



HOUMAN, MAHMOUD

HOUMAN, MAHMOUD (Maḥmud Human; b. Tehran, 1908; d. Germany, October 30, 1980; [Figure 1](#)) Iranian thinker and educator. He is primarily remembered for his works in philosophy, history, and Persian literature.

Mahmoud Houman was born in Tehran into an affluent merchant family in 1908. After completing his high school education at the German School in Tehran, he attended the Teacher Training College (Dāneš-sarā-ye ʿĀli, q.v.) and later he graduated with a B.Sc. in chemical engineering from the German-Persian vocational school (*madrassa-ye ṣanʿatī*) of Tehran. Soon he began teaching chemistry at the same institute and even reached the position of assistant director (Houman, 1985, p. 9). He left (or was forced out of?) his position at the Institute and began teaching history at the University of Tabriz in 1948-49. In the 1950s he left for Paris, where he attended the Sorbonne. There, he pursued his studies in philosophy and was, understandably, influenced by the fashionable school of the time, namely Existentialism. He studied with the French philosopher Jean Wahl (1888-1974) and received his Ph.D. with a thesis in 1954 on the notions of the “organic conception of the universe” in the works of Goethe and Hafez (qq.v.). After returning to Iran, he began to teach philosophy at the Teacher Training College until his retirement in the mid-1970s (Houman, 2000, p. 6). Houman was also an ardent nationalist, and in 1966 he, along with his older brother Aḥmad, founded a short-lived, informal society to promote Iranian culture. In 1978, he took the preliminary steps toward establishing a new society called *Anjoman-e āʾin-e Irān* (Society of Iranian [social] customs), but due to his illness the plan was never actualized



(Houman, 1985, pp. 12 ff).

Houman first came to public attention with the publication of his *Hafez ĉe miguyad?* in 1938, which was later followed by *Hafez* (1946), two seminal, if somewhat neglected, works in the modern study of the 14th-century poet Hafez (q.v.). He also prepared a series of lecture notes on ancient Iranian history, which were eventually published as *Tāriq-e bāstāni-ye Irān* (2000). Moreover, he authored two philosophical treatises entitled *Az zendegi ĉe midānim?* (What do we know of life?) and *Zist yā zendegi?* (Existence or life?). His multi-volume *Tāriq-e falsafa* (History of philosophy) followed soon after. He then participated in another project entitled *Še’r ĉist?* (What is poetry?), which is a dialogue between him and his student Esmā’il Kō’i (Esmail Khoi) on the essence of poetry. He also delivered a series of private talks which appeared posthumously as *Hasti va ādami* (Existence and mankind) in 1985.

On a personal level, he was known for his equanimity as well as for his ability to recognize the merits of those who did not share his views: for example he had a high regard for the historian Aḥmad Kasravi (q.v.) notwithstanding the latter’s penchant for weekly book-burning, particularly works of poetry (Houman, 1985, p.15). Also Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad (q.v.), who certainly held a completely different worldview from Houman, was indebted to him for his assistance in the translation of Ernst Jünger’s *Ū ber die Linie* (*Obur az kaṭ*) as well as for his comments on the draft of *Ġarb-zadegi* (q.v.; Āl-e Aḥmad, 2011, p. 5).

It should, parenthetically, be added that Houman was an active member of Iranian Freemasonry (q.v.) and as “Bro. Houman, 33^o” he was instrumental in rewriting the rituals of the Scottish Rite Masons to include Iranian cultural and historical elements (Samii, 1993). The sensationalist journalist Esmā’il Rā’in (1978, III, p. 680), apparently, was the first person to “out” the members of the organization which, not unexpectedly for all societies afflicted with paranoia, caused much discomfort for the members of the brotherhood. More importantly, a trend seen in Houman’s later works, which may be of interest to the students of Iranian Freemasonry, is his use of Masonic teachings in expounding history and philosophy. For example in his *Hasti va ādami* (Existence and mankind) the main arguments revolve around the ancient concept of *ordo ab chao* ‘Order out of Chaos’, which was later appropriated by the Masonic movement (1985, p. 35ff.).



Houman mentored a number of devoted students who became important figures in Iranian intellectual life in their own rights, people such as Esmā'il Kō'i, Abu'l-Qāsem Partow A'zam and 'Abd al-'Ali Dastgayb. In sum, one may conclude that while his later works demonstrate immense erudition on the author's part, his works on Persian literature possess far greater originality and will be of lasting value. Indeed, more recently, two researchers in the field of engineering have used Houman's pioneering methodology as the basis for a chronological classification of the remaining *ghazal*s of Hafez (Rahgozar and Inkpen).

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