



## ILLUMINATIONISM

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**ILLUMINATIONISM** or Illuminationist Philosophy (Ar. *al-ḥekma/al-falsafa al-ešrāqiya*; Pers. *falsafa-ye ešrāqi*), first introduced in the 12th century as a complete, reconstructed system distinct both from the Peripatetic philosophy (*falsafa-ye maššā'i*) of [Avicenna](#) (d. 1037) and from theological philosophy (*kalām-e falsafi*). Most medieval historians as well as specialist historians of philosophy concur that Illuminationist philosophy is a “novel” and a most complete system (*al-nezām al-atamm*) constructed by the young Persian philosopher Šehāb-al-Din Yaḥyā b. Amirak Sohrevardi (1155-91).

The basic meaning of *ešrāq* (Illumination) is “rising,” more precisely “rising of the sun” (Lane, *Arabic English Lexicon* I, pp. 1539-41). The term is used extensively in Arabic and Persian philosophical texts, signifying a special intuitive mode of cognition with no temporal extension (i.e., a-temporal), spatially coordinated “in” (*fi*) the knowing, self-conscious subject (Ar. *al-mawzu' al-modrek bi'l-dāt*; Pers. *man-e dānanda/kod-āgāh*). In other words, it applies to the relation between the “apprehending subject” (*al-mawzu' al-modrek*) and “apprehensible object” (*al-modrak*). The term *ešrāq* is also widely used in popular discourse. In its general, non-technical usage in ordinary language, it signifies the “mystical” as well as the range of extraordinary types of knowledge, including personal inspiration (*elhām*).

*The 12th-century forerunners.* Illuminationist philosophy is not the sole creation of Sohrevardi. Earlier 12th-century, non-Aristotelian texts started a trend that culminated in Sohrevardi's construction of the new system. Firstly, the famous physician and scientist, Abu'l-Bara-kāt Baḡdādi, composed a novel,



philosophical, three-part text titled *Ketāb al-mo'tabar* (The book evidential), which challenges Aristotle (as presented in Islamic Peripatetic texts, mainly in Avicenna's *Šefā'*) in regard to scientific methodology, but especially in physics. He is one of the first 12th-century philosophers to elaborate on an old tradition, whose roots are to be found in Plato's idea of sudden inspiration put forth in light imagery in his *Seventh Letter* (341C, 344B). This was later discussed by Speusippus (see Merlan, p. 64), and was the subject of an entire treatise by St. Augustine (see Allers). The favorite Platonic metaphor of light and vision of the *Republic* V-VIII is repeated in almost all Illuminationist texts. The notion that primary principles of science are obtained by "evident self-reflection" is stated briefly by Baḡdādi in his "Introduction" (*al-Mo'tabar*, p. 3); however, Sohrawardi is most likely the first philosopher to utilize the Platonic metaphor in logic and epistemology, as well as cosmology. He states that certain types of knowledge are "evident-in-themselves" and are immediately known by the subject. This is one of Illuminationist philosophy's main non-Aristotelian principles, described by Sohrawardi as fundamental to philosophy.

The next 12th-century figure who wrote non-Aristotelian texts was the Persian mathematician and logician, 'Omar b. Sahlān Sāvaji, who, though unknown in Western studies, was a creative logician, and famous for his works on the foundations of mathematics (see Bayhaqi, *Tattema Šewān al-ḥekma*, p. 137; Hāji Ḳalifa, I, p. 217; Sāvi, in *EI*). Sāvaji's extant texts are demonstrative of his creativity in restructuring the traditional nine Books of the Arabic *Organon*, by defining a two-part logic: "expository propositions" (Ar. *al-aqwāl al-šāreḥa*, Pers. *goft-e rowšan konanda*); and "proof theory" (*ḥojaj*). His innovations served as the model for Sohrawardi's "Rules of Thought" (*al-Žawābeṭ al-fekr*), which is the Illuminationist restructured logic presented in the text *The Philosophy of Illumination, Part One*: I.1: sec. 1-7. Many Illuminationist technical innovations in formal logic—such as reduction of terms; formal redefinitions of the Second and Third Figures of Syllogism as simple inferences, or reductions, based on the First Figure; critical re-evaluation of negation in simple and compound propositions—may be regarded as extensions of Sāvaji's ideas (see Sāvaji, *Tabšera*, pp. 3-5; and Ziai, 1990b, chap. 1). The fact that Baḡdādi and Sāvaji are among the three Islamic philosophers Sohrawardi does name is indicative that he had studied their work.

