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SUHRAWARDI'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF IPSEITY

I

Suhrawardî is a philosopher and a mystic, a man from a faraway time (twelfth century) and a thinker who belongs to an outdated intellectual context. Hence his philosophy requires that we mingle with it in a lively manner. Calling him a Phenomenologist is a way of creating a link. If our approach is lively enough, we can avert the risks of anachronism.

There's already a convergence between Suhrawardî's philosophy of illumination and Phenomenology, in that they both originate from the notion of manifestation. I suggest showing that his intuitions could benefit from Michel Henry's material Phenomenology's insights.

Suhrawardî claims that being is divided into light and non-light. Light is self-sufficient (*ghanî*), it rests in itself. When it is not a quality for another than itself, it is separate (*mujarrad*) and pure. When it is a quality for another, it is becoming (*nûr 'ârîḍ*). As for what is not light in itself, it is either not a quality for another than itself, and is hence called the dark substance (*ghâsiq*)¹ that doesn't exist in itself (H,² § 111), or it is a quality for another than itself, and it is then obscurity (*zulmâniyyat*). The bodies, *barâzikh*,³ are what remains even when light has withdrawn. They are dark by essence, although from some, stars for instance, light is never absent, a becoming light of which they are the support (*hâmil*). It is to say that, even though this light doesn't originate from them, it remains in them (H, § 109–110). Where does it originate from, then? From a superior substance which is the donor of lights (H, § 110).

When it comes to incorporeal or pure (*maḥḍ*) light, it doesn't dwell in a body, and therefore doesn't call for a designation (H, § 112). It is to say that it is as little

¹ The word is Koranic and connotes evil: *min sharri ghâsiq idhâ waqaba* (113:3).

² Suhrawardî. *Kitâb Hikmat al-ishrâq* // idem. *Opera metaphysica et mystica*. Vol. II. Éd. H. Corbin. Téhéran–Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1952.

³ Another Koranic word (23:100; 25:53; 55:20), which means, in different contexts, barrier, interval, or isthmus.

seized by the senses than it is by representation. Would it be unconscious? No, answers Suhrawardī: “Nothing that has an essence of which it is not unconscious is a being of the night, for its essence is evident to it. It cannot be a dark state in something else, since even the luminous state is not self-subsistent light, let alone the dark state. Therefore, it is a pure incorporeal light you cannot show at”.⁴

In the margin of representative self-phenomenality, which implies a gap, stands something else, an immediate self-seizure, a subjectivity that is directly instructed by itself, a seeing that doesn’t call for demonstration or deduction. We are hence in the vicinity of Michel Henry’s philosophy. The Frenchman concedes luminosity to transcendent phenomenality, whereas he reserves the metaphor of the night for the immanent phenomenality, the embrace of self-affection, since it operates without any distance, hence without any visibility (which seems more appropriate than a light that couldn’t be seen). However, one can wonder if the word *phenomenality* is appropriate for an act of showing that doesn’t call for light, even if it is black. But is it an act of showing? There isn’t even time here for a gesture or the movement of a forefinger. Self-affection’s absolute is given in one go each time. It is convenient to be sure about the validity of the comparison, to know, in other words, whether the Persian truly objects to a transcendent phenomenality. Here’s how the text goes on: “The self-subsistent, self-conscious thing does not apprehend its essence by an image of its essence in its essence. If its knowledge is an image and if the image of its ego is not the ego itself, the image of the ego would be an ‘it’ in relation to the ego. In that case, that which was apprehended would be the image. Thus it follows that while the apprehension of its ego is precisely its apprehension of what it is itself, its apprehension of its essence would also be the apprehension of something else — which is absurd” (H, § 115; PI. 80).

The word *image* is a translation of *mithāl*, which connotes the idea of a similarity, a similarity that implies otherness, and hence the dimension of an exteriority where the same alienated is deployed, since, as Henry explains it, to put oneself in images with the purpose of seeing oneself isn’t possible unless there is a phenomenological distance, meaning the opening of a horizon of transcendence in which occurs the scission between the seer and the seen. The essence of phenomenality being reduced to ecstasy, the ordeal of oneself is left to the work of intentionality. Because the image of oneself is only produced within the distance from the self, it is not life itself that is shown, but its opposite. Indeed, there are only images within the world (MV,⁵ 131) insofar as it is the center of the outside, by opposition to life, which is forever constrained to immanence. Of the living, the image will always present the “external appearance, a content without con-

⁴ H, § 114; quoted (with modifications) from: Suhrawardī. *The Philosophy of Illumination*. Provo: BYU Press, 1999. [Hereafter *PJ*] P. 79.

