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Suhrawardī's Epistemology of Sense Perception: Direct or Indirect Realism?

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Abstract

Sense perception is a specific type of perception that arises from the mind's encounter with the tangible world through the activation of one of the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell). Through this process, a person discovers the surrounding world and acquires a significant portion of their awareness. Sense perception is considered one of the important sources of human knowledge. Realistic theories of sense perception are categorized into two main types: "direct realism" and "indirect realism". According to direct realism, individuals can directly identify the entirety or, at the very least, some qualities of physical objects around them without the involvement of a mental medium. In contrast, indirect realism posits the existence of a mental medium, referred to as a "sense-datum", as the immediate object of knowledge. The majority of Islamic philosophers adhere to indirect realism, with Sheikh Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī being a notable proponent of direct realism. Presently, most contemporary Western epistemologists lend support to direct realism. Suhrawardī's perspective initially appears ambiguous, as some of his works suggest an inclination towards mental mediation, while others indicate a belief in direct realism. This article aims to delve into Suhrawardī's viewpoint and establish that his definitive stance aligns with direct realism.

Keywords: Sense Perception, Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī, Direct Realism Theory, Indirect Realism Theory.

Introduction

Epistemological theories concerning sense perception are broadly categorized into two main groups: direct realism and sense-datum theories. In the latter, the direct object of awareness is not the physical object itself but a mental and non-physical entity known as a sense-datum. Conversely, in direct realism, the subject becomes aware of the entirety, or at least some qualities, of physical objects directly and without the involvement of any mental intermediaries.

Sense-datum theories further branch into two categories: indirect realism and phenomenism. Indirect realism proposes that the mental entity acts as a medium between the mind and the external world, facilitating awareness of the external world. Phenomenism, on the other hand, represents a form of

antirealism, where adherents cast doubt upon or outright deny the existence of a physical world beyond sense data.

While the majority of Islamic philosophers align with indirect realism, Sheikh Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrawardī, whose life spanned fewer than forty years in the middle of the twelfth century A.D., appears to be a proponent of direct realism—a notable exception. This study seeks to examine the validity of this characterization. To achieve this, it first explores the nature of sense perception and then delves into Suhrawardī's stance on mental intermediaries.

It is essential to note that although the title of this study encompasses all types of sense perceptions, encompassing awareness through the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste), Suhrawardī, in works like *Philosophy of*

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Illumination (Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq), predominantly emphasizes the sense of sight. This emphasis may arise from the belief that the nature of sense perception across all senses is uniform.

The Nature of Sense Perception in Suhrawardī's View

In Suhrawardī's epistemological framework, sense perception—especially vision—has a central place in elucidating the connection between the immaterial soul and the material world. Suhrawardī addresses the mechanisms and metaphysics of perception not merely as a physiological process but as a particular mode of relation, rooted in his illuminationist ontology. The following section delves into Suhrawardī's account of the sense of sight, its philosophical underpinnings, and its distinct place within Islamic philosophical discourse.

The Nature of Sight

Shaykh al-Ishrāq discusses the principle of vision (the doctrine of *ibṣār*) in several sections of *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, examining and gradually refining it in detail. Subsequently, he explicates the knowledge of *Nūr al-Anwār*, the knowledge of all immaterial lights, and the perception related to both the external and internal senses of the human being based on the theory of *ibṣār*. In the natural philosophy sections of *al-Mashāri' wa al-Muṭārahāt* as well, he extensively examines various opinions concerning the reality of vision, refutes them, and then refers the exposition of the secret of sight back to *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* (Maftouni, 2013, p. 135).

In his seminal work, *Philosophy of Illumination (Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq)*, Suhrawardī elucidates the nature of sight, asserting, "Certainly, sight is accomplished by the absence of the veil between the observer and the visible object" (Suhrawardī, 2001, p.150). According to Suhrawardī, sight constitutes an illuminationist relation (*al-idāfa al-ishrāqiyya*) forged between the eye and the physical object, contingent upon the absence of any intervening veil. The alignment of the observer and the physical object engenders sight, enabling the visual perception of concrete visible entities.

Suhrawardī grounds his conception of sight as an illuminationist relation (*al-idāfa al-ishrāqiyya*) in his broader perspective on the soul. He posits that the human soul is incorporeal and emanates from divine light (*al-nūr al-ilāhī*) (Suhrawardī, 2009, p. 54), affirming, "Human soul is of heaven" (Suhrawardī, 2009, p. 86). This heavenly origin endows the human soul with attributes akin to the divine essence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhī*), as it is a symbol of divine lights (*al-anwār al-ilāhī*).

