The Tradition of Avicennan Metaphysics in Islam

FRANK GRIFFEL
Yale University, Department of Religious Studies, New Haven, CT, USA (frank.griffel@yale.edu)

Mahdī Ḥa'irī Yazdī, *Universal Science. An Introduction to Islamic Metaphysics*, translated by John Cooper, edited and introduced by Saiyid Nizamuddin Ahmad, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017. 204 + xii pp. (The Modern Shīʿah Library; 2).

The Shi'ah Institute in London arranged the publication of an English translation of one of the most popular Iranian textbooks of the Avicennan tradition of metaphysics in Islam. First printed in Persian in 1956, Mahdī Ḥa'irī Yazdi's Universal Science *gives an un-contextualized presentation of the most important discussions that happened within Avicennan metaphysics since its inception in the 11th century.*

Key words: metaphysics; Arabic and Islamic philosophy; essence and existence; priority of essence or of existence; Avicennan philosophy; illuminative philosophy

Mahdī Ḥa'irī Yazdī (1923–99) was one of the most influential philosophers in Iran during the second half of the twentieth century. Born to a very prominent family of religious scholars in Qom, the holy city of Shiite Islam 180 kilometers south of Tehran, he received a thorough education in the *ḥawzah* (religious seminary) founded by his father. His father, in fact, played an important role during the 1920s and 30s in the transformation of Qom into the center of Shiite scholarship that it is today. Mahdī Ḥa'irī Yazdī studied with a remarkable generation of teachers, among them the last *marja'-i taqlīd* (highest Shiite authority) Burūjerdī (d. 1961) as well as Grand-Ayatollah Khomeynī (d. 1989). After his education at the *ḥawzah,* which mostly focused on *fiqh*, Ḥa'irī Yazdī moved to the Iranian capital and in 1952 got a first PhD in theology (*ilāhiyyāt*) from the University of Tehran. There, he started teaching and in 1955 became a lecturer. What distinguishes Ḥa'irī Yazdī from many other traditional Shiite thinkers, however, is the time he spent studying and teaching at Western universities. In the early 1960s, he moved to North America and studied at universities in Toronto, Canada and Ann Arbor, Michigan. While he was writing the dissertation for his second PhD in philosophy, which he received 1979 from the University of Toronto, he had already taught at various Western institutions, among them Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., McGill University in Montréal, and Oxford in the United Kingdom. Even after returning to Tehran University in 1979, the year of the Islamic revolution, where he was appointed full professor, he held visiting appointments at Harvard, Yale, and other places.

Ḥa'irī Yazdī's first book in English, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy. Knowledge by Presence* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), represents the work he completed in his PhD dissertation of 1979. Here, he takes an analytical look at the tradition of Ishrāq-philosophy in Islam, and particularly at its founder Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī, who was executed around 1192 in Aleppo, Syria. Al-Suhrawardī's philosophy combines existing ontologies in

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Islamic philosophy with a novel view about human knowledge. In this book, Ḥa'irī Yazdī shows a deep familiarity with both the Western history of philosophy as well as the tradition of *falsafa* and *ḥikma* in Islam. The book can be read as a response to an important point that Immanuel Kant makes in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant famously argues that certain *a priori* patterns of human perception and reasoning represent to us the object of knowledge (i.e. the world) in ways that make it impossible to detect what this object (*Ding-an-sich*) is independent from this representation. Rationality is a human way of perceiving and explaining the world. To the empiricist critique that knowledge hence is no longer objective but merely inter-subjective among humans, Kant responded with the so-called "transcendental deduction," which is certainly the most challenging chapter in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. There, he sets out to prove that human knowledge still correctly applies to its object despite it being a representation. Truth must be understood as the coherence between our knowledge and its object in the outside world. Generations of readers have disagreed whether Kant succeeded in this demonstration. Ḥa'irī Yazdī's *Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy* presents al-Suhrawardī's idea of *'ilm ḥuḍūrī* ("knowledge by presence") as a pre-emptive response to Kant's problem. True knowledge is simply present in the human mind like self-consciousness, which has no particular object other than oneself. Knowledge of things other than oneself is a mere relation that interferes with the self-knowledge but does not change its essence. For al-Suhrawardī, all human knowledge is essentially self-knowledge and immediately present to the mind just as the knowledge of our own self. Al-Suhrawardī's epistemology is the result of intense skeptical debates in Islam about the nature of human and divine knowledge and it aims at creating a theory of knowledge that applies to both. Ḥa'irī Yazdī presents the interplay between philosophy and theology—which characterize the traditions of *falsafa* and *ḥikma* in Islam—as *the* answer to a fundamental problem in modern Western philosophy.

