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SHAHRZURI'S ETHICAL THEORY AS EXPUNDED IN HIS
SHAJARAH AL-ILĀHIYYAH

Shamsuddin Muhammad Shahrzuri is one of the distinguished philosopher-sages of the seventh century¹. He is the first commentator and expositor of Suhrawardi's *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*², which was much utilized by later commentators. He is also the writer of a famous history of philosophy entitled as *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ wa rawḍat al-afrāḥ* or simply known as *Ta'rikh al-Ḥukamā'*³, in which Shahrzuri tries to compile a universal history of philosophy on the basis of the principles of philosophical historiography as delineated by Suhrawardi in his works, especially in the *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*. He is, moreover, the writer of the monumental work *al-Shajarah al-Ilāhiyyah* (The Divine Tree)⁴, which is a veritable compendium of Islamic philosophy in about two thousand pages, written in the illuminationist vein. He might be the author of other works such as the extremely profound and terse treatise by an unidentified author published by 'Abdurrahman Badawi under the forged title *Al-muthul al-'aqliyyah al-aflātuniyyah*, which, according to Badawi, was written by an author who antedated Qutbuddin Shirazi (d. 710). In the eighth chapter of the fourth treatise of the *Shajarah* Shahrzuri proclaims his intention to write a treatise on this topic. The following is a brief survey of Shahrzuri's ethical theory as set fourth in the *Shajarah*.

The treatise of Shahrzuri on ethics⁵ starts with the much-debated problem of the relationship between the theoretical and practical philosophy and as to which one is prior. Almost all the Peripatetics believe in the priority of the theoretical over the practical philosophy. Avicenna, for example, in the *ilāhiyyāt* of his *mag-*

¹ After the Hegira (ed.).

² see: Hossein Ziaee's edition of *Sharḥ Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* of Shahrzuri, published by *Paz-hūshigāh-i 'ulūm-i insānī*, Tehran, 1372 (solar).

³ The original Arabic version was published by *Matba'ah uthmāniyyah* in Heydarabad, India. The old Persian translation of the book by Maqsūd 'Alī Tabrīzī was edited and published by Muhammad Taqī Daneshpazhūh and Muhammad Sarwar Maulā'ī ('*Ilmī wa farhangī Press*, Tehran, 1356). A later Persian translation by the late Ziā' ad-Dīn Durrī, entitled *Kanz al-Ḥikmah*, has been published several times.

⁴ *al-Shajarat -al-Ilāhiyyah fī 'ulūm al-ḥaqā'iq al-rabbāniyyah*, is being edited by distinguished Iranian scholar Najafquli Habibi, the first part having been published recently (published by the Iranian Institute of Philosophy, Tehran, 2005).

⁵ *Shahrzuri. al-Shajarah*. P. 473—488.

*num opus Shifā*⁶ categorically asserts the priority of the former over the latter. He even goes so far as to maintain that even in practical philosophy the theoretical ingredient takes precedence over the practical element, because no praxis is possible without the theorica.

Shahrzuri, on the contrary upholds the theory that “the practical philosophy is prior to the theoretical, because the perception of the intelligible realities as it should, depends upon the purity of the soul and its being illuminated and both depend on the purification of the soul and the perfecting of the political virtues”⁷.

Shahrzuri quotes a passage from Farabi to the effect that the initiate in philosophy should be well-versed in all good traits. He should know well the Quran and the sciences of the Shariah; he must be chaste, veracious and must shun and abhor all vices such as wickedness, debauchery, treachery, perfidiousness, cunning and double-dealing. He should, moreover, devote himself to the performance of religious obligations (*adā' al-wazā'if al-Shariyyah*), without transgressing any pillar of Shariah”⁸. All this should be construed to signify the priority of the practical philosophy, which is nothing other than the purification of the soul, over the theoretical.

Again he quotes Farabi as saying that “the consummation of happiness is through moral virtues as the fruit is the consummation of the tree”⁹. This divergence of opinion from the Peripatetics arises, no doubt, from the Illuminationist’s emphasis upon the purifications, expurgation and rectification of the soul as a necessary step prior to the attainment of sapiential wisdom.

