

# **Nobility of the Complex: Suhrawardi's Illuminationist Exposition on the Medieval Problem of Universals**

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# Nobility of the Complex

## Suhrawardi's Illuminationist Exposition on the Medieval Problem of Universals<sup>1</sup>

Khshayar Beigi

Exalted art Thou, Originator of all, First of the First, Origin of  
origins, Giver of Existence to all quiddities, Manifester of all  
identities, Causer of miraculous than any miracle, Proficient in  
subtleties and that which is yet more subtle than any subtle  
thing! O Lord of the Active Intellects, of the Essences  
abstracted from all matter, place, and dimension, of them that  
are the triumphal Lights. Incorporeal in all respects they are  
perfect and nigh unto Thee... I ask Thee to pour out upon me  
Thy blazing lights and to teach me the Knowledge of the Noble  
Mysteries.  
Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Among the list of philosophical problems that Shahabuddin Suhrawardi, the 12th Century Persian Philosopher and founder of the Illuminationist school, engages with in his famous manifesto *The Philosophy of Illumination* (*Hikmat al Ishraq* in Arabic, and *PHI* hereafter) the problem of Universals deserves special attention and treatment for several reasons. First, historically, the problem has been the target of sustained and sophisticated articulations, debates and developments for several hundred years both in the Islamic-Iranian

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is developed out of my presentation at the annual conference of the International Society of Neoplatonic Studies at Loyola Marymount University in the summer of 2018 and is indebted to the organizers particularly John Finamore and Eric Perl for their intellectual hospitality and camaraderie. Before and beyond the conference, I'm mostly grateful to Professor Frederic Schroeder, whose insightful advice and intellectual generosity enabled me to turn my raw curiosity on the problem of Universals to an exciting journey of apprenticeship. This paper is dedicated to him in the ethos of philosophical friendship.

<sup>2</sup> Translated by John Walbridge, "The Devotional and Occult Works of Suhrawardi the Illuminationist". *Ishraq, Islamic Philosophy Yearbook*, No.2, Russian Academy of Sciences, 2011.

track of philosophy (or *hikmat*) and in the Scholastic-Christian-Jewish tradition of theology and metaphysics in Europe. Though unknown to Western scholars until about a century ago, Suhrawardi's contribution next to Avicenna, the forefather of the problem, can shed further light on this long and fascinating history. Second, thematically, most contributors to the problem including both Suhrawardi and Avicenna have treated the subject in various proximity to the problem of Platonic Forms (though the reverse is not true<sup>3</sup>). Suhrawardi too in his discussion of Universals refers directly to Platonic Forms and states his standing within the Platonic tradition but via Illuminationist terminology and more importantly arguments. Such references and their contexts can clarify what kind of *philosophical* Platonism (or neo-Platonism) Suhrawardi advocated beyond some contemporary presentations of him as either the apostle of an Iranian cult of Platonism or on the opposite and more recently some reductive readings of him as proto-Avicinian<sup>4</sup>. Third, Suhrawardi's discussions of various philosophical problems in his Illuminationist treatise and in particular on Universals are intertwined with a sophisticated exposition on metaphysics of Light. This obvious fact though acknowledged by Suhrawardi scholars is yet to yield philosophical analytics adequate to the problematization and valorization of Light as the most distinct concept of Illuminationism. And finally, the problem of Universals despite its archaic origins and Medieval life can still be relevant in modern philosophical terms<sup>5</sup>. This point though brought up by Western scholarship is not undertaken in research on the Islamic or Eastern side of the story. I hope this essay, through my treatment of the Illuminationist position in terms of an early philosophical take on Complexity, serves as an invitation to more contemporary framings of Suhrawardi's project.

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<sup>3</sup> Suhrawardi embarks on a criticism of the Peripatetics' denial of Platonic Form in the Part One of *The Philosophy of Illumination* (p.65) separately and long before turning to Universals in the Part Two.

<sup>4</sup> For an example on the first distortion look at Henri Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, Volume 2, *Sohrawardī et les Platoniciens de Perse* (1971). For an example on the second distortion, look at Gutas (2003). In contrast, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardi and the Heritage of the Greeks* (Walbridge, 1999) is a pioneering attempt to trace the Greek sources referenced or alluded to by Suhrawardi.

<sup>5</sup> For example look at Loux and Galluzzo, *The Problem of Universals in Contemporary Philosophy* (2015).

## Historical Analysis versus Illuminationist Exposition

It is customary to start inquiries into the problem of Universals in a historical manner: by marking the birth of the subject with Porphyry's premonition in *Isagoge* and then moving towards the discussion of the three levels of Universals (Mental, Logical and Natural) by Avicenna to continue through its reception and maturation in the history of Medieval philosophy in the West or alternatively in the Islamic East<sup>6</sup>. The same comparative - historical approach could also have been used in the present inquiry on the Illuminationist position possibly with promising results. However I contend that an evaluation of Suhrawardi's position be it in relation to Avicenna, the Greeks or other important milestones in this meandering journey of the problem doesn't have to exclude or bracket the specific Illuminationist cradle in which the problem is born and nourished by Suhrawardi. After all, the role of Suhrawardi in the history of Islamic philosophy has been understood by himself as well as by his commentators and interlocutors as an overcoming of the deficiencies of Peripatetic thought via Illuminationism. In the same vein I hope to show that Suhrawardi's exposition of the problem of Universals despite his frequent and often critical references to other positions is best approached not externally via a surgical-comparative method but internally and within the texture of Illuminationist principles and paradigms where the discussion of the problem takes place. Thus I start with a brief overview of Suhrawardi's project as divided into two main parts in his famous manifesto *The Philosophy of Illumination* before locating his exposition on Universals within the text.