*Introduction to Sohrawardi's Illuminationism.* Sohrawardi, the founder of Illuminationist philosophy, was born in 1155 in northeastern Iran in the hamlet Sohraward, and was executed by the express command of Saladin the



Ayyubid in 1191 in Aleppo, where his tomb still stands. The most widely known Illuminationist text by Sohrawardi is titled *Ḥekmat al-ešrāq* (The Philosophy of Illumination), which is a testimony to Sohrawardi's novel and innovative approach to philosophical discourse distinguished from Peripatetic philosophy. He aims to refine and augment Avicenna's Peripatetic system and is careful that the Philosophy of Illumination does not decline to the position of "handmaiden" of theology, as with the works of many thinkers from the late 12th century and 13th century on who followed *Ġazālī's* guidelines to limit philosophy by theological presuppositions, notably Aṭir-al-Din Abhari in his famous and very widely used philosophical primer *Hedāyat al-ḥekma*. Starting in the 13th century historians, notably Šams-al-Din Šahrazuri, elevate the novel Illuminationist system to the rank of an independent "school" of philosophy, and often praise it as the only creative continuation of philosophical investigation in post-Avicennan periods.

In its technical use within philosophical systems the term illumination (*ešrāq*) is coupled with the term "vision" (*mošāhada*), and together they inform of the unified epistemological theory, Knowledge by Presence (*'elm-e ḥożuri*), first constructed and named in the 12th century by Sohrawardi. This unified epistemological theory is the crowning achievement of the system, Philosophy of Illumination, where the term "illumination" signifies the most general act of knowing and the term "vision" signifies the act of the subject, in terms of generalized knowledge. The epistemological process of vision-illumination leads to knowledge (*dāneš*) in the most general sense, and the action "knowing" is expressed by the term *dānestan* (to know, inclusive of all types), acted by a subject, *dānanda*, related to an object, *dānesta*. The unified epistemology is extended over the inclusive range of types of knowing. For example, in vision as external sight (Pers. *didan*; Ar. *ebšār*), the subject (Pers. *binanda*; Ar., *mobšer*) and the object of sight (Pers. *dida*; Ar. *mobšar*), when identified by the one-to-one relational correspondence (the Illuminationist relation between any subject and object, *eżāfa-ye ešrāqiya*, replacing predication) that triggers Knowledge by Presence, will indicate the function of sight. Extended beyond external sight, and in its generalized form, the Illuminationist unified epistemological theory posits that, when any knowing subject (*modrek/dānanda*) and any knowable object (*modrak/dānesta*) form "sameness" by an identity preserving relational correspondence in the generalized domain of knowing (*edrāk/dānestan*), then, and only then, knowing is actualized, as stated by Sohrawardi: "knower, known, and knowing are here one" (i.e., the same: *al-modrek wa al-modrak wa al-edrāk hāhonā*



*wāhed*).

Medieval historians, and contemporary scholars, differentiate Peripatetic philosophy and Illuminationist philosophy in terms of ontological, epistemological, and cosmological principles. The philosophical position most widely used to distinguish the two schools, initially by Mollā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) in his *Ta'liqāt* and later upheld by the contemporary thinker Sayyed Jalāl Āštiāni in his complex text titled *Hasti*, is the Illuminationist ontological principle “primacy of quiddity” (*aṣālat al-māhiya*) over that of “primacy of being” (*aṣālat al-wojud*)—the latter is commonly thought to be the principle Peripatetic ontological view.

Illuminationist philosophy departs from Peripateticism in relation to: terminology; epistemological priority of the intuitive over the purely syllogistic; and use of constructed ontological-based meta-language of light applied to all entities in the whole continuum of reality, where existent things in each segment of the cosmos (Intellect, Soul, Matter, plus an added fourth realm named *Ālam al-ḳayāl*, translated, *mundus imaginalis* by Henry Corbin) are said to be lights of various degrees of luminosity and are propagated from the source of being, the Light of Lights. The Light of Lights is one with respect to all possible modes, and all other “lights” are propagated from it according to rapidly increasing sequences such as  $2^n$ . The multiple abstract lights (*anwār-e mojarrada*) of the Illuminationist system form the cosmological theory of multiplicity of intellects (*katrat-e 'oqul*), which is another distinguishing feature of the system in relation to the Peripatetic numbered and discrete separate Intellects (*'oqul-e mofāreq*).

Perhaps the most widespread use of Illuminationist Philosophy has been epistemological theory. The impact of Illuminationist Knowledge by Presence (*'elm-e ḥożuri*), which posits a posterior epistemological position to acquired, or representational, knowledge (*'elm-e ḥoşuli*), has not been confined to specialist, philosophical circles, as has Illuminationist logic, for example. The epistemological priority status given to intuitive knowledge has dominated “speculative mysticism” (*'erfān-e nazāri*) in Iran, and is also widely intimated in Persian poetry.

