

# AL-SUHRAWARDĪ'S CRITIQUE OF IBN SĪNĀ'S REFUTATION OF THE PLATONIC FORMS

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## Abstract

Aristotle's denunciation of his long-time teacher Plato's theory of Forms, one of the most essential elements of the latter's metaphysical thought, has resonated throughout the general history of philosophy and in the literature of classical Islamic philosophy. One example of its influence on Islamic thought is the dispute between Ibn Sīnā and al-Suhrawardī on the reality of the Forms. Ibn Sīnā, who, with al-Fārābī and Ibn Rushd, was one of the most important figures of Islamic Peripateticism, produced a detailed refutation of the theory of Platonic Forms modeled after Aristotle's. Al-Suhrawardī, founder of the Illuminationist School, the second major Islamic philosophical tradition, revered Plato as an ideal philosopher primarily for his mystical character and intuitionist epistemology, regarding him as the greatest of all philosophers. Al-Suhrawardī owed many of the essential components of his own metaphysical system to Plato. Therefore, he made great intellectual efforts to confute Ibn Sīnā's criticisms of the theory of Platonic Forms using Ibn Sīnā's own philosophy. This article is intended to give an exposition of al-Suhrawardī's efforts.

*Key Words:* Plato, Aristotle, the theory of Forms, Ibn Sīnā, al-Suhrawardī, philosophical criticism

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## Introduction: A Historical Overview

The dispute between Ibn Sīnā and al-Suhrawardī on the ontological nature of the Platonic Forms is intimately related to the problem of universals as it was first set forth by Plato and later criticized by his most important pupil and successor, Aristotle. A detailed account of Plato's concept of universals, which came to be known as the theory of Forms or Ideas, and of the subsequent critique and modification of this concept by Aristotle is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, in what follows, I shall describe the development of the theory in Ancient Greek thought and the objections raised against it in only enough detail to allow the reader to follow the arguments against and for it by Ibn Sīnā and al-Suhrawardī, respectively.

Plato is the father of the question of universals; it is in his dialogues that we find the first arguments for the existence of universals and the first discussion of the difficulties they raise. Plato believed that universals must exist ontologically, to explain the nature of the world, and epistemologically, to explain the nature of our knowledge of it. In addition, he not only proposed a solution to this ontological and epistemological problem but also predicted the objections to his solution.<sup>1</sup>

The universals are employed to think about and refer to the qualities of individual objects and the relations among them. For instance, if we say of two or more objects that each is a table, or is square, or is brown, or is made of iron, we are saying that there is a property common to the objects that may be shared by many others and by which the objects may be classified into kinds. Such classification is not only useful for scientific and other purposes but also necessary because it allows us to experience anything as belonging to kinds. In other words, anything that we perceive is perceived as an object of certain kind, as having certain qualities, and as standing in certain relations to other objects. By extension, though every individual object is unique because it is numerically distinct, its features are general because they recur in other objects.

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<sup>1</sup> A. David Woozley, "Universals," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. Paul Edwards; New York: Macmillan & The Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan, repr. 1972), VIII, 194.

There are several approaches and theories describing the nature of universals, including nominalism, resemblance theories, realism, and conceptualism; we, however, shall focus on the last two as the most relevant to our subject. In the history of philosophy, realist and conceptualist theories of universals are opposed because the former holds universals to be extramental and mind-independent, whereas the latter considers them to be mental and mind-dependent. For the realist, universals exist in themselves and would exist even if there were no minds to be aware of them. For the conceptualist, however, universals are purely mental; if there were no minds, there could be no universals.

The two principal versions of realism are those proposed by Plato and Aristotle. Plato is the first not only to have propounded a theory of universals but also to have noted the ontological and epistemological difficulties his theory created. Aristotle, adding new objections to Plato's critique of the theory, postulated his own distinctly different but still realist account. Though Plato and Aristotle were both realists because they granted to universals an existence independent of minds, they disagreed about the status and mode of existence they believed universals to have. Notably, Plato never regarded his theory as a final, fully elaborated, and perfect theory. On the contrary, he modified and refined it throughout his philosophical career. Thus, no one single work contains a full exposition of the theory; he treated it in his dialogues with varying degrees of detail. His theory was first outlined in the *Symposium*, explained fairly fully in the *Republic*, briefly defended in the *Timaeus*, mentioned with respect in the *Philebus*, treated in critical terms in the *Sophist*, and explicitly criticized in the *Parmenides*.<sup>2</sup>

Putting aside the debates about the extent to which the views set forth as those of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues are actually Socrates' and the extent to which Plato used Socrates as the spokesman of his own views, it seems certain that Socrates is the first to have aroused Plato's interest in the question of universals. Additionally, while Socrates did not explicitly hold a theory of universals in the Platonic sense of the term, a point confirmed by Aristotle,<sup>3</sup> Plato

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Ryle, "Plato," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, VI, 320-321.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on Aristotle's views about Socrates' role in the origin of the theory, see Gail Fine, *On Ideas: Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Theory of Forms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 44 ff.

maintained that the philosophical questions Socrates addressed could only be answered through such a theory.