Suhrawardi divides *The Philosophy of Illumination* into two major parts. The Part One is called "The Rules of Thought in Three Discourses". The first two discourses of this part are comprised of simplified introduction to elements of semantics, logic and epistemology. The Third Discourse of Part One is called "On Sophisticated Refutations and Some Judgements between the Illuminationist and the Peripatetic doctrine in [several] sections". There Suhrawardi attacks various approaches to philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> For a study on the Western history of the problem look at Jesse Owen, "Common Nature: A Point of Comparison Between Thomistic and Scotistic Metaphysics" (1957). For a recent study on its Islamic-Iranian origins and developments look at Muhammad Faruque's "Mullā Ṣadrā On The Problem Of Natural Universals" (2017).

problems including sophism and Peripateticism but without resorting to Illuminist arguments or methodology. This discourse is in itself very valuable as Suhrawardi in the course of ten judgements (*hukumāt*) embarks on exposing errors in Peripatetic arguments and/or criticize their deficient proofs on those mutually-shared positions (for example, on the immortality of the soul). Several of the critical debates in Part One (for example on vision) elevate into full-fledged Illuminist expositions and principles in Part Two (Knowledge by Presence for example).

The Part Two of *PHI* is called “On the Divine Lights, the Light of Lights, and the Bases and Orders of Existence, in Five Discourses”. The problem of Universals appears in this manifesto-like, second half of *PHI* and within the Second Discourse entitled “On the Order of Existence in Fourteen Sections” under the section “On the Principle of the Most Noble Possibility”. The fact that the problem is absent from the polemical mission and critical scope of Part One only to appear later under Part Two implies that Suhrawardi held a special, positive role for it in his Illuminist undertaking (under a paradigmatic “principle” and section). In the manner of the text I open the discussion of the problem of Universals in Illuminist terms by first locating and explaining the section “the Principle of the Noblest Possibility” in the overall structure of *PHI*.

The section in question appears towards the end of the Second Discourse in Part Two of *PHI*. In the preceding discourse Suhrawardi presents a metaphysical articulation of Illuminism based on his exposition on Light as a *supra-sensory, incorporeal* phenomenon. There he clearly establishes the independence of Light from bodies as well as from visibility: an incorporeal Light is a light in itself and evident to itself - the supreme axiom of Illuminism. It is not within the scope of this essay to provide a synopsis of Suhrawardi’s inauguration of Illuminist ontology via this foundational First Discourse of Part Two of *PHI*. For a cursory overview and overall idea into the progressive movement of his elaborate treatise on Light, I list the titles of the nine sections of the First Discourse in descending order: “Showing that Lights Need No Definitions”, “On the Definition of the Independent”, “On Light and Darkness”, “On the Dependence of the Body on Its Existence upon the Incorporeal Light”, “Showing that Whatever Perceives Its Essence Is an Incorporeal Light”, “On the Lights and Their Classes”, “Showing that the Intellectual, Incorporeal Lights Differ by Perfection and Deficiency, not by Species”, “More on

the Difference among Incorporeal Lights”, and “Proving that There is a Being Necessary by Essence”.

Building on the First, the Second Discourse continues the philosophical exposition of Light but in terms of “The order of existence” or an Illuminationist cosmogony. Here Suhrawardi is less concerned with axiomatic declarations or manifesto-like definitions and focuses more on descriptions, implications, and applications of the Illuminationist agenda from various angles and directions. Light is still the most prominent figure but more in terms of what it does rather than what it is: For example through arguments on transmission, dissipation, interaction, and multiplication of rays as they relate to existing philosophical problems including the propagation of many from one, the theory of vision, the controversy over the nature of God’s knowledge, the cosmological question of celestial movements in relation to Providence, the antinomy between Love and Violence and still others. In brief, if the First Discourse focuses on the foundations of the Illuminationist project, the subsequent discourses pivot its practice and promise as a mature philosophical approach by echoing, developing and affirming the tenets of the First Discourse in relation to more general debates and problems of ancient philosophy within the intellectual tradition of his time; A veritable *tour de force* of Illuminationism.

### The Principle of the Noblest Possibility: Introduction, Scope and Importance

The section under which the problem of Universals is discussed is called “The Principle of the Noblest Possibility” and starts with a concise definition of the eponymous principle: “One of the Illuminationist principles is that if a baser possibility exists a more noble possibility must already have existed” (*PHI*, 107). With no further explanation the definition is followed immediately by a theological disclaimer:

Thus, if the Light of Light had necessitated the basest darkness through Its unitary aspect, no aspect would have remained to necessitate that which was more noble. If it were supposed to exist it would require the absurdity of an aspect nobler the Light of Lights to necessitate it.