According to Suhrawardī, divine knowledge is characterized as an "illuminationist relation" (*al-idāfa al-ishrāqiyya*), wherein all creatures are present before the essence of the "Light of Lights" (*Nūr al-Anwār*), resulting in divine awareness. In a parallel fashion, human souls perceive concrete physical objects through this illuminationist relation, achieved by the convergence of the five senses and the physical objects, provided there is no intervening veil.

To delve deeper into the concept of "illuminationist relation," it is crucial to understand the two types of "relations" (*izāfa*) posited by Islamic philosophers:

illuminationist relation (*al-idāfa al-ishrāqiyya*)

categorical relation (*al-idāfa al-maqūliyya*)

While categorical relation (*al-idāfa al-maqūliyya*) exists between two distinct entities, illuminationist relation (*al-idāfa al-ishrāqiyya*), as defined by Suhrawardī, involves only one side, with the relation being inherent to that side. Suhrawardī

employs this concept to characterize knowledge (*'ilm*) as a matter of relation (Rāzī, 1991, p. 331).

In Suhrawardī's writings, the human soul, under appropriate perceptual conditions, directly relates to physical objects. This singular relation constitutes the knowledge and perception of the physical object, without the need for a third intermediary object between the soul and the perceived entity. According to Suhrawardī, mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) does not serve as a medium for perceiving external entities; rather, the soul perceives objects directly.

The Necessary Conditions of Sight

While the human soul serves as the entity perceiving concrete objects, Suhrawardī outlines specific conditions necessary for perception, stating, "Vision is nothing but the facing of a bright object with healthy eyes" (Suhrawardī, 2001, p. 134). According to Suhrawardī, the essential conditions for sight include:

1. The existence of light,
2. The presence of some distance between the observer and the visible object,
3. The alignment of the observer and the visible object, and
4. Eye health.

Suhrawardī emphasizes the importance of light for sight, noting that, in relation to the light of the air, two additional lights are required: the observer's light (*Nūr rā'ī*) and the observed light (*Nūr mar'ī*) (Suhrawardī, 2001, p. 150). He distinguishes between the dual functions of human eyes: seeing and emitting light, asserting that emitting light is distinct from the act of seeing (Suhrawardī, 2001, p. 135).

Regarding the distance between the observer and the observed object, Suhrawardī observes that excessive distance or proximity can impede vision, acting as veils (Suhrawardī, 2001, p. 134). These conditions, including the absence of veils, are crucial for unobstructed sight.

Possibly, all these conditions can be distilled into one requirement: In sight, no veil must be present between the observer and the observed object. Suhrawardī identifies specific veils such as the absence of light, insufficient distance, lack of facing, and eye health issues, each acting as an obstacle to sight.

Illuminationist Causality ('*al-Ilīah al-Ishrāqiyya*)

Suhrawardī rejects two prevalent philosophical views on sight, dismissing both the "emission theory" and the "intromission theory" (Suhrawardī, 2001, p. 150). The former posits that visual perception occurs through emitted rays of light from the eyes, while the latter suggests that perception results from something representative of the object entering the eyes.

In presenting his alternative perspective named Illumination (*Ishrāq*), Suhrawardī rejects these theories and advocates for a third stance. He anchors vision in Illumination and seeks to understand why Illumination is crucial for the perception of concrete objects within the human soul.

As the founder of Illuminationist Philosophy, Suhrawardī grounds his views in intuition (*kashf wa shuhūd*). Unlike peripatetic philosophers who believed in the perception of truth through reasoning, Suhrawardī asserts that truth can be grasped through intuition. In illumination and intuition, visible objects are present before souls, necessitating a relation akin to the "Illuminationist relation" (*al-idāfa al-ishrāqiyya*) between the human soul and the concrete object.

In Illuminationist relation and knowledge by presence (*al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī*), there is no intermediary between the perceiver and the perceived object. Instead, the object is directly present before the subject. This perspective aligns with intuition and illumination, rejecting the need for a light beam from the eyes or the formation of an image in the soul for visual perception. Suhrawardī contends that these aspects are inconsistent with the principles of intuition and illumination.

