

Suhrawardī and the Problem of Universals

By Justin Cancelliere

I have heard that if one boards Noah's ark and grasps Moses's staff, he will be delivered.

Risālib-yi šafīr-i sīmurǧb ("Song of the Griffin")

When we notice that things share certain properties while differing in other respects, what is the nature—or, more specifically, the ontological status—of that shared property? When, for example, we notice that the various people we encounter all are human beings, what, we might ask, is the nature and status of the human being as such, over against the identity of this or that individual person? This question, which has come down to us as the “problem of universals,” indeed lies at the heart of philosophy itself, for how one answers it is arguably determinative of whether philosophy, for those who would pursue it, proves to be love of wisdom or something else entirely.

The present essay began as a broad-based review of the scholarly literature on Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl (d. 587/1191), whose writings have, as is unanimously agreed, played a decisive role in the development of philosophy in the Islamic world.¹ Given, however, the exceptional vastness and depth of both the learning and thought of this sage, it became apparent that discussion could fruitfully be restricted to

¹ Suhrawardī's status as a properly epochal figure in the history of Islamic philosophy can be attributed to his being the first major Muslim thinker to attempt a comprehensive rapprochement between discursive philosophy, which had reached something of an apogee with Avicenna, and the supra-rational “tasting” (*dhawq*) characteristic of the Sufi approach to the attainment of true knowledge. For the seminal English-language introduction to the life and thought of Suhrawardī, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1976).

those of his teachings most relevant to the set of philosophical issues commonly referred to under the heading introduced above—that of the problem of universals—with an eye toward elucidating, on a more fundamental level, his views regarding the relationship between discursivity and gnosis,² and this for the simple reason that a subject so central to the strivings of this eminent author as yet awaits adequate treatment in the English-language scholarship.

If these two themes are bound up intimately with one another in the writings of Shaykh al-Ishrāq, or the “master of illumination,” as he came to be known, it is due to a doctrine of universals whose philosophical function it is to bridge the gap between the twin modes of knowing in question. For Suhrawardī, such a “traversal” is made possible—at least on the preliminary, theoretical level³—by the multivalence of the universal, which can signify three basic types of things, namely terms, concepts, and realities. For example, the universal term “man” is a word that refers to a concept in the mind, and the concept in turn refers “upward and back” to a transcendent reality whose immutability both guarantees the stability of the concept’s meaning and safeguards the boundaries of the species in the midst of its individual members’ multiplicity.⁴ In other words, Suhrawardī is a Platonist, and if the transition from mere concept to “transcendent reality” seems jarring, you have already sensed something of the distaste experienced by countless befuddled students of philosophy when confronted with the decidedly esoteric and even intellectually scandalous theory of Platonic Forms marking the emergence of the problem of universals into Western consciousness.

Regarding the controversy stirred up by the momentous teachings of

² By discursivity I mean the reasoning faculty of the mind, or reflective thought, and by gnosis I mean the direct or unmediated knowledge of God (minimally) and/or divine realities (maximally).

³ The idea of “preliminaries” here pertains to the doctrine/method, or “theoretical/operative,” binary.

⁴ One might notice here the implications of this doctrine for the notion of “macroevolution,” for which no such boundaries exist in any genuinely non-provisional—or “non-epiphenomenal,” one might say—way.

“the divine Plato,”⁵ it begins with his own illustrious student Aristotle, who famously—albeit perhaps only *prima facie*⁶—disputed his master’s cardinal doctrine in his *Metaphysics*. The crux of the matter for Aristotle was the difficulty posed by the “third man” argument, which called into question the explanatory power of the Form based on the purported need for yet another Form to ground the relation between the first Form and its image.⁷ To use the example after which the argument is named, if the “man-ness” of a particular man is explained by his participation in the Form of Man, then a “third man” will be required to explain what the particular man and the Form of Man have in common. Without going into unnecessary detail, the important point is that this seeming flaw in Plato’s theory prompted his successors to refine their thinking on universals with the result that the “naive” realism just outlined—whether rightfully attributable to Plato or not—was supplanted by the “moderate” realism of Aristotle, which in its turn was eventually subsumed into the remarkably sophisticated synthesis of the Neoplatonists.

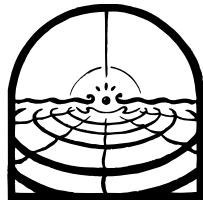
With this historical background in place, but before proceeding to our discussion of the literature, it will be helpful to outline the various positions on the problem of universals that took shape in Western discourses on the subject, since the relevant technical terminology is employed by the scholars whose works we will be examining. Realism in this context, then, refers to the idea that both universal terms and the concepts they denote are rooted in “realities” that subsist extra-mentally, or independently of human cogitation. Conceptualism refers to the position claiming that the terms refer to objective or non-arbitrary

⁵ Suhrawardī refers to Plato by this honorific, as did many other Muslim philosophers, who considered him one of the “five pillars of *ḥikmah*” (*asāḥīn al-ḥikmah al-kbamsab*) along with Empedocles, Pythagoras, Socrates, and Aristotle. See Hikmet Yaman, *Prophetic Niche in the Virtuous City: The Concept of Ḥikmah in Early Islamic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 5; John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardī and the Heritage of the Greeks* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 83.

⁶ For a forceful and sustained defense of the Neoplatonic “harmonist” position concerning the relationship between the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, see Lloyd P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁷ As Gerson points out, it was Plato himself who introduced this argument in the *Parmenides*, and as he further observes, “There is one passage ... in which Aristotle says that it is ‘they’ (i.e., Platonists) who introduce the third man. Aristotle cannot but have been aware that third-man arguments were used in the Academy to separate inadequate from adequate understandings of Forms. It was natural for Neoplatonists to assume that Aristotle’s own views were in harmony with the latter and not the former” (*ibid.*, 228).

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