I start with the above disclaimer in the definition of the Principle that tends to confirm but also append what Suhrawardi calls the “Unitary

aspect” of God before explaining what the nobler and the baser Possibilities refer to. Earlier in the First Discourse of the Part Two Suhrawardi provides a clear definition of what he means by the Unitary aspect of God or the Light of Lights in the Illuminationist vocabulary:

The Light of Lights is unitary, having by Its own essence no condition, and everything else abides by It. If It has no condition and no opposite, nothing can nullify It, so It is eternal and everlasting. No states, be it luminous or dark, adheres to the Light of Lights, and It may have no attribute in any respect. (PHI, p.88)

The Unitary aspect in that earlier Discourse establishes the paramouncy of the divine: that God is beyond any categories of being, or in Illuminative terminology bereft of both luminous or dark states. This point is often neglected that though Suhrawardi tends to describe all metaphysical beings as incorporeal light and holds them in emanative hierarchy starting with the most supreme Light of Lights down to the weakest Managing Lights, he also excludes the nature of the first term of the series from the illuminative nature of light or “luminous or dark states”. In other words, Light of Lights hardly even belongs to the genus of Light, much less to be a light-being and never a light-species<sup>7</sup>. Or simply, the Light of Lights is only nominally a light. This by itself can be an important echo between Illuminationism and the Neoplatonic schema of One-beyond-Being: That God participates in Its Being as Illumination.

In the next discourse where a new principle is introduced we expect that it would not spoil the Unitary essence of God established before, and likewise the Principle of the Noblest Possibility doesn’t claim to explain or support this essential aspect: had God to be included in the Principle a level higher than God would have to be necessitated, which would be “absurd” argues Suhrawardi. So the new principle stands neither over nor under the supreme transcendence of the Light of Lights, rather it stays in onto-theological proximity to it, neither explicated by God’s Unitary aspect, nor explaining it. Rather it enjoys a semi-independence status. Now that we know whatever the Principle is concerned with it can’t include the thought of God, what else it can be about?

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<sup>7</sup> Suhrawardi emphasizes that Lights don’t differ by type or species despite their qualitative classifications but by intensity or “perfection”.

As its name shows, this principle deals with a different realm: the realm of Possibility<sup>8</sup> or in a more technical sense the realm of abstract being or incorporeals<sup>9</sup>. After the truth of God's Unitary aspect, which is almost closed to philosophical inquiry, it is the truth of Possibility along with its division into noble and base levels that defines the goal of metaphysical investigation. And since any investigation into this realm by definition excludes God's Unitary nature, Suhrawardi omits Light of Lights from the cascading hierarchy of Lights when he sets to underscore the importance as well as the scope of the Principle:

Therefore you should conceive in regards to the Proximate Light<sup>10</sup>, the Dominating lights, the spheres and the Managing lights what is more noble and more dignified after holding its possibility. They are beyond the world of chance so nothing prevents them to be as perfect as they may be<sup>11</sup>. (*PHI*, p.107, translation slightly changed)

God is taken out of the purview of the Principle but the philosophical exigency stays as well as its lightscope or illuminative field as attested to by the quasi-religious term *to conceive*.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from Illuminationist injunctions, in the above Suhrawardi valorizes the field of investigation or Possibility in the very wording of

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<sup>8</sup> Walbridge and Ziai in their English translation use "contingency" for *imkan*. In his French translation Corbin uses "possibility". I tend towards the latter choice which implies a general, being of the abstract that is neutral towards either materialistic chance or illuminationist perfection. As we will see Suhrawardi maintains that the more noble level has no place for chance in contrast to the baser level which is permeated with chance events.

<sup>9</sup> It is not within the scope of this paper to give a comprehensive overview on the problem of incorporeals and Suhrawardi's criticism of the Peripatetics on it. His Illuminationist take on the problem of Universals can be understood as an important re-iteration of his position on this foundational problem.

<sup>10</sup> The Proximate Light is the highest and closest to the Light of Lights and its first emanation.

<sup>11</sup> In the English version Walbridge and Ziai mistakenly translate *ba'di imkānihi* to "except contingency" and the mistake has turned the whole sentence into a contradictory and confusing statement. The Persian translation by Jafari (p.272) gives "while being possible" which is slightly off but overall conveys the point. The French translation by Corbin (p.149) "après sa Possibilité" is correct and is accompanied by a useful footnote.

<sup>12</sup> *Ta'taqid* in Arabic.



the two realms: the “nobler” and the “baser”. Does that mean Illuminationism is a metaphysical project of moral superiority? Are we instructed here by Suhrawardi to look at higher levels of abstract being just because the higher is purged from chance events and thus more perfect or noble in ontological terms? In its very definition, the contrast between the Noble and the Base certainly betrays a value judgement at the heart of the Principle, far from submitting the realm of Possibility or incorporeals into a neutral metaphysical inquiry. Suhrawardi’s subsequent accent on the nobler and the omission of the baser in the title of the Principle as well as in the injunction above further reinforces this value judgement. But the Principle with its value-laden articulation and biased exhortation enjoys an intricate historical and philosophical context far beyond a simple sermon in praise of the metaphysically Higher Good or the ontologically Virtuous. Suhrawardi’s metaphysical partiality when viewed within this larger, comparative frame is an act of counterbalance or correction (and not simple opposition or refutation) to what his interlocutors had previously postulated and established as the world of abstract being or Possibility.

