

Nature and Gnosis: The Tawhidic Theosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

By Jerome Klotz

Introduction

This is a study in the work of the great Persian-born polymath and foremost living representative of the “Perennialist School”, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b.1933). Despite his prolific authorship spanning over five decades and his near universal renown in both the popular and academic worlds, the depth of Nasr’s contribution to contemporary philosophy remains largely unacknowledged, having only begun to receive the sort of critical attention it deserves. In this study I therefore aim to provoke a deeper interest in as well as a more profound understanding of Nasr’s work by homing in on the unitive or “tawhidic” (from *tawhīd*, meaning “unification” or “oneness”) dimension of his thought. It is my argument that Nasr’s metaphysical corpus succeeds in articulating a creative synthesis wherein nature and gnosis, cosmology and gnoseology, are not divorced from one another, as the prevailing paradigms of modernity have assumed, but integrated harmoniously through a noetic apprehension of the Absolute. One of the main contentions of Nasr’s philosophy is that man, far from imposing his own mental categories upon a world merely external to himself,¹ attains true gnosis (Arabic: *ma‘rifah*; Persian: *irfān*) of nature by means of an illuminative sapience innate to the soul, conveyed and actualized by the symbols (*rumūz*) of revelation, and ultimately continuous with the supernal light (*nūr*) of Divine Wisdom. To put what I take to be the principle claim of Nasr’s philosophy in the form of a concise statement: *the substance of nature can only be known in light of Divine Wisdom, and that, because the light of Divine Wisdom is the substance of nature and indeed of all knowledge.*

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: SUNY, 1989; hereafter cited as KS), 131.

It is precisely in this way that the philosophy of Nasr, like that of Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240) or Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (better known as Mullā Ṣadrā, ca. 1571/72-1640), cannot really be called a “philosophy” at all—or at least not in the truncated sense with which that term has come to be employed today. For whereas the principles of modern philosophy are those almost exclusively “derived from discursive thought alone”, the principles of Nasr’s philosophy (here taken in its etymological sense as the “love of wisdom”, *philosophía*) stem “from the fruit of a vision of the divine order.”² Hence my designation of Nasr’s thought as a “tawhidic theosophy” which seeks to locate (1) the twofold “root” of gnosis in revelation and intellection, (2) the twofold “fruit” of gnosis in the Absolute Oneness of Reality and, only by extension, the pure relativity of created existence, and (3) the twofold “taste” of gnosis in the “presential knowledge” (*al’ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*)³ of the cosmos as theophany and beatitude, that is, as both the manifestation and the consummative vow of the Sacred: all things having emanated from the Supreme Reality as the promised return of themselves to It.⁴ On this view, nature is never simply “natural”, nor is it ever reducible to any one horizontal plane of the vast hierarchy of its manifold gradations, but is rather imbued from “above” with ascending strata of significance, each thing vertically linked to every other, such that not a single existent—be it angelic, human, animal, vegetable, or mineral—is without its own hallowed sense and meaning. “In essence,” writes Nasr, “...everything is sacred and nothing profane because everything bears within itself the fragrance of the Divine.”⁵

Such a proposal bears significant consequences for our contemporary setting. The various crises afflicting the world today, ranging from the philosophical and religious to the ecological and economic, all attest to

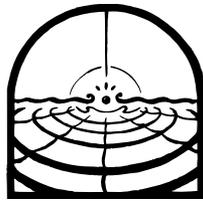
² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sadr al-Din Shirazi and his Transcendent Theosophy: Background, Life and Works* (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997; hereafter cited as STT), 57.

³ See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (New York: SUNY, 2006; hereafter cited as IPOP), 76-77.

⁴ As Nasr puts it in his poem, “Occidental Exile”: “It is from *that* world that we are exiled, / It is *that* world from which we all hail / And to *that* world to which we must return, / Return after our earthly journey’s end.” See *Poems of the Way* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1999; hereafter cited as PW), 23.

⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Chicago: Kazi, 2001; hereafter cited as IIT), 7.

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