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**THE EAST OF SUHRAWARDĪ AND THE WEST
OF HEIDEGGER:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF HEIDEGGER'S AND SUHRAWARDĪ'S VIEWS
ON THE ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS**

In one of his works Heidegger casts doubt about the beginning of a dialogue between the Eastern and Western thinkers because their languages, or in Heideggerian words, their houses of being are different.¹ However, in his message sent to the symposium of “Heidegger and Asian Thought”, he said: “Again and again it has seemed urgent to me that a dialogue take place with the thinkers of what is to us the Eastern world”.² In fact, Heidegger’s works and ideas, and particularly his interest in Far Eastern thought, provide the ground for this dialogue, and materialize this necessity. Of course, this dialogue will come to fruition only when both sides speak *dialogically*. There is indeed a difference between the interpreting of and penetrating into philosophers’ views and communicating with them sympathetically (*dialegethai*).³

Suhrawardī and Heidegger had such dialogues with their predecessors and achieved a lot of unachievable findings. It is hoped that the comparison of these two thinkers, whose bases and ends of their philosophical thoughts are different from each other, will be a useful, although small, step forward in paving the way for this dialogue.

First we proceed to discuss Suhrawardī’s views. The philosophers of the ancient Greece have had a peculiar status in the history of Islam, since their ideas have been interpreted in different ways. These philosophers have been mentioned in different books, ranging from Shahristānī’s book, *Milal wa niḥal*, in the 6th century A. H., to Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkiwārī’s *Mahbūb al-qulūb* in the 11th cen-

¹ Heidegger M. *On the Way to Language*. Trans. P. D. Hertz. Harper and Row Publishers, 1971. P. 5.

² Parkes Gr. (ed.). *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987. P. 7.

³ Heidegger M. *What is Philosophy*. Trans. W. Kluback and J. T. Wilde. London: Vision, 1972. P. 67.

ture, as if they had communication in some way with one of the prophets, and in Shahrīstānī's words, their philosophy had been adapted from the prophets' niche of prophecy (*mishkāṭ al-nubuwwah*). Undoubtedly, such an interpretation, which is against the generally accepted data of the science of history, appears incorrect. Phenomenologically speaking, however, it should be noted that they were concerned simply with philosophy irrespective of historical details. And since they believed that religion is related inextricably to philosophy, they were after a prophetic wisdom. In fact, philosophy lacking a relationship to prophethood was absurd to them. Hence, it has been said that, for example, "Thales of Miletus benefited from Torah's niche of prophecy",⁴ or that "Empedocles lived at the time of Prophet David and got knowledge from him".⁵

On the contrary, Bīrūnī without trying to have dialogue with the ancient Greek philosophers calls their era — due to lack rational thinking — the ignorant period of Greece.⁶

Another view in this respect is that of the Muslim Peripatetic philosophers. They belittled the symbolic language of the early Greek philosophers and considered it worthless and irrational. That is why they did not pay attention to what the Greeks said.

The last view belongs to Suhrawardī and his followers, including the later Illuminationist (*Ishrāqī*) philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā.⁷

We will proceed to deal with Suhrawardī's ideas, in detail. Suhrawardī considers himself as an heir to a perennial and profound wisdom, that is, Illuminationist wisdom (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*). He begins to comment on this philosophy favorably because, as Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī, the famous commentator of *ishrāqī* philosophy, says, the meaning of real wisdom had been forgotten in the course of time.⁸ By real wisdom, Suhrawardī means the one that God has granted to His people and that He has deprived the others of; a wisdom which is completely different from the common one among the scholars in his time. The common and official wisdom of that period was a false and inefficient one, causing people to deviate from the way of the Truth. The wisdom of the Peripatetics or the followers of the first teacher, Aristotle, shares the same feature for it enjoys incorrect principles and false problems. Suhrawardī's main claim for posing the Illuminationist philosophy is the revival of the real meaning of wisdom or Sophia, which,

⁴ *Shahrīstānī*. Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal. Ed. Muḥammad Badran. Cairo, 1364 A.H. Vol. 2. P. 68.

⁵ *Ibid*. P. 72.

⁶ *Bīrūnī*. Ta'rīkh al-Hind. Haydarābād, n.d. P. 18.

⁷ Mullā Ṣadrā, in a chapter on "the origination of the world", in his treatise *Fī al-ḥudūth* (*Ṣadrā*. *Fī al-ḥudūth*. Ed. S.H. Mūsawīyan. Tehran: SIPRI, 2000. P. 152–241) deals with the ancient Greek thinkers; however, his discussion has been exactly adapted from Suhrawardī's works, of course, without including his allusions to the East.