Mental Existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) in Suhrawardī's Works

In Suhrawardī's writings, the term "mental existence" (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) is explicitly mentioned. In the book *The Garden of Hearts* (*Bustān al-Qulūb/ Rawḍāt al-Qulūb*¹), he asserts, "if you want to perceive something, its image should be formed in your mind; for example, if you want to perceive the sky, the image of the sky ought to be formed in your mind" (Suhrawardī, 1993a, p. 336). Similarly, in the book *Shapes of Light* (*Ḥayākil al-Nūr*), he states, "if you obtain knowledge of something that you did not have before, your knowledge would be in a way that the image of that thing appears in your mind and should be the same as or similar to it" (Suhrawardī, 1993b, p. 86). In his work *Ways and Conversations* (*Kitāb al-mashārī' wa al-moṭārahāt*), Suhrawardī underscores the significance of mental existence and labels those who deny it as ignorant.

Suhrawardī's Arguments for "Mental Existence"

Argument 1: The rationally impossible, or non-existent, things—such as a square circle, or the existence of contradictory states simultaneously—have intelligible meanings. That is, these concepts can be meaningfully referred to and discussed within discourse, and they possess certain defining characteristics that make them distinguishable from one another. The mere fact that we can conceive of and assign meaning to such notions implies that they enjoy a type of reality, albeit non-external. Suhrawardī contends that since these entities do not exist objectively in the external world, their reality must be located within the domain of the mind (*al-dhihn*). In other words, even though rational impossibilities lack extramental existence, their intelligibility and conceptual content necessitate a form of being—specifically, being in the mind as objects of conception or mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*). This view enables Suhrawardī to account for how one can think, discuss, and even analyze non-existent or impossible objects without committing to their existence outside the mind, thereby safeguarding the distinction between external (*al-wujūd al-khārijī*) and mental existence.

Argument 2: Attributing concepts, predicates, or statements to rationally impossible things—for example, the claim "rationally impossible things are impossible"—presupposes, at some level, the presence of a subject to which these descriptions can be ascribed. The very act of making meaningful judgments about non-existent or impossible entities (such as asserting their impossibility) indicates that these entities must possess some kind of ontological status that allows us to refer to them and subject them to predication. Since, from Suhrawardī's illuminationist perspective, these rationally impossible things lack external or actual existence (*al-wujūd al-khārijī*), the only plausible domain in which such

subjects can subsist is the mental realm (*al-dhihn*). Thus, Suhrawardī maintains that the mind serves as the ontological "locus" for these objects: it is only within the mind that impossible entities can be conceptualized, referenced, and attributed with qualities such as impossibility. In this way, the act of predicating properties of such things itself demonstrates the necessity of their mental existence, even while affirming their external non-existence.

Argument 3: Suhrawardī differentiates mental existence from external existence (*wujūd khārijī*) (Suhrawardī, 2001, p. 71), suggesting that entities in the mind possess identity and unique features, including being impressed in the mind, being pointable, and being indivisible.

Negating concepts from rationally impossible things, as in the statement, "rationally impossible things do not have any reality in the external world," also requires a domain in which these things are posited as subjects of such negation. In other words, for us to meaningfully deny the external reality of these impossible entities, they must, in some sense, be acknowledged as "existing" somewhere; otherwise, the very act of predication or negation would be unintelligible. Suhrawardī addresses this by positing the mind (*al-dhihn*) as the locus wherein such entities are given a form of non-external existence. He draws a clear distinction between mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) and external existence (*wujūd khārijī*) (Suhrawardī, 2001, p. 71). According to Suhrawardī, things that exist in the mind enjoy their own unique identity and features: they are impressed (or instantiated) in the mind, can be pointed to or indicated as mental objects, and are indivisible in a way specific to mental existence. This distinction underlines the unique ontological status of mental entities, making it possible for us to refer to and predicate features of even impossible things, while maintaining their non-existence in the extramental world.

Suhrawardī's View on Sense Perception

Suhrawardī's conception of sense perception is marked by a notable degree of ambiguity and apparent contradiction across his oeuvre. At first glance, Suhrawardī appears to vacillate between two distinct models: a theory positing mental mediation and another advocating a form of direct realism. This ambivalence is especially pronounced when contrasting passages from his principal works. In his foundational text, *Philosophy of Illumination* (*Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*), Suhrawardī asserts an unmediated, direct mode of visual perception. He famously maintains: "Sight is accomplished by an illuminationist relation (*al-iḍāfa al-ishrāqiyya*) provided that there is no veil between the observer and the visible object" (Suhrawardī, 2001, p. 153). This illuminationist relation, in Suhrawardī's technical vocabulary, denotes an ontologically immediate encounter between the soul and the object, unencumbered by any mediating entity or representational content within the mind. In a similar vein, he explicitly states that "vision is the facing of the eyes with concrete things" (Suhrawardī, 2001, p. 134). These passages strongly support an interpretation of Suhrawardī as a proponent of direct, non-representational perception, at least as far as the phenomenon of sight is concerned. However, a systematic reading of his corpus reveals statements that point in a different direction and suggest a more complex underlying theory.