Definition of *khulq* (a moral trait)

Shahzuri defines *khulq* in a Peripatetic vein as “an innate disposition (*malakah*) whence issue all the acts with facility (*bi suhūlah*) without any thought (*fikr*) or de-liberation (*rawiyyah*)”¹⁰. Now the problem immediately arises as to whether such moral traits are changeable or not. There are some who argue that moral traits, being based on physical temperament, are fixed and unalterable. People of hot temperament (*hārr al-mazāj*), for example, tend to be courageous, as those of cold temperament tend to be cowardly (*jabān*). Such is the case with other moral traits¹¹.

Shahzuri does not accept this view. The upshot of his refutation rests on his claim that moral behavior is impossible without rational choice. “It is possible to change and alter our moral traits. They are liable to increase, decrease, to excess and emendation, through abundant practice of words, deeds, motions, rests and

⁶ See the introduction of Ibn Sina to the «Ilāhiyyāt» / Ed. by G. Anawati and reprint. by the Ayyatollah Mar’ashi Najafi Library. Qum, 1404 A. H. (lunar).

⁷ *Shahrzuri*. al-Shajarah. P. 376.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, P. 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* P. 378.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

concepts (*taṣawwurāt*). Otherwise prophets, sages and saints would not take upon themselves the trouble of calling people to God in every possible way. They would not command people to attain the moral virtues. Moreover, how would such an absurdity be reconciled with what has been reported from the foremost among the human beings (upon whom be the benedictions of God!) that "I was chosen in order to bring to completion the noble virtues". It is possible for a reasonable being to come to know that through contemplation and experience"¹².

The types of virtues

Greek ethical theory had much impact upon the formulation of a rationally justified ethical theory in Islam, especially among Muslim philosophers who seldom thought about founding the metaphysical foundations for an ethical theory based on the tenets of the Quran¹³. The codification and classification of virtues among Muslim philosophers is an Islamic version of the ethical code as propounded by Plato and Aristotle and occasionally by the Stoics. Plato's division and classification of the virtues rests on the tripartite division of the soul in the *Republic*. The soul, according to Plato, has three main functions, each proper to a specific faculty, to which belongs a specific virtue, being the perfection and consummation of that faculty¹⁴. "In Aristotle, the spheres of the several virtues are strictly narrowed down and we are enabled all the better to estimate the widening and spiritualizing of moral ideals which the centuries since Aristotle have brought with them"¹⁵. Crucial to Aristotle's ethical theory is the doctrine of the "golden mean", according to which each virtue is a mean or an intermediary between two extremes of deficiency and excess. This theory was taken over by the Muslim Philosophers and employed in their elaboration and justification of a sort of an Islamic virtue ethics.

Shahzuri, in his classification of the virtues, combines the four cardinal virtues of the *Republic*, based on the tripartite faculties of the soul, with the peculiarly Aristotelian version of theory of the "golden mean". The human soul, according to him, has three main faculties, the rational (*al-nātiqah*) also called the intellectual (*al-aqliyyah*); the appetitive (*al-shahawānīyah*) and the irascible (*al-ghaḍabiyyah*). As to the intellectual faculty, it is the angelic soul (*an-naḥs al-malakiyyah*) in man, being the principle of discernment between truth and error, of

¹² Ibid. P. 379.

¹³ This is not to downgrade or depreciate the tremendous and laborious efforts by the Muslims to reconcile the wisdom-tradition of all peoples with the tenets of the holy Shariah. No doubt, this wisdom-tradition enabled the Muslim to better understand the tenets and the tenor of the faith. What I mean is that there was also the possibility of laying the foundations of an ethical theory on the basis of the teachings of the revelation and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet. This was done of course to a large extent, but now is the time to be systematized.

¹⁴ For a good and elaborate discussion about different ethical theories and their philosophical presuppositions see for example: *Majid Fakhry*. Ethical Theories in Islam. Leiden: Brill, 1991.