⁸ *Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī*. Sharḥ Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq al-Suhrawardī. Ed. A. Nūrānī and M. Moḥaghegh. Tehran, 2001. P. 3–5.

in his view, is an intuitive wisdom, based on spiritual wayfaring, but which has been replaced by the Peripatetic philosophy for the time being.⁹

Suhrawardī considers this period as the worst and the most destitute period, as there is no mystical unveiling; and all the paths of contemplation are blocked. At this time, some people who are ambitious call themselves philosophers and mislead the seekers of wisdom. Accordingly, in response to the question of who a real philosopher is, Suhrawardī divides philosophers into eight groups.¹⁰ This classification is made in terms of the degree of a philosopher's involvement in gnosis (*'irfān*) and mystical wisdom on the one hand and in philosophical thought and reasoning on the other. Suhrawardī considers a philosopher a perfect man and a vicegerent (*khalīfa*) of God if he gets involved in both intuitive mystical knowledge and rational thinking.

In this way, Suhrawardī tried to trace the fountain of wisdom which he believes is a profound and God-given one that existed all the times, i.e. *philosophia perennis*, and since it is a luminous wisdom, it can be attained in the East, i.e., where the sun rises. However, Suhrawardī is not referring to the geographical East; rather, he means the true East which is the place of the illumination and radiation of the light of the Truth. Thus the wisdom rising from there is Illuminationist one (*ishrāqī*). Nevertheless, the question is: "Where is the East?" This is Suhrawardī's main problem. In his quest for the East, Shaykh Ishrāq Suhrawardī goes to the ancient Greece, and from there, to the ancient Iran. In his eyes, these places comprise the Eastern side of the Truth, i.e., the place where the Truth's light rises. He was mainly concerned with the ancient Greece and Iran. Regarding the ancient Iran, he briefly says that, in that period, there existed a branch of the perennial Sophia. From among the Iranian sages living in the time of Zoroaster onwards, he points to sages such as Jamasf and Buzurjmīhr as the carriers of this wisdom. The Oriental philosophy of the ancient Iran, as we will see, has continued its life in the Islamic world in Islamic Mysticism (Sufism), and among great Sufi Shaykhs, whom Suhrawardī calls Divine philosophers. Unlike the Peripatetics, he pays more attention to the pre-Aristotelian philosophers. In his view, the philosophy of the ancient Greece is intuitive (*dhawqī*) and Oriental which has come to its end with Plato, and which has been degenerated in Aristotle. Therefore, in contrast to Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī believes that Aristotle represents the decline of Greek philosophy rather than its perfection.

Suhrawardī considers himself the heir of Plato and his predecessors, i.e., the early Greek philosophers. He maintains that his way is the way of real wisdom, with Plato as its master. It is also the way of the sages living before Plato, including the father of philosophers, Hermes, as well as the prominent figures and pil-

⁹ *Suhrawardī Sh. Y. Hikmat al-ishrāq // Corbin H.* (ed.). *Collected Works of Suhrawardī*. Vol. 2. Tehran, 1977. P. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* P. 11–12.

lars of philosophy, Empedocles and Pythagoras.¹¹ Like most historians of philosophy In Islam, Suhrawardī considers some ancient Greek philosophers as prophets or as people benefiting from the prophets' niche. Since he does not place Aristotle at this high position, while respecting him, he does not believe it right to appreciate Aristotle so much so that other Greek philosophers are downgraded in comparison to him.

Suhrawardī believes that the reason for the ancient Greek philosophers' being ignored is that their words are symbolic; therefore, "what others claim to have rejected in relation to their ideas only pertain to the outward aspect of their words rather than to their deep and hidden meanings and no one can reject symbols."¹² It was this very attention to language that persuaded Suhrawardī to enter a dialogue with the early Greek thinkers, and discover their hidden messages amidst their words.