¹It should be noted, however, that the attribution of this work

to Suhrawardī is rather tenuous.

Notably, in *The Garden of Hearts (Bustān al-Qulūb)*—also known as *Rawḍāt al-Qulūb*—Suhrawardī adopts language indicating a mediating cognitive element. He remarks: “If you want to perceive something, its image should be formed in your mind. For example, if you want to perceive the sky, the image of the sky ought to be formed in your mind”. This insistence on the formation of a mental image as a prerequisite for perception implies the necessity of a realm of mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) wherein perceptual content is impressed before genuine awareness occurs. A similar account is articulated in *The Shapes of Light (Ḥayākil al-Nūr)*, where Suhrawardī explains: “If you obtain knowledge of something that you did not have before, your knowledge would be in a way that the image of that thing appears in your mind, and it should be the same as or similar to it”. This passage underscores the epistemic significance of mental images and the function of mental existence in the acquisition of knowledge, including perceptual knowledge. These disparate assertions have given rise to ongoing scholarly debate regarding the proper interpretation of Suhrawardī’s account of sense perception. Some commentators read the juxtaposition of direct and mediated models as evidence of theoretical development across different stages of his thought, while others attempt to harmonize these claims within a single, nuanced framework. What is clear, however, is that Suhrawardī’s philosophy of perception cannot be straightforwardly reduced to either a strict direct realism or an unequivocal endorsement of mental mediation. Instead, his thought demands careful exegetical attention to the layered context of his writings and the broader illuminationist metaphysics within which his views were formulated. This complexity invites further investigation, particularly as to how Suhrawardī negotiates the relation between external reality, mental images, and the knowing soul in the act of perception.

Different Probabilities in Suhrawardī’s View on Mental Mediation

As mentioned, Suhrawardī presents two perspectives on sense perception in his works. Six possibilities can be considered to reconcile these perspectives.

First Probability (Indirect Perception)

According to the first interpretive possibility, Suhrawardī fully endorses the theory of indirect perception, arguing for the essential role of mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) in the process of perceiving external sensations. On this account, even when Suhrawardī appears to speak of direct perceptual contact—in works such as *Philosophy of Illumination (Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq)*, where he attributes perception to the conjunction of an external object and the immaterial soul—these statements should be understood within an overarching framework that prioritizes indirect perception. Here, sense data from the external world require mediation via mental forms or representations to become accessible to the soul. *Philosophy of Illumination* is thus read as primarily aiming to articulate the principles underlying perception and sensation, rather than advocating for immediate access to external realities. Moreover, Suhrawardī’s other works, including *The Shapes of Light (Ḥayākil al-Nūr)* and *The Garden of Hearts (Bustān al-Qulūb)*, delve further into the nature and mechanisms of sense perception, reinforcing the necessity of mental existence as a prerequisite for perceptual awareness. On this reading, all perception is ultimately mediated and indirect, grounded in the

reality of mental existence.

Second Probability (Direct Perception)

In the second interpretive framework, Suhrawardī is seen as an unequivocal proponent of direct perception, explicitly denying the mediating role of mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) within the process of sensory awareness. Drawing primarily on his major work, *Philosophy of Illumination (Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq)*, scholars defending this position emphasize Suhrawardī’s frequent assertions that human souls perceive external objects directly, without the interposition of mental forms or intermediaries. Although Suhrawardī elsewhere may allude to elements of indirect perception or the existence of mental representations, these are regarded as secondary to his central, illuminationist doctrine that posits an immediate, unmediated encounter between the immaterial soul and external reality. Thus, within this probability, Suhrawardī is interpreted as advocating for a kind of perceptual realism, in which the soul’s apprehension of the external world occurs directly and is only minimally, if at all, reliant on mediating mental content.

Third Probability (Developmental or Conflicting Views)

The third interpretive possibility posits that Suhrawardī’s views on sense perception are not monolithic but rather exhibit development or even internal conflict. According to this reading, Suhrawardī initially adheres to a position that emphasizes the mediation of mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*), aligning with the theory of indirect perception in his earlier works or formulations. However, as his thought matures, he transitions toward a more pronounced endorsement of direct perception, ultimately rejecting the necessity of mental existence as an intermediary in the perceptual process. This developmental view suggests that the apparent contradictions in Suhrawardī’s writings are reflective of a philosophical evolution rather than a unified, static doctrine. Thus, the coexistence of both indirect and direct accounts of perception in his oeuvre can be best understood as evidence of a shift or transformation in his epistemological stance over time.