¹⁵ *Sir David Ross*. Aristotle. London: University Paperbacks, 1966. P. 201.

meditation and ratiocination (*fikr*) and the intrinsic desire to comprehend the eternal verities. The refinement (*tahdhīb*) of the theoretical faculty (*al-quwwah-al-nazariyyah*) is called “theoretical philosophy” (*al-ḥikmah al-nazariyyah*)¹⁶.

As to the appetitive soul, which is also called the animal soul; it is the driving force for concupiscence (*shahwah*) and for search after food and for seeking enjoyment through food, drink and sexual intercourse¹⁷.

As to the irascible faculty, it is that bestial soul in man, which provokes anger and makes one audacious in horrible situations (*aḥwāl*) and has an intrinsic desire for domination, haughtiness, arrogance and glory. As in Plato, the harmonization between these three faculties through the wise administration of reason constitutes the paramount virtue of justice (*‘adālah*), in the absence of which each faculty inclines and deviates into the two extremes of excess (*ifrāt*) or deficiency (*tafrīt*). The excess in the theoretical faculty is called “stupidity” (*safah*) or “undaunted silliness” (*jarbazah*); that in the appetitive faculty is named “covetousness” (*sharah*) and the extravagance in the irascible faculty — “rashness” (*tahawwur*). On the other hand, the deficiency in the rational faculty is simplemindedness (*balah*); that in the appetitive, impotency (*khumūd*) and the extravagance in the irascible faculty — cowardice (*jubn*). “But when the three faculties are in equilibrium (*‘itidāl*), there springs forth a third virtue, which is justice, arising from the refinement of the practical faculty, whose two extremes are injustice (*zulm*) and receptivity to injustice (*inzilām*)”¹⁸.

The list of four cardinal virtues in *Al-Shajarah* corresponds to the four virtues in Plato and Aristotle and the four cardinal virtues recognized by Greek sages in general, that is, justice (*δικη*), wisdom (*σοφια, φρονησις*), courage (*ανδρεια*) and temperance (*σωφροσυνη*). “The refinement of the appetitive is called “self-control” (or “temperance”) (*‘iffah*) and that of the irascible faculty, “courage” ... so the corresponding virtues are wisdom, temperance, courage and justice. Each virtue is a mean; but the extremes are without limit. Every virtue or moral excellence is a mean bounded by two vices, I mean the two extremes of excess and deficiency. The mean is the straight path; so a man of moral excellence should not transgress it, because, according to the measure of his transgression, he would deviate, stray and swerve from the otherworldly happiness. That is a very painful disease from which very few can eschew except those unique individuals among the most virtuous and the most perfect (*al-amthal*)¹⁹.

In corroboration of the point at issue, Shahzuri refers to the words of prophets and sages to the effect that there are very few who are on the straight path and the rest would be rent to pieces and would be scattered in indefinite *barāzikh* after the demolition of their bodies, where they would stay awhile, ascending from stage to

¹⁶ *Shahrzuri*. *Al-Shajarah*. P. 479.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* P. 479–80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

stage, until finally they cast aside all those configurations (*hay'āt*). Shahzuri then goes on to enumerate all the subsidiary virtues subsumed under each of the four cardinal virtues²⁰.

The virtues subsumed under wisdom (*al-ḥikmah*)

There are six virtues subsumed under *ḥikmah*: first, mental acumen or intelligence (*dhakā'*), which consists of promptness in deriving conclusions from the premises and the facility in deduction due to persistent practice, until it becomes a stable disposition (*malakah*); second, ready comprehension (*sur'at al-fahm*), that is, the motion of the soul from the concomitants (*malzūmāt*) of things to their essential qualities (*lawāzim*); third, the purity of mind (*ṣafā' al-dhihn*), that is, the aptitude of the soul to make present its desired end without agitation; fourth, the ease of learning (*suhūlah al-ta'allum*), that is, the agility of the soul in acquiring its desired end, without the hindrance of confused thoughts, so that the soul in its entirety pays heed to its object of desire; fifth, retentiveness (*taḥafuzz*), by which the forms apprehended by reason (*'aql*), estimative faculty (*wahm*) or imagination (*takhayyul*) are called forth with the least effort; sixth, "recollection" (*tadhakkur*), by which the soul is able to contemplate the forms stored up in the retentive faculty whenever it wishes with a sort of facility due to its acquired disposition²¹.

