming in the hereafter and thereafter immeasurably superior to the life here below. One's existential state there moreover, depends on one's involvements here.

6) There are different grades of knowledge. Oriental Philosophy maintains that there are different grades and levels of knowledge, which, rather than being exclusive, are complementary and hence supplement each other. If the crux of knowledge is certainty rather than doubt, there are various grades of certainty:

- a. Knowledge of certainty (such as the transmitted knowledge that fire burns, or the knowledge of the blind man who knows everything in the parable of Ibn Ṭufayl above)
- b. Vision of certainty (such as to see that fire burns, or the same blind man when he suddenly comes to gain his eye sight)
- c. The realization of certainty (such as to put one's hand in blazing fire). This is the final aim of oriental wisdom.

All oriental traditions in East or West have diligently and strenuously worked their way from discursive philosophy to the science of realization. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), due to their historical and geographical contiguity with Hellenic and Hellenistic cultures, had to fight their way from the Hellenic wisdom to the more profound sapiential wisdom of their respective revelations, as we see for example in Philo Judaeus and the Patristic Platonizing fathers to the Peripatetic Scholastic Doctors, in the Oriental Philosophy of Avicenna and a concatenated array of luminaries in sapiential wisdom in the Islamic World. Non-Abrahamic religions of the eastern traditions, on the other hand, were kept aloof from such Hellenistic influence and were left to their own devices to develop ways of sapiential wisdom. Abrahamic religions, moreover, could not ignore the immense treasure of Hellenic discursive reason, as manifested in their great ability to maintain and surpass it, reaching more elevated peaks of oriental wisdom. But on the other hand Aristotelianism led to

narrow scholasticism. Furthermore, there have always been, and still are, other methods of discursivity than the Aristotelian.

7) There is no clear-cut borderline between religion and philosophy in the oriental perspective. This might be due to the fact that there is no dichotomy in sapiential wisdom between reason and revelation, if the latter is understood sapientially rather than dogmatically. According to the Easterners, the Divine revelations manifested in Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Islam and other Divine religions are the highest and best communications and disclosures of Divine wisdom. If sages like St. Thomas, Shankara, Ibn 'Arabī or Mullā Ṣadrā quote verses from the Bible, the Upanishads or the Quran, this is not due to the fact that they are dogmatic theologians and literal commentators but because they want to disclose the sapiential wisdom concealed in the cited verse. This fact entitles us to corroborate Ghazzālī's statement above that Divine scriptures can only be comprehended through knowledge by tasting, that is through sapiential wisdom.

8) Sapiential wisdom, not being conceptual and abstract but rather based on realization, manifests itself in all facets of culture and civilization; in language, art, architecture, domestic life, in the art of the governance of the state; in individual and communal codes of ethics and so on. It can also manifest itself in the laws governing family relationships, institutions and especially government. The laws dominating such domains are not arbitrary or conventional, but derive their ultimate legitimacy from primordial norms relating to the Divine and pristine nature of things, as disclosed by Revelation.

9) Finally, understanding the principles of such Oriental Philosophy as manifested in these great traditions and coming to an authentic awareness of their significance is the most necessary prerequisite for a dialogic of civilizations in a global age.

Notes

1. Cf. for example Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 985a. 10-18.
2. Cf. Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, Part 1: 'The Oriental World', trans. J. Sibree (Batoche Books, Kitchener, 2001), pp. 128-242.
3. For a good account of the translation movement see e.g. A. Badawi, *La Transmission de la Philosophie Grecque au Monde Arabe* (Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris, 1987).
4. This book might have been translated into Arabic, because there are references to