⁵ *Henry M. C’est Moi la Vérité*. Paris: Seuil 1996 [hereafter *MV*].

tent, at once opaque and empty" (MV, 276). We see how precious is Suhrawardî's preciseness. The image's otherness makes of a self, that is put in images, a *he*, in other words, a simulacrum which can't be expected to lend knowledge about that living, not even an ipseity. And Suhrawardî specifies that becoming an image of himself, is, to the knower, equivalent to establishing a duality, which is impossible, since nothing becomes other than itself!⁶ Which foretells Henry's theory of passivity, according to which ipseity is desperately related to itself.

Let's consider how Henry, in his turn, excludes all images from ipseity: "The self is only possible as pathetically submerged in itself without ever posing itself in front of itself, without pro-posing itself in some visible form (sensory or intelligible) or another. Such a Self, foreign to any apparition of itself in the world, is what we are calling a radically immanent Self, a Self neither constituted by, nor the object of thought, without an image of self with nothing that might assume the aspect of its reality. It is a Self without a face, which never lets itself be envisaged. It is a Self in the absence of any perceptible Self, such that this absence of any perceptible Self or thought constitutes the Self's veritable Ipseity, as well as everything possible on the basis of it. It is only because no image of itself is interposed between it and itself, in the manner of a screen, that the Self is thrown into itself unprotected and with such a violence that nothing can defend it from that violence any more than from itself".⁷

Beneath the language of violence, one should recognize the immediate revelation of the self that precedes all representation and makes Suhrawardî say: "Moreover, if its apprehension of itself were by an image and it did not know that this was an image of itself, it would not know itself. If it did know that was an image of itself, it must have already known itself without an image. How could something be conceived to know itself by something superadded to itself — something that would be an attribute of it?" (H, § 115; PI, 80). No acknowledgement without knowledge, no representation without presentation (which doesn't mean: no representation without self-representation). In Eckhart's terms, the morning knowledge (without images) is a condition for the vesperal knowledge (by image).⁸

What Suhrawardî calls subsistence in oneself doesn't only refer then to the subject's absoluteness or autarky, but to the immanence to oneself as well. Which explains what he says about self-luminescence as offering a self-knowledge that doesn't involve the exteriority of the image. Subjectivity (*anâ'yyat*) is defined as the possession of immediate self-revelation (H, § 116). One should specify that this parousia, as Henry would call it, doesn't have a character of discontinui-

⁶ *Suhrawardî*. Kitâb al-mashâri' wa l-mutârahât // *idem*. Opera metaphysica et mystica. Vol. I. Éd. H. Corbin. Téhéran–Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1952. P. 474.

⁷ MV. P. 188–89; the English translation from: *Henry M*. I am the truth, Toward a Philosophy of Christianity. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. P. 149.

⁸ Cf.: *Henry M*. L'Essence de la manifestation. Paris: PUF, 1963. P. 412.

ty, as if self-revelation occurred on demand or at occasions. It is permanent and absolute, as is Henry's self-affection, since it is light in itself and cannot stop being so. Ipseity knows no syncope and undergoes no ellipse: "You are never unconscious of your essence or of your apprehension of your essence" (H, § 116; PI, 80). What about the body? Suhrawardī practices a radical phenomenological reduction (which he calls *tajarrud bi-l-dhāt*,⁹ ipseity abstracting itself from all that is not itself, from matter for instance), and does so literally: he brings man to light (his alias being the phenomenological *me*), and the latter doesn't include bodily organs, something that Suhrawardī elucidates by calling for a sort of eidetic variation: "Although you may cease to feel any or every part of your body, and some bodily parts may even become annihilated, yet a human being's life and perception does not decline on account of this (...). You may be cut off from any bodily or contingent perception but will remain cognizant of yourself and know yourself without recourse to any phenomenal thing".¹⁰ Isn't this a sort of eidetic variation, of a Platonic type, that Suhrawardī uses? "You never lack information about your own act of being. Even in a state of drunkenness, you lose awareness of your members, but you still know that you *are* and that you have an essence. Think again: where is your ipseity? How is it? What is it? You will be aware that you are not in the body, and that your essence is known to you without an intermediary through an immediate feeling".¹¹ It follows that in Suhrawardī's cogito, the apprehension of the self is continuous (H, § 116).¹² That is the phenomenological meaning and the condition of the science of presence (*'ilm hudûri*) as an intuitive, non-predicative knowledge, a principle itself of the knowledge that requires images (*'ilm şuwari*). The feeling of the self based on the apodicticity of the *I am* rests no more upon a conversion of the spirit, or upon the subject's act of making of himself an object of thought, than it needs the services of the intellect as a Peripatetic agent and of the act of abstracting things from their form, since it rests entirely on the identity of what is manifesting itself and of what is manifested: *huwa al-zâhir li-nafsihi bi-nafsihi* (H, § 116) — without any possible addition of thing or characteristic. Suhrawardī's immanent self-knowledge reminds us strongly of Henry's feeling of oneself — identity between what feels and what is felt (EM, 580) — which is not less immanent. Will we find in Suhrawardī's work Henry's idea of affection revealing affection?¹³ It is

⁹ *Suhrawardī*. Kitâb al-talwihât // *idem*. Opera metaphysica et mystica. Vol. I. Éd. H. Corbin. Téhéran-Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1952. P. 115.