The virtues subsumed under courage

Eleven virtues are subsumed under courage, which are: first, greatsouledness (*kibar al-nafs*), which is indifference to both esteem and contempt; second, intrepidity (*najdah*), which is the self-assurance of man in times of horror and consternation when anxiety causes disorderly motions; third, magnanimity (*'uluww al-nafs*), by which the soul is neither elated nor depressed by worldly gains; fourth, stability (*thabāt al-himmah*), which is a power in the soul by which it endures pains and withstands calamities; fifth, "forbearance" (*ḥilm*), that is, the abstention of the soul from any kind of anger with ease and facility; sixth, serenity (*sukūn*), by which the soul lives up to the injunctions of the *shari'ah* and the divine intellect in altercations and hostilities (*khuṣūmāt*); seventh, astuteness (*shahāmah*), which is a power in the soul, which enables it to acquire great things in expectation of the good repute; eighth, endurance (*taḥammul*), which is the ability of the soul to exploit the proper tools and gadgets in order to achieve the praiseworthy ends; ninth, humility (*tawāḍu'*), which consists in that you do not esteem for yourself any advantage over those lower than you in rank; tenth, ardent zeal (*ḥamiyyah*), which means that one should guard what ought to be guarded without any lassitude (*tahāwun*); eleventh, "compassion" (*riqqah*); by which the soul suffers from the pains and ailments of the humankind²².

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. P. 481.

²² Ibid.. P. 482.

The virtues subsumed under self-restraint or temperance (*'iffah*)

There are twelve virtues comprised under the cardinal virtue of temperance: first, modesty (*hayā'*), which is a sort of alteration, accruing to the human soul when getting aware of perpetrating evil acts, in order to avoid blameworthiness; second, leniency (*rifq*), which consists in the voluntary submission of the soul to the happenings and events; third, "right guidance" (*husn al-huda*), which is a true yearning of the soul to perfect itself; fourth, reconciliation (*musālamah*), which consists in that the soul should display civility and amiability in disputes without being perturbed (*bilā idtirāb*); fifth, equanimity (*dā'ah*), which is the composure of the soul when concupiscence is excited; sixth, patience (*sabr*), which is the steadfastness of the soul against delightful but wicked pleasures lest they should issue forth; seventh, frugality (*qinā'ah*), which is the satisfaction of the soul with the necessities of life; eighth, "gravity" (*waqar*), which is the imperturbability of the soul when attending to its object of desire; ninth, "piousness" (*wara'*), which is the adherence of the soul to good deeds and praiseworthy actions; tenth, "orderliness" (*intizām*), which is a sort of assessment (*taqdīr*) and arrangement (*tartīb*) by the soul as required and, moreover, to take into consideration the common interests until this becomes a fixed disposition in the soul; eleventh, "liberty" (*hurriyyah*), which is the disposition of the soul to acquire property through lawful channels and to dispose it in rightful ways; twelfth, munificence (*sakhā'*), which is the bestowal of one's property in the easiest manner. In Shahrazuri's view, munificence itself branches off into eight subsidiary virtues as follows: charity (*karam*), forgiveness (*'afw*), manliness (*murū'ah*), nobility of character (*nubūl*), equity (*muwāsāt*); toleration (*musāmahah*) and altruism (*īthār*), that is, preferring others to oneself²³.

