



## Illuminationist Texts and Textual Studies: Essays in Memory of Hossein Ziai

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# Review

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The late Hossein Ziai (1944–2011) was a professor of Philosophy and Iranian Studies at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he taught from 1988. Prior to UCLA, he taught at several American and Iranian institutions as one of the foremost authorities on the Illuminationist school of Philosophy (*ḥikmat al-isbrāq*) in general and the thought of its founder Shihāb al-Din Suhrawardī (1154–91) in particular. His charismatic personality and sense of humanity, together with his scientific talents, were bound to make him respected and loved by many of his peers and students. Fourteen of his most distinguished colleagues have dedicated this volume to his memory: Eiyad S. al-Kutubi, Ahmed Alwishah, Charles E. Butterworth, Khaled El-Rouayheb, Ali Gheissari, Malihe Karbassian, Mohammad Karimi Zanjani Asl, Christian Lange, Y. Tzvi Langermann, Jon McGinnis, Nasrollah Pourjavady, Reza Pourjavady, L. W. Cornelis van Lit, and John Walbridge.

Appearing nearly seven years after Ziai's untimely passing, this volume is remarkable for the high quality of the contributions. It opens with a Preface by the editors explaining the focus of the collection and a summary of the chapters, followed by a note on

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the contributors. The main contributions are presented in fifteen chapters divided into four parts: Part 1: Introduction begins with chapter 1, by Ali Gheissari, and summarizes Ziai's fascinating life history and background and provides a detailed bibliography of his intellectual output. Also remarkable are thirteen illustrations, consisting of calligraphy and watercolor, which familiarize the reader with a lesser-known aspect of Ziai's intellectual output. Chapter 2, by John Walbridge, is an evaluation of Ziai's contribution to the study of Suhrawardī from the personal perspective of the contributor, who was Ziai's student and then longtime collaborator.

Part 2: Suhrawardī and the Philosophy of Illumination starts with chapter 3, by John Walbridge. Although perhaps too technical for non-specialist readers of Suhrawardī, this chapter is a highly informative piece on the earliest manuscripts of Suhrawardī's work. It is the fruit of a decade-long project that will have a definitive impact on future editions of Suhrawardī's works, and is sure to enhance our understanding of intellectual history in the centuries following Suhrawardī's death. Chapter 4, by Mohammad Karimi Zanjani Asl, discusses and provides a bilingual edition of a short treatise on the theory of knowledge sometimes attributed to Suhrawardī. Chapter 5, also by John Walbridge, is a discussion and translation of another early short treatise by Suhrawardī. Chapters 6 and 7, by Malihe Karbassian and Nasrollah Pourjavady respectively, study two significant concepts in Suhrawardī's thought, *barzakh* and *sakīna*, from etymological, philosophical, and historical points of view.

Part 3: The Illuminationists or Suhrawardī's Commentators moves from Suhrawardī to his commentators and followers. Chapters 8 and 9, by Ahmed Alwishah and Y. Tzvi Langerman respectively, are both dedicated to Ibn Kammūna, chapter 10 (by L. W. Cornelis van Lit and Christian Lang) to Shahrazūrī, and chapter 11 (by Reza Pourjavady) to Nayrīzī, all three are among Suhrawardī's major commentators. In chapter 8 Alwishah discusses Ibn Kammūna's view of the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) and includes a very helpful translation of related passages from Ibn Kammūna's commentary. Langermann in chapter 9 introduces the reader to a short treatise by Ibn Kammūna (also included in translation) on what Langermann describes as "a philosophically oriented monotheistic ethic." Van Lit and Lange in chapter 10 discuss and provide a translation of a text by Shahrazūrī on the Suhrawardīan notion of "a world of image" (*'ālam al-mithāl*). Chapter 11, by R. Pourjavady, is dedicated to a short text by Suhrawardī, and Nayrīzī's commentary on it, which is also translated in this chapter.

Part 4: The Wider Tradition is the last section of the volume and consists of four different chapters with different objectives, which, although of high quality, have a less direct connection with the focus of the volume. What above all unites them is an interest in the post-classical history of Islamic philosophy—which fits well with Ziai's own intellectual orientation. Chapter 12, by Khaled El-Rouayeh, is dedicated to a manual on logic, important for understanding the post-Avicennan developments of logic. The contributor also provides an Arabic transcription of the treatise, as well as a facsimile of the beautiful manuscript. Jon McGinnis in chapter 14 reflects Ziai's interest in physics and mathematics, and discusses Avicenna's argument for the finitude of the cosmos and its reception by the post-classical thinkers; relevant passages

from different authors are included in translation. Finally, in chapter 15, Eiyad S. al-Kutubi presents a faithful, literal translation of a short treatise by Mullā Ṣadrā on the nature of the afterlife and the problem of bodily resurrection.