¹⁰ *Suhrawardī*. Partaw-Nâme // *idem*. Opera metaphysica et mystica. Vol. III. Éd. S.H. Nasr. Téhéran-Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1976. P. 23. Cf.: *idem*. The Book of Radiance. Trans. Hossein Ziai. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1998. P. 24.

¹¹ *Suhrawardī*. Bustân al-qulûb // *idem*. Opera metaphysica et mystica. Vol. III. P. 363. Cf.: *idem*. Kitâb al-talwihât. P. 116.

¹² Cf. also: *Suhrawardī*. Hayâkil al-nûr // *idem*. Opera metaphysica et mystica. Vol. III. P. 86.

¹³ On love that feels itself, see: EM. P. 580. What he reveals is himself and nothing else (EM. P. 693).

true that the term *shu'ûr*, in the formula *al-jawhar al-shâ'ir bi-dhâtihî*,¹⁴ that could be translated as *the substance that feels itself*, fits that role, but it requires that we keep in mind the nuance of consciousness. Though, if we search correctly, we will find the equivalent of the affective cogito, where Suhrawardî, in his effort of putting aside the need for exteriority and of affirming the science of presence, declares that, when man feels pain, what he apprehends is not conveyed through the image of pain or that of the cut-off member: it is the ablation itself that is known.¹⁵ "The truth of pain, says Henry, is the pain itself" (EM, p. 677).

II

Henry calls ontological monism the theory, which he challenges, according to which the being is only a phenomenon if it is distanced from the self, so that the alienation would be the essence of manifestation. That would tend to establish then a "dualism of the being and of its own image" (EM, 83). That is true for man and for the cosmos, it is also true of God: "The being of God would be nothing else than the *Ungrund*, not only the most obscure but also the most abstract, and, as such, something totally unreal, if he weren't submitted in his turn to the conditions that open and define the field of phenomenal existence and of true spirituality", if he didn't produce "facing to him (...) his own image" (EM, 84). For Henry, as for Suhrawardî, God's self-revelation is produced in pure interiority. Self-affection, for Henry, is conceived as an embrace; and, for Suhrawardî, as self-luminescence. Henry's words about God's exteriorization in an image refer to Fichte's *The Way towards a Blessed Life*. My feeling is that it would have been more judicious to call for Schelling's work with which Fichte is debating. It is indeed in *Philosophy and Religion* that the thematic of the auto-revelation of God is formulated, through an independent but rebellious image, a spectacular exteriorization that cannot be confused with a self-division,¹⁶ since God means to unveil himself totally in his reflection.

With whom can we oppose Suhrawardî's intuition? In other words, who, among his contemporaries, could appear as a promoter of ontological monism? The answer is: the greatest genius of all, Ibn Arabî, the Doctor Maximus. The idea is found in the first chapter, devoted to Adam (as a representant of the human specie), of the *Bezels of Wisdom*, where it is said that "God (*al-Ḥaqq*) wished to see his essence (*'ayn*) in a universe that encompasses all of reality, so that his own secret is manifested to him. Indeed, the vision that a thing has of itself through itself is not similar to the vision it has of itself in another that stands as a mirror, because it appears then in an image offered by the watched support,

¹⁴ *Suhrawardî*. Kitâb al-mashârî' wa l-muṭârahât. P. 474.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* P. 485.

¹⁶ *Schelling F.W.J.* Sämtliche Werke. Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856–1861. Vol. VI. P. 31–33. Cf.: *Hatem J.* Schelling. L'angoisse de la vie. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009. Ch. I.

without the existence of which it could not have been able to reveal itself".¹⁷ The support-mirror designates the world on which the image will be projected. It is clear that the image is that of God or, to be more precise, that of a deep reality of God, designated by the word essence, a reality that is not visible without exteriorization, even though, as it is said in the same page, it would be that of God's countless Names. This allusion to the Names, added to the title of the chapter, shows that God's image is Man himself, the being in which the Names reflect.