Virtues subsumed under justice, comprising twelve virtues

First, "friendship" (*sadāqah*), which is a sort of veritable love which stimulates one to make preparations for things which cause the well-being and prosperity of friends; second, intimacy (*ulfah*), which is the unanimity of a certain group working in mutual collaboration in order to gain a better livelihood; third, "fidelity" (*wafā'*), which is attachment to the way of equity and mutual collaboration, without ever transgressing it; fourth, "compassion" (*shafaqah*), which is the disposition of the soul to eradicate the causes of pain while witnessing them in other human beings; fifth, "visiting the relatives" (*salāh al-rahīm*) which means to make your relatives and kinsmen your partners in worldly goods; sixth, "good recompense" (*mukāfāt*), which is to compensate good deeds done to you, with at least as many good deeds or more; seventh, "good partnership" (*husn al-shirkah*), that is the give-and-take in your transactions should be in a state of equilibrium; eighth, good judgment (*husn al-qadā'*), that is to fulfill the obligations due to others without obligating them and without feeling regret; ninth, "affection" (*tawaddud*), that is, seeking the affection of peers (*akfā'*) and people of merit with good words and

²³ Ibid. P. 483–85.

broad insight; tenth, “submission”, which means that one should not object to the deeds issuing from God the Almighty; eleventh, “trust in God” (*tawakkul*), which consists in that one should not see human beings as true agents in acts depending on human power and one should not wish, therein, any augmentation, diminution, precipitation nor delay; twelfth, “worship” (*ibādah*), which consists in that the Creator should be exalted in the souls and glorified in the hearts; so should be those proximate to the divine threshold like angels, prophets and saints (peace of God upon all them!)²⁴.

The types of vices

According to Shahrzuri, each virtue is a mean between two vices, which are two extremes of excess and deficiency, standing in two opposite directions. We try to abbreviate in a tabular form the list of vices, with respect to their associated virtues²⁵.

Excess	Mean	Deficiency
overwittiness (<i>khubs</i>)	wittiness (<i>dhakā'</i>)	dull-wittedness (<i>baladah</i>)
quick imagination; sudden but flimsy flashes of imagination	quick understanding (<i>sur'at al-fahm</i>)	tardiness in comprehension (<i>iḥtā'fī 'l-fahm</i>)
darkness (<i>zulmah</i>) accruing the soul	purity of mind (<i>safā' al-dhihn</i>)	tardiness (<i>ta'khir</i>) in deducing conclusions
hastening of the soul in ascertaining forms (<i>istithbāt al-suwar</i>)	ease of learning (<i>suhūlat al-ta'allum</i>)	difficulty (<i>su'ūba</i>) in learning
excessive waste of time in futile musings	good intellection (<i>ḥusn al-ta'aqqul</i>)	failure of the mind (<i>qusūr al-fikr</i>) in intellecting the desired ends
wasteful expenditure of time in retaining futile things	retentiveness (<i>ḥifẓ</i>)	negligence (<i>ghaflah</i>) in verifying grave and momentous things
examination of unnecessary things which cause waste of time (<i>taḍyī' al-waqt</i>) and blunt the faculty	recollection (<i>tadhakkur</i>)	forgetfulness (<i>nisyān</i>) of things which ought to be remembered

²⁴ Ibid. P. 485–87.

²⁵ Ibid. P. 487.

Excess	Mean	Deficiency
bashfulness (<i>khurq</i>)	modesty (<i>hayā`</i>)	shamelessness
prodigality (<i>iṣrāf</i>)	munificence (<i>sakhā`</i>)	niggardliness, close-fistedness (<i>bukhl</i>)
arrogance (<i>takabbur</i>)	humility (<i>tawāḍu`</i>)	self-abasement (<i>tadhallul</i>)
depravity (<i>fisq</i>)	worship (<i>ibādah</i>)	straitening self-restraint (<i>taḥarruj</i>), casuistry

Most people mistake the extremity of excess, which is a vice, for the mean, which is a virtue, which might be explained as being due to short-sightedness. For example most people erroneously take rashness for courage and prodigality for munificence. But such error does not occur on the part of deficiency, because deficiency is a sort of privation and so few would misconstrue cowardice or niggardliness for courage and munificence. In certain other virtues, such as humility and forbearance, the reverse is the case, that is, the virtue in question is identified with deficiency, which, according to Shahrzuri, is due to the fact that such virtues are more privative (*adamī*) in nature.²⁶

²⁶ Ibid. P. 488.