Socrates was primarily concerned with the human virtues, and his aim was to reach a satisfactory definition of the virtue under discussion. He questioned the definitions of beauty, courage, piety, justice, and even virtue. He rejected the definitions offered because he believed that they were too narrow or too wide, but especially because they gave instances of the virtue instead of its essential definition. In other words, Socrates sought the one form that all instances of the virtue had and of which they were the instances. The matters about which Socrates asked questions were limited because his philosophical concerns were chiefly ethical. Plato expanded Socrates' theories and maintained that there must be an essence common to all things of a given kind that would apply not only to abstract virtues, such as justice and courage, but also to natural objects, such as trees, and to artifacts, such as beds and tables.

As mentioned above, Plato himself was the first to recognize the limitations of his theory, the most important of which is suggested by the following question: What type of relationship exists between the universal form and its particular manifestations, and what is the ontological nature of the universal itself? To answer this question, he developed the doctrine known as the Theory of Forms, according to which each universal is a single substance or Form, existing timelessly and independently of any of its particulars and apprehended not by sense but by intellect. The considerations that led Plato to propound such a theory can be summarized as two interrelated concerns: epistemological and metaphysical.

(1) Epistemologically, if knowledge of things is possible in the real sense of the term, this knowledge must be of what is permanent and unchanging. Nevertheless, the physical world falls short of this requirement because all objects in the physical world undergo constant change. This is known as the Heraclitean doctrine of constant flux, which Plato himself acknowledged. To address this condition, he introduced a counterpart of the physical world: a supersensible realm of unchanging stability. He proposed that only with such a realm does knowledge become possible. This realm is the realm of the Forms.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1996), 136.

(2) Ontologically, there are many things, yet they are all, in some sense, iterations of the same thing. From this manifest fact of recurrence, Plato derives the conclusion that there are universals apart from and prior to particulars.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is the Form of the particulars or instances of any certain kind that confers upon them their existence.

Plato's vision of universals as substantial Forms gave rise to a depressing question from both a logical and ontological standpoint. If, for example, the Form of Beauty is not only the perfect pattern of beautiful particulars but is also itself perfectly beautiful, two problems arise: First, there is a clear contradiction because the Form of Beauty in this case is both individual and held to be universal. Second, as Plato realized in the *Parmenides* and as Aristotle repeated, if a Form stands to its particulars as "one over many," and if the Form is an ideal pattern of which the particulars are imperfect copies, an infinite regress is created that is known as the third man argument. This argument can be stated as follows: if the Form is to be predicable of itself and of its particulars, the Form shall require another Form to be beautiful. The second Form of Beauty will be self-predicable and thus call into being a third Form, a fourth, and so on, *ad infinitum*.<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned above, Aristotle is the second, after Plato himself, to have challenged Plato's theory of universals. Aristotle, as opposed to his teacher, proposes that the only true substances are individual objects, such as Socrates and this table. Therefore, universals are not substances existing independently of particulars; on the contrary, they exist only as common elements in particulars.

Aristotle raised a number of objections to Plato's theory, but three of them are of special interest to us because Ibn Sīnā reproduces them, especially the first two, in his own critique of the theory:

(1) The aforementioned infinite regress argument, or third man argument, which he took from Plato.

(2) Duplication of the Forms: Aristotle asserts that by conceiving of the Forms as separate substances, Plato introduced an unnecessary and unhelpful duplication. Aristotle claims that this duplication does not solve the problem of the nature of a set of entities because postu-

<sup>5</sup> John C. Bigelow, "Universals," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. Edward Craig; London & New York: Routledge, 1998), IX, 541.

<sup>6</sup> Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 142-143.

lating a second and better set merely repeats this problem at a different level. In short, the problem that holds true of the particulars also holds true of the Forms.

(3) Confusion of the categories of substance and property: Substances are individuals and *possess* properties, but they cannot *be* properties. Plato, however, treated a Form both as an individual substance and as a property by saying that, for example, Beauty is a Beautiful.<sup>7</sup>