The language of ancient Greek philosophers, which was symbolic and represented their state of insight and illumination, turned into Aristotle's language of discourse and reasoning. From then onwards, the decline of Greek philosophy began and its dawn turned into dusk. Thus the Aristotelian philosophy, which entered the world of Islam and was continued by Muslim Peripatetics, was Occidental in Suhrawardī's words. However, though the Oriental philosophy of ancient Greece did not continue in the Occidental philosophy of Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, in the Islamic world, it was revived and renewed in Islamic Mysticism (Sufism). Suhrawardī argues that the elders of Sufism have travelled "the path of the people of wisdom and reached the fountain of Light."¹³

After this brief review of Suhrawardī's ideas, it is the time to touch upon Heidegger's ideas. He treads a different path in his study of the early Greek thought. Perhaps no thinker in our time has ever attached as much importance to ancient Greek philosophy as Heidegger. Nor has anyone tried to find a way into ancient Greek philosophers' ideas through entering a dialogue with them in the same way that he has. As Heidegger himself asserts concerning the Anaximander Fragment: "We cannot demonstrate the adequacy of the translation by scholarly means . . . Scholarly proof will not carry us far enough. We can only reflect on the translation by thinking through the saying. But thinking is the poetizing of the truth of Being in the historic dialogue between thinkers."¹⁴ Heidegger's contemporaries, like those of Suhrawardī, usually evaluate the philosophy of the ancient Greece on the basis of Aristotelian interpretation and argumentation, and maintain that, since this philosophy is still a raw and irrational school of thought,

¹¹ Ibid. P. 10.

¹² *Suhrawardī*. Talwīḥāt // *Corbin H.* (ed.). Collected Works of Suhrawardī. Vol. 1. Tehran, 1976. P. 113.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Heidegger M.* The Anaximander Fragment // *idem.* Early Greek Thinking. Translated by D.F. Krell. P. 57.

it is of a primitive nature. The same thing happened in the Latin period, too. According to Heidegger, in this way and on the basis of this interpretation, “the Greeks become essentially a higher type of Hottentots, whom modern science has left far behind.”¹⁵

But the question is: “Why does he appreciate the early Greek era so much?” If we pay more attention to history, we see that the great thinkers are sensitive to their time. Obviously, Heidegger, too, is a great suffering thinker of the end of the modern era, a critical period that, as Heidegger himself in line with the German poet Hölderlin admits, is a destitute time. He declares that this era is coming to an end in the following way: “Western history has now begun to enter into the completion of that period which we call the modern.”¹⁶ It is a period in which Being has completely lost its meaning and nihilism which has turned into the inevitable destiny of the West, has cast its shadow all over the world from there. Heidegger talks about the darkness of the world at the end of this era. He speaks of the period of “the night of the world” as the time of hardships and distress, and maintains that “at this night’s midnight, the destitution of the time is greatest.”¹⁷ The thinkers’ most important task at this time is to understand this distress. In fact, the most distressful feature of this period is failing to understand such hardships.

Heidegger’s attention to the period of the ancient Greece is rooted in this point. If the sun of Being has set, and if the period of darkness has started and is dominating the entire world, one might ask: “Where did this dusk start from?” Where is West? In fact, the darkness dominating the modern era tempted Heidegger to seek for the place of sunset (“das Abendland”, meaning West) and the cause of this dusk. On his way, he reaches the ancient Greece where the West started. Therefore, Heidegger’s interest in Greek philosophy, in his own words, is not due to his wishing to portray a picture of the ancient Greece as one of the periods of humankind’s history. Nor is it due to his personal interest in the Greek people or his ambition for advancing academic studies of them. His most important, indeed single purpose for having dialogue with the Greek philosophers in their own language, as he says, is finding the source of a thought determining the destiny of the West. It is because of his belief in such *Geschick* (“fate”) that the Greek people became Greek in the historical sense of the word (*Geschichtlich*).

When talking of the East and the West, Suhrawardī does not have the geographical sense of these words in mind; likewise, Heidegger notes that by Greek, he is not referring to a specific people or nation. For the latter, being Greek

¹⁵ Heidegger M. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987. P. 15.

¹⁶ Heidegger M. *Nietzsche*. Trans. F. A. Capuzzi. Vol. 4. New York: Harper and Row, 1982. P. 28.

¹⁷ Heidegger M. *What are Poets for // idem. Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971. P. 93.

means the beginning of a fate in history in which man and Being have obtained a new meaning.