### The Tale of Two Incorporeal Realms

The reason why Suhrawardi takes it on himself and via an important Illuminationist Principle to call for an investigation on the higher grounds of abstract being is to compensate for the myopic position represented by Peripateticism. Put briefly if not crudely, according to Suhrawardi, the Peripatetics discovered the sublime being of the abstract Possible or the incorporeal (though he asserts that they were not the first) but then they lost sight of it and relegated its study to a lower realm of chance-events permeated by matter and its variegation. Suhrawardi calls this lower level almost pejoratively one of “darkness and barriers” and contrasts it with the nobility of the world of light:

There is a wondrous order occurring in the world of darkneses and barriers, but the relation among the noble lights are nobler than the relation of darkness and so must be prior to them. The followers of the Peripatetics admit that there is such a wondrous order among the barriers. Yet they confine the Intellects to ten. Thus according to their principles the world of barriers would have to be more wondrous than the world of light, more subtle

and generous in its order and the wisdom therein greater. This is not true since a sound mind will judge that the wisdom of the world of light and the subtle order and astonishing correspondences occurring therein are greater<sup>13</sup> than that of the world of darkness, which is but a shadow<sup>14</sup> of the world of light. (*PHI* p. 107)

In historical terms, the Illuminationist wager is a wake-up call against the metaphysical slumber of the Peripatetics. Having postulated the realm of abstract being (“after Possibility”), Avicenna and his followers failed to give full consideration to the fascinating being of the incorporeal. Instead, they conflated what they discovered with the events of a lower world in which the immaterial co-habits with the material. For the same reason Suhrawardi thinks that it didn’t bother the Peripatetics to leave the number of Intellects in this higher world of abstract being to ten while they acknowledged their countless effects in the lower world of sensible materiality. In contrast to the mistaken Peripatetics are the “pure souls” who came to the truth of the noble realm of Light first experientially and via ecstatic observations and then sought to establish it for others more demonstratively and via philosophical elaborations:

That there are dominating lights, that the Creator of all is a Light, that the Essences of Icons<sup>15</sup> are among the dominating lights - the pure souls have often beheld this to be so when they have detached themselves from their bodily temples. Then they seek proof of it for others. (*PHI*. p. 107)

Among the pure souls Suhrawardi names Plato, Socrates, and “before them” Hermes, Agathadaemon and Empedocles. Suhrawardi admits that he himself used to stand among the misguided Peripatetics in

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<sup>13</sup> The Arabic for “greater” is *akthar*. To my delight Corbin uses “more complex”. “With greater multiplicity” could be a more accurate translation.

<sup>14</sup> The description of the World of Darkness as a “shadow” of the World of Light may convey the Platonic allegory of the cave. But as we will see Suhrawardi is not concerned with the correspondence between the two worlds. Rather he is adamant to make the case for their difference in complexity and intensity.

<sup>15</sup> The English translation uses “Archetype” for *dhavāt al-asnām*. The choice is not generally wrong but is off from the Arabic and also it can hide the exact, literal translation “Essences of Icons”, which conveys the position of Suhrawardi vis-a-vis Platonic Forms as I will explain later.

denying the existence and splendor of the noble world of lights “until he saw his Lord’s demonstration”<sup>16</sup>- an Illuminationist conversion. The next few sentences brings together the ecstatic reports of Plato, Hermes and Empedocles with the ancient wisdom of Persian kings. Relevant to our theme of the Universal in this conspicuously mythical lineage is the term Lord of Icon that the Persians held as the “heavenly” placeholder for each material beings and named them accordingly as Ancient-Zoroastrian angels (“Khordad” for water and so forth and so on): Angels are spiritual embodiment of Universals. The discourse of the next few paragraphs then shifts into the more philosophical registers of the problem of Universals.

Besides its historical import, the Principle establishes a metaphysical-ethical field of inquiry: starting with the assumption that each realm of Possibility expresses a correlated level of *complexity* in terms of “subtle order and astonishing correspondences”, the question becomes how to recognize, construct and analyze a metaphysical realm more adequate or fertile to deliver to the incorporeal the level of complexity it deserves? How to practice philosophical and ethical fidelity to abstract being as the most sublime and complex figure of thought? The recognition, elevation, and articulation of metaphysical complexity in Illuminationist philosophy goes beyond the Principle of the Noblest Possibility and permeates via the figure of Light in all of the three discourses of Part Two. The aim of this essay is not to give a thorough analysis or in-depth treatment of various articulations of complexity in Illuminationist terms. That is a larger project that I hope to undertake and/or entice others towards. Here I introduce an analytical passage or subsection on complexity in order to showcase Suhrawardi’s unique though neglected place in the history of Islamic philosophy as an early if not foremost thinker of the subject. The passage and its analytics of irradiation is also directly related to Suhrawardi’s *genetic* conception and explanation of the incorporeal that supports his position on the problem of Universals.

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<sup>16</sup> A verse from Quran, 12:24. *The Philosophy of Illumination* is replete with Quranic and Hadith (Prophetic sayings) references. A study on Suhrawardi’s manner of using Islamic sources is long due.