This volume delivers what the editors promise at the outset: to introduce “new texts into the modern canon of Islamic and Iranian philosophy” (p. ix). It puts together scholarly editions of many texts which have not been available to Western readers, along with highly engaging introductions, helpful notes, and detailed bibliographies. For this, the editors and contributors deserve our gratitude. The volume acts as a kind of antidote to the tendency to underrate the post-classical developments in Islamic thought, particularly what falls in the necessarily ill-defined field of Iranian Studies. It also reflects the necessity of paying more attention to the more speculative aspects of Iranian studies.

I have deliberately left the introduction of chapter 13 of this volume until the end, in order to draw attention to a more fundamental question regarding the focus of this volume: this chapter, by Charles Butterworth, stands out from the others—and not only for amateurs of numerology. It stands out because it engages critically with Ziai’s whole intellectual project. As one of the most prominent scholars of medieval Islamic political philosophy, and continuing a tradition going back to Leo Strauss and Muhsin Mahdi, Butterworth is a firm believer in the philosophical character of Islamic philosophy. This is as distinguished from those who tend to put the emphasis on its Islamic character on the one hand, as well as those who do not make a sharp distinction between the rational and supra-rational on the other: for the latter, mystics and Sufis are as philosophically relevant as any rationalist philosopher. Butterworth intends to revive the debate, which, he tells us, he has conducted over several years with Ziai, the debate that is “centered on the question of whether intellectual apprehension is bounded by reason and its sphere or extends to some supra-rational faculty.” Butterworth clearly indicates his own Farabian allegiances and implies that Ziai was in the other camp. The way that Butterworth chooses to revive this question is through a translation of Alfarabi’s short treatise entitled *On the Purposes of Aristotle’s Metaphysics* and his accompanying explicative essay. Alfarabi’s treatise is contextualized by the famous story told by Avicenna, who claimed to have understood Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* only after reading Alfarabi’s treatise. The delicate humor of Butterworth consists of showing that Avicenna actually misunderstood Alfarabi’s treatise, and therewith Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*! The wider message of Butterworth’s contribution seems to be a radical claim about the history of Islamic philosophy: he implies that post-classical Islamic philosophy went adrift through a break with Aristotelian rationalist philosophy, which led to an unphilosophical intellectual project with pronounced supra-rational elements. The phrase “‘Eastern’ philosophy,” which only appears in the title of Butterworth’s paper in scare quotes, seems to point to the famous idea according to which Avicenna’s *al-ḥikma al-mashriqiyya* (Eastern philosophy) was a preliminary stage to the Suhrawardi’s *ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (philosophy of illumination). Butterworth contrasts Avicenna’s understanding of metaphysics as dealing with *Ilāhiyyāt* (divine matters) with Alfarabi’s view of philosophy as “pursuit rather than settled doctrine” (p. 269). The reader unfamiliar with the back-

ground of Butterworth's claim might miss here the allusion to Strauss, who defined philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom rather than wisdom itself, "the investigation rather than the result."<sup>1</sup> Strauss also saw philosophy as a fundamentally zetetic enterprise founded on the knowledge of one's ignorance, "awareness of the fundamental problems and, therewith, of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought."<sup>2</sup> Butterworth's friendly but serious reaction to the research project centered on the study of the post-classical Islamic philosophy is a reminder of a debate that deserves to be renewed and taken seriously by anyone who cares about the fundamental issues.

I would like to add a supplementary point to this debate which I believe is crucial for understanding the whole intellectual orientation of Ziai and those who pursue a similar project. Strauss' conception of Islamic philosophy went hand in hand with a strict separation between philosophy and anything inaccessible to unassisted human reason, be it revelation, mystical experience of the divine, religious or spiritual awakening, occult knowledge, etc. In this perspective, Strauss looked at thinkers like Alfarabi or Averroes as unbelievers who relied exclusively on the rational capacities of the human mind in their "intellectual apprehension." This view would have far-reaching consequences for understanding classical as well as post-classical Islamic philosophy. For the volume under review, this would mean that, if post-classical Islamic philosophy distinguishes itself by relying on anything supra-rational in its intellectual endeavor, it should not be called "philosophy" properly speaking, unless one finds a way of attributing that dependence on the supra-rational to a rhetorical strategy employed by authors like Avicenna or his illuminative successors. This strategy could have been in the service of some specific end—for instance, something akin to Strauss's claim about the prudential aspects of the religious rhetoric of other non-religious philosophers (e.g. Alfarabi and Maimonides in Islam and Judaism, Plato and Aristotle among the ancients, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in Christianity). How fruitful this approach is remains an open question, but the fundamental question is: how philosophical is post-classical Islamic philosophy, and what is its relationship with Islam?

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<sup>1</sup>Strauss, "Fārābī's Plato," 393.

<sup>2</sup>Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 32.