- some issues discussed in this book for example in Avicenna. So far no manuscript of the translation has been discovered.
5. Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-shifāʾ*. Ed. I. Madkour et al. (Cairo, 1951), vol. 1, p. 10.
 6. S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1977), p. 186.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. L. Gauthier, *Introduction a l'etude de la philosophie Musulmane* (Paris, 1900), pp. 52-53; Nasr, *op. cit.*, p. 188.
 10. A. M. Goichon. "L'unité de la pensée Avicennienne", *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences*, no. 20-21(1952), p. 300; Nasr, *op. cit.*, p. 188.
 11. L. Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne* (Librairie J. Vrin, Paris, 1951), p. 26; Nasr, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
 12. S. Pines. "La philosophie orientale d'Avicenne..." *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age*, 27(1952), pp. 5-37.
 13. Nasr, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
 14. Abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*. ed. Maurice Bouyges (Catholic Press, Beirut, 4th edition, 1990), pp. 46-47.
 15. Abū Hāmid Muḥammad Ghazzālī, *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, ed. Ahmad Shamsuddin (Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 1988), p. 26.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
 18. Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-Ḥasana*, (Cairo, 1375/1956), 442:1240.
 19. Quran, 50(*Qaf*):22.
 20. Ghazzālī, *al-Munqidh*, p. 31.
 21. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
 23. Ghazzālī, *Tahāfut*, pp. 46-47; *al-Munqidh*, p. 38.
 24. Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Ghazzālī, *Faḍā'ih al-Bāṭiniyyah* (al-Dar al-Qaumiyyah, Cairo, 1964).
 25. Ghazzālī, *al-Munqidh*, p. 58.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
 27. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Penguin American Library, 1982), pp. 402-405.
 28. Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-ishrāq*, in *Oeuvres Philosophiques et Mystiques*, ed. Henry Corbin (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, and Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1977). Vol. II., p. i.
 29. Ghazzālī. *al-Munqidh*, p. 64.
 30. It has been one of the great merits of Islamic philosophy to integrate the discursive and the sapiential philosophy.
 31. Ghazzālī has in several ways paved the way for the development of spiritual wisdom: in addition to laying the foundations of a metaphysics of light in the *Mishkāt al-anwār*, he incorporated the Sufī metaphysics into the mainstream of Islamic thought and articulated a Sufī metaphysics of morals on the basis of the Islamic revelation.

32. Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, in *Oeuvres Philosophiques et Mystiques*, ed. Henry Corbin (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, and Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1977), Vol. II.
33. Suhrawardī calls the Oriental Philosophy by names such as *al-ḥikmah al-laduniyyah* (Divinely Inspired Wisdom) and *al-ḥikmah al-'atiqah* (the Most Ancient Wisdom). See Corbin (ed.), *Opera Metaphysica et Mystica* (Istanbul, 1945), Vol. I, p. xii.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
36. Suhrawardī, *Oeuvres*, Vol. II, pp. 10-11.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.
41. S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964), p. 62.
42. Suhrawardī, *Oeuvres*, Vol. II, p. 12.
43. Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy ibn Yaḳzān*, ed. A. Nasri Nader (Catholic Press, Beirut, 1963).
44. Ibn Sīnā, *Ḥayy ibn Yaḳzān*, ed. Henry Corbin (Franco-Iranian Institute, Tehran, 1954).
45. Ibn Ṭufayl. op. cit., p. 16.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18: Also see Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa-ṭ-ṭanbīhāt*, with commentary by Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (Matba'ah al-Haydari, Tehran), Vol. 3, pp. 384-385.
49. Ibn Ṭufayl. op. cit., p. 18.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Ibn Ṭufayl. op. cit., p. 17.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*, p. 22-23
60. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24
63. See the introduction of A. Nasri Nader to *Ḥayy ibn Yaḳzān*, p. 10
64. Juzjānī, *The Life of Iḥwān al-Sīyah. A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*, trans. William Gohlmann (SUNY Press, New York, 1974), pp. 54-58.
65. E. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, (Random House, New York, 1955), p. 370 *et seq.*
66. Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, (Bulaq, Cairo, n.d.), Vol. 3, p. 333.

67. Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 529.
68. Ibid., Vol. 1, p.261; see also Chittick, W. C., *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (SUNY Press, New York, 1989), pp. 168-9.
69. Ibn 'Arabī, op.cit., Vol. 1, p. 319; see also Chittick. op. cit., p. 169.
70. Ibn 'Arabī, Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 31; Chittick, Ibid., p. 169; see also Nasr, S. H., *Three Muslim Sages*, p. 93.
71. Ibid., pp. 93-94.
72. Ibn 'Arabī, Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 154.

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23. Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī, *Opera Metaphysica et Mystica*, ed. Henry Corbin (Istanbul, 1945), Vol. 1.