## Illuminative Complexity and the Genesis of the Simple from the Composite

The term “complex” has been used occasionally and rather loosely in regards to Suhrawardi’s Illuminationism<sup>17</sup>. Among the less anecdotal references is in the short but useful preface to the English translation of *PHI*. There Walbridge and Ziai apply the term in relation to the emanative hierarchy of lights: “as one descends the ontological ladder the immaterial lights grow dimmer and more complex”(p.xxviii). They don’t support their position by references to the text for they likely take it for granted that emanative lights by definition form an expansive descent and grow complex as they multiply.

Here I do not object to nor support this emanative take on complexity. Rather I propose a different approach. I call this Illuminative complexity because it follows Suhrawardi in what he defines by the crucial term “illumination”. In section eighth of the Second Discourse of Part Two, a few pages before the section On the Principle of the Noblest Possibility, Suhrawardi gives a brief but insightful recapitulation on the phenomenon of illumination. The recapitulation explains the illumination of Light of Lights in relation to other incorporeal lights, but as the heading of the section states it also serves to show a general case for the process underlying the illuminative activity of all incorporeal lights. The section is called “Showing that the incorporeal light does not shine by something being separated from it” and starts:

The illumination of Light of Lights upon the incorporeal lights is not by something being separated by it as has already been made clear to you. Rather the illumination is a radiated light that occurs due to it *in* the incorporeal light. (*PHI*, p.98, my emphasis)

Lack of separation doesn’t establish in the above a continuity of rays of lights travelling in an outside space for example between two focal bodies emitting and receiving lights in emanative connection and hierarchy. Rather it points to the formation of an irradiating space or surface towards the production of *an illuminative inside* where rays

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<sup>17</sup> For example look up the term in *Ibrahim Kalin’s Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mulla Sadra on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition* (2010) or in “Suhrawardi”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2016 Edition) by Roxanne Marcotte.

occur or better *inhere* as effects of a more powerful light in a less powerful light. Hence the Illuminative complexity can be understood in terms of internal dynamism of light in contrast to its emanative expansion<sup>18</sup>.

Now let's move to another passage that defines complexity in the course of the genesis of simple light sources or "simple luminous essence". The passage comes right after the Principle of the Noblest Possibility. The heading of this section reads: "A Principle Showing How the Simple is Generated from the Composite<sup>19</sup>" and opens by this thesis statement, "By virtue of its rays something may result from the Dominating light that does not resemble it". The text then proceeds to explain how a Dominating light when charged or activated as a cause implodes into rays ("by virtue of its rays") and becomes irradiant: The rays inside the irradiating light act as "parts of the cause" in mirroring "higher lights" absent in the Dominating light but in an Illuminative sense present in the tracing activity of the rays. The effect then stages and receives a multiplicity or assemblage of causes from these rays including the cause-light itself which gets embedded as an absent cause in an "additional ray". The outcome is a "simple" entity not resembling its participating elements nor amounting to the sum of its diverse parts thanks to the "many differences" that are born in this genetic space of complexity:

This [non-resembling, simple] thing may result<sup>20</sup> from the essence of the other higher lights by the virtue of many lights present in it [its cause] as rays. The effect then accepts the rays that its cause had accepted, as well as an additional ray from its

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<sup>18</sup> This point also demonstrates that lights in their illuminative activity are differential and intensive in contrast to their emanative dimension, which is hierarchical and expansive. In the same vein it is reasonable to postulate that in the overall framing of Suhrawardi's schema of lights while the emanative hierarchy makes a case for a descending cosmology of all beings including lights themselves, the illuminative differential is used to explain the *genesis* of light-beings or a cosmogony of incorporeal lights.

<sup>19</sup> The English translators gives "the many" for the Arabic *murakab* which is not exact, specially that the term stands in opposition to *basit* or the simple and not to "one". The accurate translation is "the composite" or "the compound" corresponding to the French translation: "Le Composé".

<sup>20</sup> *Yahsulu* in the original text. In the English translation "come to be" and "occur" is used which are rather neutral and do not convey the positive and productive register of the Arabic verb.

cause. Thus many differences arise *in* the dominant lights. Entities result from the whole that are different from any of the parts and the simple may result from differing things. (*PHI*. p.111 my emphasis)

In other words, what transpires *in* a Dominant light by virtue of the opening of a dimensional space of irradiation (and not in the emanative space outside) is a luminous phenomenon of complexity that leads to the production of a simple essence or non-composite entity in contradistinction with its assembling parts. This genetic account of complexity rendered in luminous terms has far-reaching implications for the Illuminationist project and not the least for our discussion of the Universals.

### The Duel of Two Universals: the Non-Generic versus the Genetic

After praising the “pure souls” for observing the truth of the noble world of lights which also the Ancient sages of Persia had proclaimed, Suhrawardi moves to the subject of Universals. There he sets to clarify what they meant by the Illuminative Universal (or “Universal Form in the World of Intellect/Light”) by comparing and contrasting it to the Peripatetic arguments on Universals. Though both camps agree on the non-generic nature of Universals as incorporeal beings- that the Universal bears no analogical affinity or correspondence to things as sensible matter- they are opposed fundamentally over the implications of such a (Platonic) recognition. For the Peripatetics this means that the non-mental, non-logical Universal (better known as the Third or Natural Universal) can still exist *in re*. However, the mode of its existence *in re*, its *coexistence* with sensible matter as individual, will be a purely contingent fact and of no metaphysical import. In contrast, for the Illuminationists the non-generic essence of Universals does not end metaphysical investigation into the nature of incorporeals; rather it establishes that Universals cannot mix or cohabit with the material world and therefore they originate in a higher and more complex realm: that of the Noblest Possibility. In this noble World of Light the Universals are “luminous simple essences” despite having a composite mode of being or a Form in lower worlds:

Do not imagine that these great men, mighty and possessed of insight, held that humanity had an Intellect that was its universal form and that was existent, one and the same in many. *How could they allow there that something unconnected to matter yet*

*in matter? It is not for example that they considered the Lord of Human Icon<sup>21</sup> to be given existence as a copy of that which is below. No men hold more firmly that the higher does not occur because of the lower. Were this not their view the form would have another form and so to infinity.*

Nor should you imagine that they [Universal Forms] be composite for that would have implied that they would disintegrate someday. Instead these are *luminous simple essence though their icons are only conceivable as composite*. For even the Peripatetics admit that humanity in the mind corresponds to the many and is an image<sup>22</sup> of the concrete thing, though it is incorporeal and they are not, and that it is without magnitude or substance and the concrete things are otherwise. Thus being an image is not conditioned on resemblance on every aspect. (*PHI*. pp.108-109, my emphasis)

In the above Suhrawardi calls the Illuminative Universal (or “the Universal Form in the World of Intellect/Light”) “Luminous simple essence” and alternatively “Lord of Icon”. The choice of terminology makes it almost irresistible to ask whether what Surawardi means is the same as Platonic Forms but disguised in Illuminationist jargon? Despite resonances between Suhrawardi’s project and Platonism, as we will see the former never amounts to a brand of Platonic Idealism and instead stays steadfast on the path of Illuminationist/neo-Platonic ontology. And that’s also where this essay finds previous takes, for example by Adamson (2016) and Heer (1970, 2006), misleading in their equating the Illuminationist Universal with Platonic Form. An example by the first author:

More remarkably, Suhrawardī returns to a doctrine that had been universally rejected by the followers of Aristotle in the Islamic world: the Platonic theory of Forms (§94). Things in this world are mere images of incorporeal lights, perfect exemplars only

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<sup>21</sup> The English translation gives “archetype” for *sahib al-sanam*, literally the Possessor, Proprietor or Lord of Idol. I recognize the negative connotations of “idol” and also to preserve and emphasize the visual register of Illuminationist terminology, I’ve opted for “icon” instead.

<sup>22</sup> *Mithāl*. The English translation gives “form” though Suhrawadi in the previous passage uses *surat* for form, which is more accurate. Corbin uses “image” which is the right choice.

imperfectly realized by the bodies we see. Characteristically, Suhrawardī devises his own terminology for the idea, calling the physical images “talismans,” while the Forms are “dominating lights” or “archetypes” (§153). But apart from the vocabulary, his version of the theory is a true image of its Platonic archetype. (*Philosophy in the Islamic World*, pp. 321.)

That there are Illuminative Universals (Suhrawardī’s version of Platonic Forms), that they have a sort of “physical image” (to use Adamson’s term for Talisman or Icon) and that “things” do exist as realities in the material world Suhrawardī would have no problem with: as we cited in the above passage as well as elsewhere in *PHI*, composite forms (Icons or Talismans) are “shadows”, optical effects, or phantasms falling onto the material realm and existing as real things. But the next step is what Adamson and by extension any potential commentator could risk failing to grasp without the analytical work we undertook in the first part of this essay on the Principle of the Noblest Possibility: from a thing to its composite forms and upto its “luminous essence” there can be no *Illuminative correspondence* whatsoever, Suhrawardī would interject here. In other words, things of the real world are not “mere images of incorporeal lights”, nor can incorporeal lights describe, explain or correspond to “the bodies we see” as “imperfect realization of a perfect exemplar”. Suhrawardī is adamant on this point throughout the Part Two of *PHI* and ironically not less so in the very same passage (§153) that Adamson refers to however with a great deal of misunderstanding:

There are no such things as species forms corresponding to what is below them engraved in the dominating incorporeal lights, for these lights are not affected by what is below them....Thus their species must be self-subsistent and fixed in the World of Light. (*PHI*, p. 101)

Species or Universal Forms are fixed and self-subsistent because of belonging to “the World of Light” not because of existing in the material world as degraded copies. To better expose this common mistake in equating Illuminationism with Platonism by way of Platonic Forms, let’s recall the Principle of the Noblest Possibility: the higher does not exist for the ontological sake of the lower. That Universal Forms are ontologically tasked to instantiate themselves into enmattered individuals albeit imperfectly in our sensible world is simply rejected by Suhrawardī. Rather the Illuminationist investigation



of Universals moves their *raison d'être* in the opposite or upward direction (by way of complexity). In this upward horizon of the World of Light/Intellect, Icons or Universal Forms are nothing more than optical by-products of a “simple luminous essence”, which itself has come to being (and to conscious life as we will see shortly) as a result of the complex mannerism of a Dominant light and its states, rays and irradiations. The Principle of Noblest Possibility makes the problem of Universals climb up the ontological ladder towards luminous complexity rather than look for its justification in the sensible world as shadows of a perfect exemplar. From the same passage (p.101) : “The Principle of the Noblest Possibility necessitates the existence of these incorporeal luminous species”<sup>23</sup>.