### 1. Ibn Sīnā's Critique of the Platonic Forms

Ibn Sīnā treats the theory of the Forms in two chapters of his *al-Shifā'*.<sup>8</sup> In the first chapter, he provides an exposition of two different versions of the theory and an account of its rise in the history of thought from his own perspective. In the second chapter, he critiques and denounces the theory. The philosopher describes the theory of Forms as a result of the confusion that, according to him, occurred during the period in which the philosophical mind proceeded from physics to metaphysics. In moving from sensibles to intelligibles, i.e., from sensible particulars to intelligible universals, the ancient philosophers identified two types of form: (1) the sensible, corruptible form resting in the particulars and (2) the intelligible, eternal, unchanging, immaterial form. As Ibn Sīnā describes it, these philosophers claimed for the immaterial form an existence distinct and independent of the sensible particulars, naming them "ideal entities (*mithālī*)." According to this philosophy, our rational perception of the sensibles depends upon their immaterial forms because the intelligibles are unchanging and incorruptible, and the sensibles are changing and corruptible. Ibn Sīnā claims that Socrates and Plato adopted an extreme version of this doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Ibn Sīnā also discusses another version of the theory of Forms that posits mathematical entities as the principle of physical beings. This version is distinct from the Pythagorean theory, he says, because the Pythagoreans do not believe numbers to be immaterial, though they view them as the principle of things. The philosophers who adopt

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of Aristotle's criticisms of the theory, see Fine, *On Ideas*.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn Sīnā, Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Alī, *Kitābu 's-Şifā': Metafizik [=Kitāb al-Shifā': al-İlāhiyyā]* (translated into Turkish, with the original text, by Ekrem Demirli & Ömer Türker; Istanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2005), II, 55-56.

this version of the theory of Forms, Ibn Sīnā reports, claim that it is not the Forms but their principles that are immaterial and that these principles are mathematical entities. In contrast, Plato ranks mathematical entities between Forms and physical things. The opposing claim relies on the notion that entities that are immaterial in the mind must also be immaterial in the concrete and *vice-versa*. The physical things come into existence as a result of mathematical entities attaching to matter. It follows that mathematical entities are immaterial in essence, though they are not so insofar as they are attached to matter.<sup>9</sup>

Those philosophers who assert that the principles of physical things are mathematical entities and believe that these entities are intelligible and immaterial formulate their argument as follows: If the physical things are abstracted from matter, nothing is left over but mathematical entities, such as dimension, shape, and number. It is impossible for the principle of a material thing to be material. It ensues that the principle of physical things is mathematical entities.<sup>10</sup>

Ibn Sīnā discards the notion that the Forms or the mathematical entities are immaterial and function as the ontological principles of physical things. In other words, he discards the theory of Forms in brief, identifying what he believes are the errors that underlie the theory in five headings, of which only the first two concern us in this exposition. The first error is the misconception that those forms and mathematical entities that are abstract in the mind are also abstract in reality.<sup>11</sup> The second error is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of unity or identity. The exponents of the theory of Forms, argues Ibn Sīnā, mistook the statement, "The form in the individuals of a species is one" to mean that the form in question is numerically or individually one and resting in all individuals practically. What is, in fact, meant by this word, argues Ibn Sīnā, is that the forms are numerically many, but they are one in terms of species and nature.<sup>12</sup>

After giving an account of Ibn Sīnā's general approach to the theory of Forms, we can proceed to address his objections to the theory. We can reduce these criticisms to three. The first two address the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

version of the immaterial Forms and the last addresses that of the mathematical entities. In his first criticism, Ibn Sīnā argues that there are no forms other than and distinct from those resting in the sensible particulars. In other words, there are no such things as immaterial Forms or Ideas. In his demonstration of this argument, he tries to establish why it is necessary for those forms to rest in the sensible particulars and goes on to argue for the impossibility of the existence of the immaterial forms. The philosopher demonstrates the first point through the following *reductio ad absurdum* argument: We gain knowledge of the forms from the particulars. If the forms were not to exist in the particulars, we could not perceive them through the senses, imagination, or reason. We, however, do perceive the forms of the particulars through all three media. It follows that the forms exist in the particulars.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that this argument relies on Aristotle's first and second critiques of the theory as described in the introduction.

To demonstrate his second argument, Ibn Sīnā concedes the existence of the immaterial forms and then asks, "Is the definition and nature of the immaterial forms the same as that of the sensible forms, or is it different?" If the latter is taken to be the case, Ibn Sīnā notes, the immaterial forms would be different from the sensible forms and would therefore require a new argument to establish their existence. Furthermore, until they are proven to exist, any speculations about their eternity and immateriality would be futile and ungrounded.<sup>14</sup>

If the definition and nature of the immaterial and sensible forms is the same, then either the presence of the forms in the particulars is required by the nature of the latter, or the former are attached to the latter by an external cause. In the first case, it is impossible for a form that is abstracted from the particulars, i.e., an immaterial form, to exist, for a thing resting in another thing cannot, by its nature, be separate from it. In the second case, if the immaterial forms occur to the particulars not because of the nature of the latter but because the former are attached to the latter by an external cause and the nature of the latter does not prevent this, the immaterial forms can be material and the material particulars can be immaterial. However, this is contrary to the very theory of Forms, which posits the immaterial

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

forms as transcending the material particulars.<sup>15</sup>

To summarize, if the species' forms inhere in the particulars by the nature of the latter, it is impossible for the immaterial forms to exist because it is impossible for a thing to be separate from a thing to which it is inherent. If, however, the former are attached to the latter by an external cause, the immaterial forms could not be immaterial because they attach to the material. It follows that it would be impossible for the immaterial forms to exist in either case.