The book under review here, *Universal Science: An Introduction to Islamic Metaphysics*, is Ḥa'irī Yazdī's second book in English, yet it is translated from a Persian work that he published much earlier than *Principles of Epistemology*. The translated book with the simple Persian title *'Ilm-i kullī* ("Universal Science"), which means metaphysics, came out first in 1956, when Ḥa'irī Yazdī held a lectureship at Tehran University, before he became familiar with Western philosophy. Reprinted frequently, it became a popular textbook of the Islamic tradition of metaphysics in Iran. The current translation was done by John Cooper, who had studied philosophy in Iran 1977–81, and who later became a lecturer of Persian at Cambridge University until his untimely death in 1998. His manuscript was picked up by scholars associated with The Shi'ah Institute in London (among them Sajjad H. Rizvi, one of Cooper's students), who completed it, provide a helpful introduction, and now present it as a book.

Ḥa'irī Yazdī's *Universal Science* is a straightforward presentation of the dominant tradition of metaphysics in Islamic philosophy. At the turn of the eleventh century, Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037) reinterpreted the Greek tradition of metaphysics and taught that it falls into two subjects. The first is an inquiry into the most general of all things or concepts which is being *qua* being. Here metaphysics studies the prime divisions of being, namely the distinctions between essence and existence, between unity and multiplicity, between causes and effects, and between the two modalities of being, necessary and contingent. The second part of metaphysics is devoted to a study of the source of being, i.e. God. It presents the

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theological ideas of Avicenna with his proof of God as the Being necessary by virtue of itself and a discussion of His attributes (or the lack thereof), culminating in a study of soul and three of its major properties that, according to Avicenna, make up prophecy. Quite often, this part of metaphysics is rounded up by a discussion of the kind of message Avicenna's philosopher-prophet should convey, thus ending in political philosophy. Ḥa'irī Yazdī identifies the two subjects that metaphysics falls into as "metaphysics in the more general sense (*bi-ma'nā-yi a'amm*)" and "metaphysics in the more specific (*akhaṣṣ*) sense" (59). His *Universal Science* is devoted only to the first of these two, meaning he does not deal with the theology developed by the tradition of *falsafa* in Islam. This relatively short textbook of little more than 130 pages provides an overview of the most important discussions within the field of metaphysics—excluding theology—that appeared since the days of Avicenna. It does so by following the time-honored table of contents of a textbook of metaphysics since Avicenna, beginning with an explanation of metaphysics and how it is divided into the two sub-fields just described, followed by an explanation of existence and whether it is a univocal, equivocal, or modulated term, moving then toward the distinction between existence (*wujūd*) and essence (or: quiddity, *māhiyyat*).

The first major dispute that the book reports is the one on whether existence enjoys priority (*aṣāla*) over essence, or the other way round, quickly moving to the question of whether anything we construct in our mind (*dhihn*) should be regarded as existent similar to the existence in the outside world (*dar khārij az dhihn*). The perspective the book takes is very much determined by Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī's (d. 1640) solution to these problems. In light of Ḥa'irī Yazdī's later work, this book is remarkably free from Suhrawardian influences and presents the point of views of the so-called *mashshā'iyyūn*, the "peripatetics," here referring to the School of Avicenna. This is an Avicennism that is largely unaffected by the critique and the condemnation of al-Ghazālī in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*), a critique that has its background in the system of Ash'arite Sunni theology (*kalām*). Ḥa'irī Yazdī, for instance, rejects al-Ghazālī's criticism of Avicenna's teachings on the afterlife (112–14) and polemicizes against *kalām* (112). Even al-Suhrawardī's departures from the Avicennan system are explained with "the influence of *kalām*" (117) that he had come under. So, while the work aims at a comprehensive report of disputes, it does not shy away from taking sides. The book's partisanship reflects the mainstream view of Iranian Shiite *ḥawzah* education. Western readers of Islamic philosophy might be somewhat familiar with it from the presentations by, for instance, Henri Corbin or Seyyed H. Nasr. According to this view, Mullā Ṣadrā "provided the most masterful" answers to many questions (90). One other dogma of this school is that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) was the "leader of the doubters" (*imām al-mushakkikīn,* 175) in the teachings of Avicenna, whose objections were countered and put to rest by "the commentator" (*shāriḥ*) and "the verifier" (better: vindicator, *muḥaqqiq*) of Avicenna, the Shiite Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1278). It should be noted here that ongoing research efforts at Western universities within the past ten years or so have seriously challenged this presentation. It is no exaggeration to say that Ḥa'irī Yazdī's staging of these groups is by now heavily outdated and its pro-Shiite bias becomes clearer with every paper that is published on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī or Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī.