The modern era is in fact the expansion and realization of the same thought beginning at the end of the Greek era. Here, Heidegger makes a distinction between the early and late Greece, and maintains that the early Greek philosophy did not turn the West into the West due to what it was at the beginning; rather, it exerted its influence through what it became at the end. In other words, this trend of thought changed the history of the West only when it turned into philosophy and, as a result, dominated the Western world. This was specifically done through translating Greek works into Latin, which Heidegger considers “the first stage in the process by which we cut ourselves off and alienated ourselves from the original essence of Greek philosophy.”¹⁸ At that time, the dialogue with Greek philosophy was ended all through Western philosophy. Accordingly, in Heidegger’s view, “all Western history since is in a manifold sense Roman and never Greek.”¹⁹

Philosophy in this sense is essentially Western because, in the sense intended by Heidegger, it is Greek. He views the early Greek thought as being based on *Logos* and *mythos*, and thus being non-philosophical. Early Greek thinkers such as Heraclites and Parmenides were not philosophers; they were rather higher than philosophers, since they were still speaking in harmony with *Logos*. They were so close to Being (*sein*) that they conceived of man (*Dasein*) as the place (*Da*) of the disclosure of Being (*sein*). Truth, knowledge and language, thought and art were also understood in such a horizon of proximity with Being. The advent of Greek Sophism paved the way for the emergence of philosophy. The first philosophers who trod this path were Socrates and Plato. According to Heidegger, the change of the definition of the Truth in Plato’s thought caused a change in Greek thinking. This change has continued to exert its influence throughout the history of philosophy until the modern era. For example, with Plato, the thoughts concerning the Being of beings turned into a philosophical thought, and the first distinctions between Being and beings, and man and Being came to the fore.

On the other hand, a discursive thinking of Being was born. It should be noted that Heidegger mostly interprets Plato in Aristotelian sense. Greek philosophy came to its peak of grandeur with these two great philosophers. They founded a kind of thinking which was pretty far from the reality of Greek thinking at a time which Heidegger calls the great period of Greece. It was philosophy standing at a distance from *Logos* and moving in the direction of logic and demonstrative thought.

¹⁸ Heidegger. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. P. 13.

¹⁹ Heidegger M. *The Metaphysics as History of Being // idem. The End of Philosophy*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. New York: Harper and Row, 1973. P. 13.

Heidegger's difference from Suhrawardī at this point lies in the fact that Suhrawardī highly estimates Plato and regards him as representing the perfection of the ancient Greek philosophy, and Aristotle as the founder of discursive philosophy, while according to Heidegger, Plato and Aristotle are the founders of philosophy in the sense of rational thinking about Being. In Suhrawardī's eyes, one of the objections that can be raised against Heidegger pertains to his evaluation of Plato and Aristotle. Suhrawardī sees Plato in the Eastern horizon, while Heidegger sees him in the Western one. Like him, Heidegger sees the specific language of the Greeks as one of the main reasons for the inability to understand the thinking of the Greeks and for the resulting misunderstandings. He maintains that their language is a non-rational language and the Greeks have attained Being through a fundamental poetic experience.²⁰ This is the language of Being risen from *Logos*; it is ambiguous and incomprehensible to those people who, according to Heraclitus, are deaf to *Logos* and have no dialogue with it. In this respect, Heidegger resorts to Heraclitus's statement equating knowledge (*Sophia*) with speaking the language of *Logos*. Accordingly, he says that one cannot understand the Greek thought unless he is able to hear their language as they themselves spoke and understood it.

I conclude this paper by saying that Suhrawardī's interest in the early Greek philosophy lies in the extinction of the light of wisdom in his time, and the appearance of the so-called philosophers instead of true sages. Therefore, in his search for true philosophy (*ḥikmah*) he refers to his predecessors and in this way, he reaches for the East and the Eastern wisdom in ancient India, Iran and ancient Greece, as well as for Sufism in Islam. He says that in order to find the beginning of true wisdom (*Sophia*), we should return to the way of the earlier philosophers who were the people of insight and illumination (*nūr*). In Islam, those who travelled along the path of Sufism inherited this wisdom from them. In fact, these sages are the only people who can save us from the grief of nostalgia in such a destitute (in Suhrawardī's and Heidegger's words) time.

Nevertheless, Heidegger, who finds himself living in the dark modern age, searches the past to find the origin of the West. He, too, believes that the true thinking cannot be sought unless one remembers the past. In his quest of the West, he reaches for the Greek thought. In Heidegger's own words, he has come to the same land in which the planted seed grew into a vast desert that is fast expanding to dominate the entire world. He invites us to accept a thinking in future that, unlike the ancient Greek thinking, is not philosophical or rational, but is similar to poetry in essence. Considering the above-mentioned points, we see that these two thinkers, Suhrawardī and Heidegger, meet each other in the land of the ancient Greece.

²⁰ Heidegger. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. P. 14.