In the second argument, Ibn Sīnā invokes to establish the falsity of the theory of Forms, he contends that if the immaterial and sensible forms are assumed to partake of a common definition and nature, the particulars in which the forms rest either need the immaterial forms or do not need them. If their existence does inherently depend on them, the immaterial forms that are needed will need other forms to exist because it has been agreed that the sensible and immaterial forms share the same nature. This would induce a recess *ad infinitum*, which is false. Thus, it is impossible that the immaterial forms exist.<sup>16</sup>

If the particulars, however, need the immaterial forms not by nature but because of an accident that attaches to them, and if they do not need them when the accident in question fails to attach and therefore do not entail the existence of the immaterial forms, it will result that an accident attaching to a thing might be the cause of that thing which is prior to and independent from it, a case that is impossible. If, instead, the immaterial forms cause the existence of the particulars through the accident in question, this is contradictory, for the accident would be the cause of the sensible form but not that of the immaterial form, though they share the same nature.<sup>17</sup>

However, if the particulars do not need the immaterial forms, the latter are not the cause and principle of the former. The latter in this case are inferior to the former, for the former act as the object of influence and actions, while the latter do not. For example, an abstract human form is incomparable to a living, actual human being.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

The third criticism Ibn Sīnā levels at the theory of Forms is concerned with the version of the theory, discussed above, that holds the principles of physical things to be mathematical entities. The philosopher's critique of this version comprises two parts. In the first, he rejects the notion, as he does when establishing his hylomorphist theory of physics, that point exists independently of line, line of surface, and surface of natural body. Of most significance in this exposition, however, is his criticism of the doctrine that posits numbers to be the principles of natural things. Ibn Sīnā asserts that if numbers were the principles of natural things, the distinction amongst species would rely on characteristics of lessness and moreness. In this case, the difference between a man and a horse would be reduced to the former being more than the latter. However, because less is perforce involved in more, the horse would be involved in the man, which is obviously false.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Al-Suhrawardī's Critique of Ibn Sīnā's Arguments

Before proceeding to the exposition of the answers al-Suhrawardī gives to Ibn Sīnā's criticisms of the theory of Forms, it is necessary to clarify the reason al-Suhrawardī defends this theory and to provide a context for his understanding of it. Al-Suhrawardī believes that the celestial and elemental beings emanate from immaterial lights. These lights are their species forms or "the lords/masters of icons/idols," as he calls them.<sup>20</sup> This belief is but an expression of Plato's theory of Forms.<sup>21</sup> Al-Suhrawardī identifies his concept of the world of lights with Plato's world of Forms by relating that Plato saw the world of lights in one of his mystical visions.<sup>22</sup> Thus, al-Suhrawardī would naturally defend the theory of Forms against Ibn Sīnā's criticisms.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Abū l-Futūḥ Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā ibn Ḥabash al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, in idem., *Majmū'a-yi Muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Isbrāq* (vol. II, ed. Henry Corbin; Tehran: Pizhūhishgāh-i 'Ulūm-i Insānī wa-Muṭāla'āt-i Farhangī, 1373 HS [1993]), 143.

<sup>21</sup> See *Ibid.*, 159-160; idem., *Kitāb al-talwīḥāt al-lawḥiyya wa-l-'arsbiyya*, in idem., *Majmū'a-yi Muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Isbrāq* (vol. I, ed. Henry Corbin; Tehran: Pizhūhishgāh-i 'Ulūm-i Insānī wa-Muṭāla'āt-i Farhangī, 1373 HS [1993]), 68.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-Isbrāq*, 155-156, 162, 255. See also Rifat Okudan, *İşrak Filozofu Sübrevardî Maktûl ve Eserlerindeki Üslup ve Belağat* [*al-Suhrawardī al-*

Though he tries to confute Ibn Sīnā's criticisms, al-Suhrawardī clarifies that the world of lights is not demonstrated by rational proofs; rather, one can only obtain knowledge of its existence and nature by shedding one's body and soaring to that world to behold it firsthand.<sup>24</sup> To emphasize the epistemological value of the spiritual vision and that of the science of light, or the Philosophy of Illumination built on that vision, he compares the vision in question to astronomical observations and the knowledge of lights to the science of astronomy.<sup>25</sup> Al-Suhrawardī believes that, in the end, both sciences depend on the observations of a few people and notes that, in astronomical matters, the Peripatetics rely on the observations of Ptolemy and that Aristotle relies almost solely on the observations of the Babylonians.<sup>26</sup> Al-Suhrawardī further claims that the science of lights is even more reliable than astronomy because its practitioners are pillars of wisdom and prophecy.<sup>27</sup> Thus, for al-Suhrawardī, the theory of Forms is the outcome of a direct vision of Forms and not the result of a confusion that took place during the mind's movement from the particulars to the universals, as Ibn Sīnā claims.