In his introduction, the editor of the book Saiyed N. Ahmad stresses that a tradition of philosophical inquiry continued to exist at Shiite *ḥawzah*s whereas the same cannot be said about their Sunni counterparts (43). That is a valid point and provides valuable context for

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the particular Shiite historiography that Ḥa'irī Yazdī's presentation is part of. It is, despite its partiality, mostly interested in re-constructing lively philosophical discussions, focusing on the arguments more than anything else. In fact, in his own introduction, Ḥa'irī Yazdī complains about (early) Western literature on Islamic philosophy which for him is too much concerned with the lives of the philosophers and too little with what these people were really about (51). *Universal Science* is not the first book in the Islamic tradition of *ḥikma* that is focused on arguments, and it is therefore prone to be interesting for anybody accustomed to analytical philosophy. Its detailed report, for instance, on the dispute between al-Rāzī and al-Ṭūsī (with contributions by Mullāh Ṣadra and Bahmanyār) on the validity of the principle—of Neoplatonic origin—that a completely simple being can only cause a single effect (*ex uno non fit nisi unum*) presents the positions in a dry but effective dialogue that provides enough material for more than one full class discussion.

All this makes Ḥa'irī Yazdī's *Universal Science* a very valuable book. Its presentation of debates in the history of Islamic philosophy helps us understand the source-texts that form part of these discussions and that are currently being explored. Once one takes into consideration that Ḥa'irī Yazdī is not interested in historical context, one can read him with great benefit and then go about and research that context oneself. Hence, the book can be a helpful resource for all of us who are now engaged in the historical reconstruction of these debates. It certainly helps in understanding the language of *ḥikma*, again a field where progress has been made yet more needs to be done.

John Cooper's English translation is fluent and lucid, particularly for readers who are familiar with the underlying Arabic and Persian terminology. Those who are not might find his English very technical and cumbersome. I thought, for instance, that the days when we translate "*naẓar/naẓarī*" with "speculation" or "speculative" are over (better is "rational" or, as opposite to *ʿamalī*, "theoretical"). Equally anachronistic is the translation of "*insān*" ("human") as "man." The uniform rendering of "*ḥaqīqat*" as "reality" obscures the discussion about the function and benefit of metaphysics at the beginning of the book. *Ḥaqīqat* is, in accord with its context, better translated as "true meaning" or even "essence." Fortunately, many technical terms in the book are followed by a transliteration of the original Persian and Arabic words that abides by a modern standard and is usually reliable except on p. 170, where the idea of "complete (or better: sufficient) cause" is mistakenly transliterated as *ta'aththur-i tām*, rather than correctly as *ta'aththur-i tāmm*.

In his foreword, Sayyid Amjaf H. S. Naqavi, the editor of the series, writes that the content of Ḥa'irī Yazdī's book "has been transmitted continuously for the best part of thousand years" (xi). In fact, whoever wants to appreciate Islamic philosophy should leave expectations about progress the way we are used to it in the Western history of modern philosophy behind. Time-tested explanations and positions as well as the good or rather superior argument are higher values here than progress. Until we have translations of its source-texts, Ḥa'irī Yazdī's *Universal Science* offers English readers a rare first-hand glimpse into the huge treasure-trove of debates and disputes within *ḥikma* (which I translate as "post-classical philosophy") in Islam that should be used in research as well as in teaching.

Frank Griffel is Professor of Islamic Studies at Yale University in New Haven, USA. He has published books and articles on Islamic theology and philosophy, particularly the interaction

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between these two traditions. His new book, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam,* is scheduled to come out in 2020.

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