To give the reason of the creation of the world, the mystics usually refer to a *ḥadīth qudsī* (in other words, a divine speech reported by a Prophet, but not part of a revealed book) according to which God would have said: "I was a hidden treasure; I desired to be known (*u'raf*), which is why I brought the creatures (*khalq*) to life, which made them know me".¹⁸ Although Ibn 'Arabī often uses this saying, and even though he has it in mind here, it is not what he professes now. In the *ḥadīth*, God is only the object of knowledge, whereas in the *Bezels of Wisdom*, he's at once the subject and the object of knowledge, the world and man serving merely as mediators. What matters to him is to be known by himself, and not to be known in general. But obviously he can't reach self-knowledge without going through the element of exteriority, without alienating himself in an image of himself, which is precisely what Suhrawardī judges to be at once unworthy of God and impossible, since the essence lacks nothing, even in terms of knowledge, because the essence is itself that self-knowledge. But, before getting to the Persian, the Andalousian's text invites us to specify one point. The word I've translated into essence in the sentence: "God (*al-Ḥaqq*) wished to see his essence (*'ayn*) in a universe that encompasses all of reality so that his own secret is manifested to him" means also source and eye. By *source*, it is suggested that he desired to see his own origin, the power of the absolute self-production. By *eye*, it is signified that he projected the organ of vision in a way that the image sees him as much as he sees it, or, in other words, that God and his image are by turns subject and object. But that an image can see, that is what Suhrawardī and Henry would find even more absurd. It is simply the right match to the error of treating the self as a thing, furthermore deprived of ipseity; here, it is the thing that is mistaken for a self. But what is not light doesn't have self-awareness, nor does it have an awareness of what is other, the former being a condition of the latter (H, § 121). Suhrawardī stands then in an ontological dualism (in Henry's sense) that separates the living from the non-living and distinguishes their respective phenomenality. Since whatever has no interiority is deprived of ipseity and hence of self-luminescence, its phenomenization obeys then another principle ruled by spatial-temporality, exteriority and representation. In Suhrawardī's words: "It is different [than with self-luminescence] when it comes to exterior things,

¹⁷ *Ibn Arabī*. *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. Le Caire, 1946. P. 48–49.

¹⁸ *Al-Daylamī*. 'Aṭf al-alif al-ma'lūf 'alâ al-lâm al-ma'tûf. Cairo, 1962. P. 25–27.

because, in this case, the image and its object are both a *he* (*huwa*)” (H, § 115). And these things, precisely because they can't be revealed to themselves (Suhrawardî gives actually the example of body parts that can only be examined by means of a dissection¹⁹), require the help of life they're deprived of. The *barzakhs*, unable to produce each other, since they are “night and death”, need the light that makes them particular and without which they would be nothingness (H, § 111). But the words *life*, *light* and *self-revelation* are interchangeable: “Pure light is alive, and every living thing is a pure light” (H, § 121; PI, 84). “Anything that apprehends its own essence is a pure light, and every pure light is evident to itself and apprehends its own essence” (H, § 118; PI, 82). No dissection here, because there's no self-division, no objectivity. “You can't part from yourself, and designate yourself as a *he*”.²⁰ Being light, the phenomenon is also phenomenality.

III

A second inquiry would determine Suhrawardî's mystical ascension as a reduction to essence in spite of his presentation of the imaginal world. The meeting with the angel must be understood as a recall and an evidence of the weak self-affection, not as the space of an ecstatic intentionality. It would be the purpose of a third inquiry to proceed to a phenomenological approach of Suhrawardî's God, designated as the Light of Lights, a self-luminescent living (H, § 128) who, out of generosity (*jûd*), effuses His grace on all (H, § 144). Since it possesses the original and absolute self-revelation (what Henry would have called the strong self-affection), this light can only produce light by itself (§ 135). We'll look at this another time.

Henry dedicates a part of the *Essence of Manifestation* to Master Eckhart whom he presents as a thinker of immanence (Husserl thought he could appropriate him too²¹). I hope I have shown that Suhrawardî could also pass for a precursor on a decisive point of radical phenomenology. A Henryan reading of the Persian contributes to finding him a place within contemporary thought. I endorse the just appreciation that Gabrielle Dufour-Kowalska makes of Henry, reader of Eckhart: “When the philosopher appropriates somebody else's thought, and grants him/her within his own thought a privileged field of resonance, he is then capable, more than any other, of liberating a discourse that is prisoner of the past and of restituting its internal creativity”.²²

¹⁹ *Suhrawardî*. Partaw-Nâmeh. § 27; *idem*. Al-Alwâh al-'imâdiyya. § 30 (*Suhrawardî*. Opera metaphysica et mystica. Vol. IV. P. 50).

²⁰ *Suhrawardî*. Al-Alwâh al-'imâdiyya. § 31.

²¹ See: Cairns D. Conversations with Husserl and Fink. Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1976. P. 91.

²² *Dufour-Kowalska G.* Michel Henry. Passion et magnificence de la vie. Paris: Beauchesne, 2003. P. 199.