Nevertheless, al-Suhrawardī attempts to produce rational proofs to establish the existence of the lords/masters of icons/idols, or Forms.

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*Maqtūl, The Philosopher of Illumination, and His Style and Rhetoric in His Writings* (PhD dissertation; Isparta: Süleyman Demirel University, 2001), 111.

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed analysis of al-Suhrawardī's plan of emanation in relation to his doctrine of the lords/masters of idols/icons, see John Walbridge, "The Background to Mullā Ṣadrā's Doctrine of the Platonic Forms," in *Mulla Sadra and Transcendent Philosophy: Islam-West Philosophical Dialogue – The Papers presented at the World Congress on Mulla Sadra (May 1999, Tehran)* – (Tehran: Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute [SIPRI], 2001), II, 155 ff.; İsmail Erdoğan, "Platon'un İdeler'ine Bazı İslam Düşünürlerince Yapılan Atıf ve Değerlendirmeler [Some Muslim Thinkers' References to and Assessments of Plato's Ideas]," *Bilimname* IV/1 (2004), 36 ff.; idem., "İşraki Düşüncece Türlerin Efendileri Meselesi [The Lords of Species in Ishrāqī Thought]," *Dimî Araştırmalar [Religious Studies]* VIII/23 (2005), 139 ff.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-isbrāq*, 13, 161-162; idem., *al-Mashbārī' wa-l-muṭarāḥāt*, in idem., *Majmū'ā-yi Muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Isbrāq*, I, 460; idem., *al-Muqāwamāt*, in idem., *Majmū'ā-yi Muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Isbrāq*, I, 190.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-isbrāq*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *al-Mashbārī'*, 460.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-isbrāq*, 156.

To achieve this, he identifies the agent that supervises and conducts activities vital to the human body, such as growth and nutrition. For him, it is impossible for these activities to be carried out by the rational soul because they typically occur without the knowledge and cognizance of the rational soul. Thus, these activities must be conducted by the self-subsistent and self-emanating lord of the species. The philosopher asserts that other natural phenomena also occur through the agency of the lords of icons. For example, the attraction of oil to fire occurs through the agency of the lord of the icon responsible for fire and not because of the absence of a vacuum between the two or the attractive power of fire.<sup>28</sup>

Al-Suhrawardī's second argument for the reality of the Forms is built upon a theory that he refers to as the "superior contingency principle."<sup>29</sup> This theory establishes the hierarchical nature of the emanation of beings from the Light of Light within the context of the Illuminative cosmology. Al-Suhrawardī envisions that the most proximate light emanates directly from the Light of Lights, followed by other vertical lights. These emanate from one the other, and from them originate the lords/masters of icons/idols. From these emanate the bodies and souls of the celestial and elemental beings. Therefore, if the elemental beings of the lowest rank exist, the masters of the idols that are situated above them, i.e., the Forms, must have come into existence before them.<sup>30</sup>

The existence of the Forms in this argument relies on the necessity of the hierarchy of emanation. To establish this necessity, or, in other words, to demonstrate the superior contingency principle, al-Suhrawardī presents the following argument: "If a contingent being of lower rank in the hierarchy has come into existence, the contingent being that is ranked higher must have come into existence before it. Thus, if the Light of Lights were to cause, through His aspect of unity, the dark barrier [i.e., the body] that is ranked lowest in the

<sup>28</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *al-Mashāriḥ*, 459-460.

<sup>29</sup> For further information on the theory, see Ghulām-Ḥusayn Ibrāhīmī Dīnānī, *Qawā'id-i Kullī-yi Falsafī dar Falsafa-i Islāmī* (Tehran: Pizhūhishgāh-i 'Ulūm-i Insānī wa-Muṭāla'āt-i Farhangī, 1381 HS [2001]), I, 33 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 143. See also Eyüp Bekiryazıcı, *Şibâbeddîn Sübreverdi'nin Felsefesinde Ontoloji Problemi [The Ontology Problem in the Philosophy of Şibâb al-Dīn al-Subrawardī]* (PhD dissertation; Erzurum: Atatürk University, 2005), 86.

hierarchy, there would remain no aspect to cause a being ranked higher. If that higher being were assumed to have come into existence, it would imply that an aspect higher than the Light of Lights caused it, which is impossible.”<sup>31</sup>

This aspect of al-Suhrawardī's argument appears to be flawed by circularity because the philosopher takes for granted that the aspect in the Light of Lights that causes light is higher than that which causes the body. This claim, however, has not yet been established and is not an obvious truth. In other words, the claim that light precedes the body in the hierarchy of emanation is being demonstrated by treating the same claim as an established truth.