On the other extreme, Heer (p.2) rightly states that the Illuminationists oppose the Peripatetics “who asserted that universals existed externally as incorporeal substances within particular sensible objects”. A significant difference that in agreement with Heer we already covered in the section on the Principle of the Noblest Possibility. But then Heer too falls into the trap of finding the solution to the problem of Universals via a misguided recourse to a version of Platonic Forms, which he attempts to recognize in Suhrawardi’s World of Suspended Images<sup>24</sup>. In so doing Heer conflates the Arabic *muthul* (the plural of *mithāl*) meaning Platonic Forms with another Arabic term *‘alam al mithāl* or the World of Suspended Images coined by

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<sup>23</sup> Also for another similarly-mistaken position look at Kaukua (2015), p. 151-2.: “In a word, then, the pure lights or appearances behind the lights or appearances for another are Platonic forms, which account for the identity and stability of concrete appearances by being their immediate causes in a downward emanative process of illumination.” It baffles the author of this essay that these commentators, regardless of their lack of discussion on what is and is not a Platonic form, seem to have never wondered that if all that Suhrawardi meant by “luminous simple essence” came down to nothing more than Platonic Forms then why he didn’t bother to state this fact once and for all instead of going to such lengths to rearticulate the same position in Illuminative terms? Neo-Platonism is not a simple copy and paste of Platonic terms and the difference between Platonic Forms and Illuminative Universals by itself is a major demonstration of this neglected methodological point. Suhrawardi is thinking within the Platonic tradition but as a neo-Platonist.

<sup>24</sup> Jinns and some angelic beings are lodged in this intermediary world according to Suhrawardi. If compared with the general schema of Greek Neoplatonism, Suhrawardi’s World of Suspended Images could be placed lower than the Soul and higher than Nature. For a footnote on the confusion of meanings of the term *mithāl* look at Walbridge and Ziai’s important clarification (no.52, p.180).

Suhrawardi. The latter term has become an attractive representative of Illuminationism in contemporary scholarship though of not much importance to Suhrawardi himself: in the Illuminative cosmology Suspended Images are ghostly or mixed entities, simply illusions. As such they are projected somewhere in the middle of immaterial and material worlds. While Suspended Images are curious phenomena to human perception, because of their low ontological status they command not much philosophical importance despite the hype of (mostly useless) contemporary scholarship on the subject. Curiosity and philosophical inquiry don't necessarily share a path.

Now we should ask if Suhrawardi can offer an Illuminationist account of Universals in difference to the Peripatetic version and allied - but not identical with - Platonism (of Platonic Forms)? The answer is a firm and important positive. In the previous section we caught a glimpse into how the Simple ("a simple luminous essence") results from the Composite through complex processes of irradiation and illumination. Now we can discern the crucial role of this genetic process in what Suhrawardi (and his "Ancients") mean by the Universal in the World of Intellect/Light and its "emanative" individuation:

There are metaphors in the words of the Ancients. They did not deny that predicates are mental and that Universals are in the mind; but when they say, "There is a Universal Human in the World of Intellect", they meant that there is a Dominating light, containing different interacting rays and whose shadow among magnitudes is the form of man. It is a Universal - not in the sense that it is a predicate, but in the sense that it has equal<sup>25</sup> relation of emanation to these individuals. It is as though it were the totality and the principle. This universal is not that universal whose conception does not preclude being shared. *For they believe that it has a particularized essence and that it knows its essence.* (PHI. p.109 my emphasis)

I will try to unpack this pinnacle passage on the Universal first by recapitulating what went before. We started with the Principle of the Noblest Possibility that juxtaposes and advocates for a higher world of Lights unaffected by a lower world of material effects. Then we remember that the Ancients or "pure souls" concurred with the Sages of Persia on the truth of this wonderous World of Light and also we

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<sup>25</sup> *Muttasavi*. English translators use "the same" which is off from the Arabic and also omits the distributive register of "equal".

were informed by the latter of a luminous entity called Lord of Icon in that world as the Illuminative version of Universals. However we were warned that when there is talk of Universal Form in the World of Intellect/Light, it does not mean the Form stands for its instantiations in a lower mirroring world. This even the Peripatetics could corroborate (Suhrawardi repeatedly attempts to restage and evaluate Peripateticism within the Platonic tradition). Rather, the Universal Form points to a higher presence or power, that of a “luminous simple essence”, resulting from complex processes of illumination, whose “fallen shadow” only then we call the Form (and not the sensible thing) in the material world of volumes and magnitudes.

Till here the Illuminationists differ with the Peripatetics in establishing an immaterial or illuminative realm as well as a genetic complexity to honor their higher or more noble version of Universal. But now Suhrawardi confronts the Natural Universal of the Peripatetics not just with his illuminative, higher conception but with *what it does*: The Illuminative Universal is not that (Natural or Peripatetic) Universal which according to its non-generic nature lets itself be partaken of equivocally or rather blindly by sensible matter. Rather this other Universal, liberated from accidents of the material world and aiming for “perfection”, has its own take on its individuation, a “particularized essence” which it “knows”<sup>26</sup>. In other words, and so radically, the Illuminative Universal in its participated being is an active self-consciousness. Furthermore, the mode of the individuation of the Illuminative Universal is no more “predicative” but “emanative” with the important explanation by Suhrawardi that it distributes itself *equally* through its individuation like a radiating light that is distributed or traced equally within its rays.