Sohravardi’s new Illuminationist epistemological theory first critically evaluates the logical “law” of identity (sameness, equality) and how it applies to the relation between the subject, or the apprehending subject (*al-mawżu‘ al-modrek*) and apprehendable object (*al-modrak*). The theory is fully formulated



first in the metaphysics of the text *Paths and Havens: Book Three: On the Science of Metaphysics*, which replaces Aristotelian predicative knowledge, thought to be inapplicable to prove validity of the process of obtaining primary principles (Aristotle concurs on this, *Posterior Analytics* 1.2), with the generalized theory of Knowledge by Presence. Said in logical terms this means that: “x is y”; or “x = y” (logical principle, or law of Identity, i.e., X = X); “sameness,” “unity,” “becoming one,” plus all other predicative propositions, are replaced with a generalized law of identity as relational correspondence between each and every one (*koll wāḥed wāḥed*) of individuals (*āḥād*) of two aggregate wholes (*al-ejtemāʿ*, a novel Illuminationist term), of both the “realm knowing,” and the “realm being,” which are realms “in” (*fī*) the continuum whole. This relation between subject (thinking, thought), and object (the thing thought) is named *al-ezāfa al-ešrāqiya* meaning “Illuminationist Relation.” It is a novel idea, and the term is first used by Sohrawardi in several places of his text *al-Talwiḥāt* (Intimations). This original idea is best described as an identity preserving one-to-one correspondence between each and every member of two realms, being and knowing. The lengthy and elaborate process that terminates with the naming of relational correspondence between thinking and being, subject and object, thinker and the thing thought, is one of Illuminationist philosophy’s great achievements. The theory clearly defines the multi-level relation between “thinking subject” (*al-mawzuʿ al-modrek*, where the verb *d-r-k* replaces *ʿa-q-l*) and object, and is generalized. In this way non-predicative Knowledge by Presence is given priority over predicative knowledge, i.e., finally, “x is y” (and x = y) is replaced by {xi}R(q){y}, which is named a general law of metaphysics, where R is the Illuminationist Relation between each and every knowing subject and knowable object.

*Post-12th-century Illuminationist philosophy.* Illuminationist philosophy was very popular in the 13th century, specifically after the Mongol conquest that ushered in with it a new political era. Ašʿarite theology was no longer dominant. The lavishly endowed new school at Marāḡa, directed by the Persian scientist-philosopher Naṣir-al-Din Ṭusi, recruited many scholars from all parts of the vast empire inherited by the Mongol warlords. New activity in all domains of science is attested by the large number of fresh texts, commentaries, and interpretations of earlier sciences. Illuminationist philosophy was eagerly sought primarily due to its political doctrine, because of its potential use in formulating the theory of Mongol rule, lending it scientific and proven authority (Ziai, 1992a).



The main 13th-century Illuminationist scholars are: Šams al-Din Moḥammad Šahrazuri, Sa'd b. Maṣur Ebn Kammuna (d. 1284), whose commentary on *al-Talwiḥāt* has earned the status of a textbook among Illuminationist philosophers in Iran, and Qoṭb-al-Din Širāzi. Also Ismā'il b. Moḥammad Rizi whose work, titled *Ḥayāt al-Nofus* and dedicated to the prince Yusof Šāh son of Alb Arsalān Arḡun son of Hezār Asp, Atābak of Lorestān during the years 673-87/1274-88 (Rizi, pp. 12 ff.), may be seen as a Persian Illuminationist text. Though the text is mainly a synthesis of Sohrawardi's four major Arabic texts, the controversial doctrines are left out. Šahrazuri's Illuminationist Philosophical texts, such as *al-Šajara al-elāhiya*, the first comprehensive and truly philosophical encyclopedia, and his lengthy Illuminationist commentary, *Šarḥ ḥekmat al-ešrāq* (Commentary on the Philosophy of Illumination) are demonstrative of 13th-century creative philosophical thinking (see Ziai, 1990d; and Šahrazuri, 1993).

Other commentaries on Sohrawardi's texts were composed later, the most important of which are the 16th-century works by [Jalāl-al-Din Davāni](#) (d. 908/1502), and the extensive 17th-century Persian commentary by Moḥammad Šarīf Neẓām-al-Din Heravi. Davani is the author of the celebrated work on ethics titled *Aklāq-e Jalāli*, and he held the position of vizier under the Āqquyūnlū rulers of northeastern Iran. His commentary on Sohrawardi's *Hayākel al-nur*, titled *Šawākel al-ḥur fi šarḥ hayākel al-nur*, is well known. [Ġiāṭ-al Din Maṣur Daštaki](#) (d. 948/1541), too, has written a commentary on Sohrawardi's *Hayākel al-nur*, titled *Ešrāq hayākel al-nur le-kašfzolamāt šawākelal-ḡorur*. This is not one of the major Illuminationist theoretical works, but it is indicative of Sohrawardi's widespread impact.

Finally there is a possible, though not fully examined, impact of Illuminationist thinking in the West. This is exemplified by the interesting, though seldom mentioned, major paraphrase of important sections of Sohrawardi's text *Philosophy of Illumination*, done by the famous Nāšerid vizier Lesān-al-Din Ebn al-Ḳaṭīb in his *Rawzat al-ta'rif bi'l-ḥobb al-šarīf*, composed in Granada, Andalusia.



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