Al-Suhrawardī begins his refutation of Ibn Sīnā's criticisms of the theory of Forms with an exposition of the theory. He first establishes that the exponents of the theory do not understand the Forms in the terms set forth by Ibn Sīnā. As mentioned above, Ibn Sīnā claimed that the second error underlying the rise of the theory of Forms originated in its proponents' misunderstanding of the concept of unity.<sup>32</sup> To counter this claim, al-Suhrawardī declares that the exponents of the theory, whom he praises with titles like “the great people” and “the people of power and insight,” do not claim that there is an immaterial intellect responsible for humanity, i.e., a lord of the human icon, that designates the universal form of humanity, as understood by the Peripatetics, and rests in many people. Rather, knowing that that which is numerically one cannot possibly exist in those that are numerically many, they clarify that the lord of the icon for human beings is immaterial and distinct/independent from the human particulars. In addition, al-Suhrawardī goes on to relate, the theory's proponents acknowledge that the universals are purely mental and have no concrete reality.<sup>33</sup>

The following question should then be posed: If the Ideas are the universal forms of the things, and if the Ancient philosophers admit the universals to be purely mental entities, does it not follow that the Peripatetic claim that there are no species forms except those resting in the sensible particulars is true and that the theory of Forms is therefore proved false? For al-Suhrawardī, no such result ensues because

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<sup>31</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 154.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Sīnā, *Kitābu ṣ-Ṣifā: Metafizik*, II, 60.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 158-160.

the words of the Ancient philosophers are metaphoric, which caused the Peripatetics to misunderstand what the Ancients meant by the term “universal.” In other words, the sense in which the Ancients used the term “universal” is different from the meaning the Peripatetics assign to it. For al-Suhrawardī, the “universal man” referred to in the statement, “A universal man resides in the world of intelligibles,” is, according to the Ancients, a dominating light having various and interacting rays, the human species in a world of corporeals. In this construction, the dominating light of humanity is universal, but not in the logical sense that it is predicated on many things. Instead, it is universal in the sense that it has equal relation to many particular humans by emanating onto all of them.<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, in contrast to logic’s treatment of the universal, the Ancients clarify that this universal has a specified essence and is cognizant of itself. To illustrate the distinction between the Peripatetic and Illuminative notions of the universal, al-Suhrawardī mentions the Ancients’ use of the terms “universal sphere” and “particular sphere,” noting that the universal sphere encompasses all other spheres, unlike the concept of the universal in logic.<sup>35</sup>

Though he identifies the Ancients’ metaphorical language as the primary reason for the Peripatetic misunderstanding of the theory of Forms, al-Suhrawardī mentions several other factors that contributed to this misconception. He claims that the subtleties of the theory have been obscured by linguistic factors, accretions to the theory, the transmitters, and the prejudices of the theory’s adversaries.<sup>36</sup>

After furnishing the correct exposition of the theory, correcting the misunderstandings of the Peripatetics, and throwing the reasons behind these misunderstandings into sharper contrast, al-Suhrawardī tasks himself with confuting Ibn Sīnā’s criticisms of the theory. As discussed above, Ibn Sīnā’s most relevant criticism is founded upon the identity and distinctness of the immaterial and sensible forms. Insofar as these two forms have different natures, the immaterial forms are established as non-existent on the grounds of the nature of the sensible forms. If they are assumed to have the same nature, the immaterial forms cannot exist for two reasons. First, the sensible

<sup>34</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 160-161; idem., *al-Mashbārī*, 463.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 160-161.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *al-Mashbārī*, 463-464.

forms are inseparably joined to matter. In this case, the immaterial forms of the same nature are also necessarily joined to matter and cannot be separated from it. This implies that there can be no such things as immaterial forms. Second, if the sensible forms are assumed to depend on and have the same nature as the immaterial forms, the latter in turn must depend on other forms, inducing a recess *ad infinitum*. Ibn Sīnā's criticism of the mathematical entities operates on the same logic. The philosopher infers that because in this world the greater numbers contain the lesser ones, the same is true of Ideal numbers. In brief, Ibn Sīnā's criticism of the theory of Forms depends on the notion that the relationship between the immaterial and sensible forms is either one of identity or one of distinctness.<sup>37</sup>