This final point is not a late, fortuitous addition by Suhrawardi to his exposition on Universals. Much earlier and in the last section of the Third (last) Discourse of the Part One of *PHI*, right before the start of the Illuminationist manifesto-like Part Two, comes a very short section under the heading “On Unity and Multiplicity” (p.75). In that mini-section Suhrawardi already moves towards an elementary account of individuation in terms of egalitarian participation under a brief thesis on the unitary nature of One<sup>27</sup>. The thesis states: “That which is one in all respects is not divisible in any respect, whether into quantitative

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<sup>26</sup> Perhaps that’s why the “human” is the best example for the Illuminative Universal instead of the Peripatetic “horseness”.

<sup>27</sup> *Wāhid*

parts, or into parts of a definition, or into particulars of universals”. In other words, the one cannot be predicated - a position in total agreement with the non-mental, non-logical, Third or Natural Universal of Peripatetics. But Suhrawardi adds a positive aspect to this negative essence of one by way of a brief example and without further explanation:

Beware of loose expressions like “Zayd and Amr are one in humanity”. It’s meaning is that they both have a form in the Intellect<sup>28</sup> with equal<sup>29</sup> relations with each of them. Other expressions are similar. (*PHI*. p.75)

Interestingly and as if remembering and expanding on this early reference, the next passage after the discussion of the Universals in the same section “On the Principle....” turns into the problem of “one and the multiple” starting with its import on Platonic Forms: “Some men adduce as proof for Platonic Forms<sup>30</sup> that humanity per se is not multiple and so it is one. This is not valid....” The rest of this passage gives an overview of several arguments in support or in rejection of various aspects of the antinomy between the two categories. Then Suhrawardi derides all these arguments as “for mental satisfaction” and abruptly closes this passage.

Expectedly he then resorts in a new, final passage to Plato and “his companions” on what they reported on the World of Light through ecstatic experiences. But this time in addition to Plato and Persians, Suhrawardi adds “Arabs” as well to this Illuminationist lineage. He proceeds there with long exhortations, Quranic citations and prophetic prayers à la Illuminationism to bring this main section to a chorus-like finale before starting the short subsection on “Showing how the Simple is Generated from the Composite”, which we already dealt with.

### Conclusion and Further Directions: Light and Complexity

Light plays a seminal role in Suhrawardi’s thinking and not the least in his metaphysics. But also beyond Suhrawardi light as a primary figure of intellection has a long journey both in the Greek tradition

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<sup>28</sup> “Mind” in the English translation.

<sup>29</sup> “Same” in the English translation.

<sup>30</sup> “Form” in the English translation. Suhrawardi uses *mithāl* or its plural *muthul* in the sense of Platonic Forms. And again it is important to note that he orients his approach to the problem by looking at various arguments in support or rejection of Platonic Forms and not in wholesale advocacy for one and/or against the other.

from Plato (for example in *Republic*) to Aristotle (Active Intellect as Light in *De Anima*) to Plotinus (Ennead Four, book Five) up to the Scholastics and parallel to that in the Islamic tradition: for example commentaries on the Verse of Light in Quran by philosophers such as Avicenna and Mulla Sadra to light-based treatises by theologians such as Ghazali and Farkhr-al-din Razi and Sufis such as Najm-al-din Kubra<sup>31</sup>. In this cross-epochal, multi-disciplinary history that goes well beyond a single thinker, the figure of Aristotle seems to play a pivotal role in the transmission and translation of philosophy as a living, heterogeneous tradition across the Greek and the Islamic side. For example the Principle of Noblest Possibility is unanimously credited to Aristotle by Suhrawardi himself as well as his predecessors and his interlocutors centuries later. Suhrawardi's designation and mobilization of it as a principle and against the Peripatetics in the context of crafting a neo-Platonic tradition can be a distinct and important episode in the long and meandering drama of "putting Aristotle at the service of Plato" across the Greek (Gerson, 2006) and Islamic spectrums of a similar tradition. The comparative study of the Islamic side of this story is long due.

Parallel to the intellectual history of Light there seems to lie a profound distributionism at the core of Suhrawardi's thinking at least with the little that I attempted to engage with on the problem of Universals: An incorporeal light can be conceived as a totality or ensemble of refracting rays exerting a hold on one another in the openings of a luminous space (of Universals) and at the same time shaping the reason or "principle" for their internal and external refractions, differentiation, multiplication, irradiation, and expansion - or simply illumination. A light in this sense could be engaged with as a figure of distribution, moving inside and outside *of itself* at the same time. In this analytical aspect of my approach to Illuminationism I find Emilsson's thesis and analysis of complexity in *Plotinus on Intellect* (2007) an encouraging and inspiring point for further cultivation of a distributive thought I initiated here and hope to cultivate further.

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<sup>31</sup> Najm-al-din Kubra and Suhrawardi lived in the same historical era though not geographically close. Contrary to Corbin's allusions I believe their mobilization of the figure of Light was independent of each other. Suhrawardi's understanding of light is a phenomenon of polarized irradiations while Kubra gives importance to colors as intensive gradations of light. A serious scholarship on the latter's important treatment of the subject is long due.

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