In response to this criticism, al-Suhrawardī holds that the species' lords/masters of icons/idols, that is, the Forms, are simple and immaterial, while the icons and idols, i.e., the particulars, might be compound and material; the image of a thing need not resemble the thing in all respects.<sup>38</sup> To corroborate this argument, he reiterates that the mental image of humanity is universal, whereas the concrete human being is particular; the universal of humanity is abstract, while the men in the external world are concrete; the universal of humanity is neither corporeal nor substantial, while the concrete man is corporeal and substantial. In short, there are many points of difference between the universal of humanity and the concrete man, but the Peripatetics still acknowledge the former to be the image of the latter. Thus, the notion that the Forms are the image of the sensible particulars, concludes al-Suhrawardī, does not imply that the two must be identical in all respects.<sup>39</sup>

Based on this argument, al-Suhrawardī considers the following argument invoked by the Peripatetics to invalidate the Platonic Forms. He claims that this argument is erroneous because it stems from an incorrect notion of the image of a thing as the same as the thing itself: If the sensible form is not self-subsistent, the immaterial form must

<sup>37</sup> See Dinānī, *Qawā'id-i Kullī-yi Falsafī*, I, 171.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 159; idem., *al-Mashāri'*, 461.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 159; idem., *al-Mashāri'*, 228-229. See also Yusuf Ziya Yörükan, *Şihabeddin Sübrevardî ve Nur Heykelleri [Şihāb al-Dīn al-Subrawardī and His Hayākil al-Nūr]* (translated from Old Turkish into Modern Turkish by Ahmet Kamil Cihan; Istanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 1998), 62.

also be not self-subsistent, and if the immaterial form is self-subsistent, the sensible form must also be self-subsistent. However, the sensible form is not self-subsistent. Therefore, the immaterial forms are likewise not self-subsistent. As a result, the existence of the immaterial forms as distinct from the particulars, i.e., the theory of Forms, is false.<sup>40</sup>

Al-Suhrawardī refutes this argument in the following manner: The Peripatetics say that a substantial entity rests in the mind as an accident. In other words, a thing has both a concrete existence and a mental existence. Thus, it is possible that there might be self-subsistent entities in the world of intelligibles, i.e., the Forms, corresponding to not self-subsistent icons/idols in this world. These icons/idols are effects of the Forms, but they do not have the same character as the Forms. This is the case with the forms of concrete things that rest in the mind but are not self-subsistent.<sup>41</sup>

Al-Suhrawardī argues that the term “form” applies to immaterial and material forms equivocally or by gradation. In other words, the form is predicated on the Ideas and the sensible forms in similar ways, but the Ideas deserve to be called “forms” in a more perfect sense because they are of substantial and immaterial nature. The sensible forms are called “forms” in a less perfect sense because they are neither substance nor immaterial.

To support his argument, al-Suhrawardī mentions the Peripatetic use of the term “existence.”<sup>42</sup> He states that although they employ the term existence to refer to both the Necessary Existent and contingent beings, the Peripatetics hold existence to imply Him Himself when employed in association with Him but to designate an accident attached to the contingent beings when used in relation with them. If the Necessary Existent is held to be free from quiddity as distinct from His existence, that is to say, He is necessary solely because He is existent, all other beings, too, shall be free from quiddity because they

<sup>40</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-ishrāq*, 92; *al-Mashbārī*’, 464.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-ishrāq*, 92-99. See also Yörükün, “Şeyh Suhreverdi’nin Felsefesi [The Philosophy of al-Shaykh al-Suhrawardī],” (translated from Old Turkish to Modern Turkish by Mustafa Bulut), *Hikmet Yurdu: Düşünce Yorum Sosyal Bilimler Araştırma Dergisi* [*Hikmet Yurdu: A Research Journal on Thought, Interpretation, Social Sciences*] III/5 (January-June 2010), 426 ff.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Kitāb al-talwīḫāt*, 13.

are also existent. However, if He is necessary through an accident, this first implies Him to be compound, which is impossible. Secondly, we must ask if the Necessary Existent possesses that accident by Himself or through another. In the first case, He would only possess it by existing. Thus, other beings could also have the same accident and thereby become necessary. In the second case, He would be necessary by means of a cause, an obviously false result. However, it is impossible for the Necessary Existent to be necessary on the grounds that He is uncaused; He is uncaused because He is necessary, not necessary because He is uncaused. Thus, His necessity cannot be established by negating His causedness.<sup>43</sup>

As has been demonstrated, al-Suhrawardī aims Ibn Sīnā's own weapon at Ibn Sīnā himself, anticipating the following response from his adversary to deal the final deadly blow: "The necessity of the Necessary Existent is the perfection and intensity of His existence. Just as one thing is blacker than another through the perfection in its essential blackness and not through something superadded to blackness, the existence of the Necessary Existence is distinguished from the existence of the contingents through its intensity and perfection." Upon receiving the expected response, al-Suhrawardī concludes, "Just as the Necessary Existent is made necessary by His Essence as other beings are made contingent by their essences, the Ideas, by the same token, are made immaterial and substantial by their essences, while the sensible forms are made material and dependent on the substantial."<sup>44</sup>

Al-Suhrawardī directs another criticism at the Peripatetics from the same perspective: Ibn Sīnā argues that the motions of the celestial spheres are not caused by such motives as wrath and passion, but by their desire to resemble their separate intellects, their principles of emanation.<sup>45</sup> With this argument, claims al-Suhrawardī, the

<sup>43</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 93-94. For the equivocal application of the term "existence" to the Necessary Existent and the contingent beings, see al-Suhrawardī, *al-Mashārīf*, 223. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Mufasssīr-i 'Ālam-i Ghurbat wa-Shahīd-i Ṭarīq-i Ma'rifat," in Ḥasan Sayyid 'Arab (ed.), *Muntakhabī az Maqālāt-i Fārsī dar bāra-yi Shaykh-i Isbrāq Subrawardī* (Tehran: Shafī'ī, 1378 HS [2000]), 140-141.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 94.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn Sīnā, *İşaretler ve Tembiller [=al-İsbārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt]* (translated into Turkish by Ali Durusoy, Muhittin Macit, and Ekrem Demirli; Istanbul: Litera Ya-

Peripatetics admit the reality of the theory of Forms. Saying that the motions of the celestial spheres resemble those of their intellects is the same as saying that the beings in the world of corporeals resemble their Forms. The Peripatetics, however, reject the latter while they accept the former, which is a clear contradiction.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

Though al-Suhrawardī regards himself as a philosopher and his endeavor as philosophical, neither his understanding of the philosopher's task nor his conception of philosophy fully overlap with common perceptions of philosophers and philosophy. He treats philosophy as speculative and intuitive. He is not engaging in philosophy that depends on and attaches importance only to rational reasoning but in philosophy that, though it also attaches importance to the rational enterprise, draws primarily on mystical experience and vision. He therefore classifies philosophers into three essential categories: the philosophers who are well versed in both speculative and intuitive philosophy, those who are well versed in intuitive philosophy alone, and those who are well versed in speculative philosophy alone.<sup>47</sup> He seems to situate Plato and himself in the first group, the verified Sufis in the second, and Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā in the third.<sup>48</sup>

What underlies this categorization which clearly works against the speculative philosophers is al-Suhrawardī's conviction that speculation and rational reasoning alone cannot yield knowledge of the truth but must be accompanied by and substantiated with intuition, i.e., mystical experience. He maintains that one can separate himself from his body by weakening his bodily aspects and strengthening his spiritual aspects through a long and painful process of purgative and spiritual exercises. This can enable one to glimpse and eventually see a full vision of the metaphysical world, a feat achieved by the "divine philosophers (*muta'allib*),"<sup>49</sup> "the detached ones (*mujarrad*)," and

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yıncılık, 2005), 146-147; idem., *al-Najāt fī l-mantiq wa-l-ilābiyyāt* (edited by 'Abd al-Rahmān 'Umāyra; Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1992), II, 120.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-isbrāq*, 176-177.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>48</sup> Mahmut Kaya, "İşrâkiyye [İshrâqiyya]," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* [*Turkish Religious Foundation Encyclopedia of Islam*], XXIII, 435.

<sup>49</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-isbrāq*, 12; idem., *al-Mashārī'*, 503.

“the people of spiritual vision (*ahl al-mushābada*).”<sup>50</sup> He claims that Hermes, Plato, Zarathustra, and King Kaykhosrow experienced this vision,<sup>51</sup> that he himself relinquished Peripatetic philosophy as a result of a similar experience,<sup>52</sup> and that the *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq* is the fruit of such an experience.<sup>53</sup>

However, the following question arises at this point: From what epistemological perspective does al-Suhrawardī find the Peripatetic philosophy inadequate and criticize it? Furthermore, as a result of this criticism, how does he transform the Peripatetic philosophy into an instrument supporting the Illuminative philosophy? Briefly, the positive knowledge of metaphysical truths, which could be understood to be that of the world of lights or the Forms, al-Suhrawardī argues, can be acquired only through mystical experience and spiritual vision, not through speculative reasoning. Nevertheless, he cannot prove by means of mystical vision to one with no mystical vision, for instance, a Peripatetic, that reason is inadequate and its conclusions are mistaken in the metaphysical realm – a logical rule that al-Suhrawardī himself also acknowledges.<sup>54</sup> He, however, seems to believe that he can effectively demonstrate to the Peripatetics that they cannot deny the existence of the Forms without falling into clear self-contradiction.

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<sup>50</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 155. See also Yörükân, *Şibâbeddin Sübreverdî ve Nur Heykelleri*, 55-56, 58, 68 ff.

<sup>51</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 156; idem., *Kitâb al-talwîḫât*, 112-113.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq*, 156.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

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