Fourth Probability (Contextual Differentiation)

The fourth perspective holds that Suhrawardī’s treatment of mental existence is context-sensitive and discriminating. According to this view, he assigns a positive role to mental existence specifically in relation to imperceptible and non-existent matters—such as rational impossibilities and entities lacking external instantiation—while denying its relevance and necessity in cases involving actual, external entities (*al-umūr al-khārijīyya*). This nuanced approach is particularly supported by Suhrawardī’s work *Ways and Conversations (Mashārī’ wa Mutārahāt)*, wherein he delineates three arguments in favor of mental existence as it pertains to what cannot be directly perceived or what is ontologically absent. In this schema, Suhrawardī acknowledges the legitimacy and necessity of mental existence for imperceptible and non-existent objects, yet rejects mediation by mental existence for perception of external, existential realities, thereby providing a sophisticated differentiation that accounts for the divergent roles of mental existence in differing epistemic contexts.

Fifth Probability (Mental Existence as a Subsequent Cognitive Stage)

A fifth interpretive possibility posits that Suhrawardī situates

mental existence not as a precondition for, but as a consequence of, direct perceptual acquaintance by the soul. According to this view, the act of perception commences with the human soul's immediate and unmediated apprehension of external objects; it is solely after this primary act of direct perception that distinct scientific or propositional knowledge is established for the soul. In this schema, mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) emerges in a subsequent cognitive phase: once the soul has directly perceived an object, a corresponding mental form is actualized in the intellect as "knowledge" (*'ilm*), which then serves as the subject of further reflection, reasoning, and recall. Thus, Suhrawardī may be interpreted as assigning mental existence an auxiliary, derivative status—necessary for cognitive continuity, memory, and science, but not for the immediate perceptual act itself.

Sixth Probability (Differentiated Mediation: Sense versus Imaginative Perception)

The sixth probability holds that Suhrawardī systematically distinguishes among different classes of perception, most notably, sense perception (*al-idrāk al-ḥissī*) and imaginative perception (*al-idrāk al-khayālī*). In this interpretive model, Suhrawardī unequivocally denies the mediation of mental existence in the case of sense perception: the soul's cognizance of external objects through the senses is direct and unmediated by any mental form. However, with regard to imaginative perception—where the mind retrieves or constructs images of objects in their absence—mental existence is admitted as an essential intermediary. Here, the formation of a mental image or concept in the faculty of imagination enables the soul to recall, contemplate, or manipulate the object independent of its current external presence. Accordingly, in Suhrawardī's thought, while sense perception is characterized by immediate and non-mediated contact with the external, mental existence becomes operational in post-perceptual acts, especially imagination and memory, serving as the cognitive substrate that sustains the object for the soul's referential or deliberative use.

Assessing the Six Probabilities: A Critical Inquiry

A systematic evaluation of the six interpretive probabilities concerning Suhrawardī's doctrine of sense perception and mental existence reveals several substantive weaknesses in the latter three scenarios, while also clarifying the grounds for the plausibility of the third probability.

Weaknesses of the Fourth Probability

The fourth probability posits that Suhrawardī limits the relevance of mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*) to cases involving imperceptible or non-existent objects, denying its necessity in relation to actual, external entities. On close analysis, this reading is difficult to sustain for several interrelated reasons: 1) Nature and Function of Suhrawardī's Arguments: Suhrawardī indeed frames his three primary arguments for mental existence around concepts such as extinct, impossible, or non-existent things. However, such arguments are not intended to restrict the scope of mental existence to these cases alone. Instead, they serve a foundational function—demonstrating that for any object, whether non-existent or existent, to be meaningfully conceived, a distinct ontological status within the mind must be posited; 2) Philosophical Context in the Islamic Tradition: It is methodologically unsound to attribute to Suhrawardī a

view that isolates mental existence as exclusively necessary for non-actual objects, since comparable arguments are deployed by virtually all major Islamic philosophers to establish the doctrine of mental existence for *all* forms of perception, including sense perception. For instance, Mullā Ṣadrā explicitly applies these logically problematic cases as a proof for the universality of mental existence in any perception (Mullā Ṣadrā, 2007, p. 150). To read Suhrawardī as a narrow exception would be both textually and philosophically unjustified; and 3) Hermeneutic Risks: Limiting Suhrawardī's intent in this manner would either fail to account for the broader function of his arguments or require the implausible assumption that he diverged sharply from fellow philosophers on a fundamental epistemological doctrine without explicit argument to that end.

In sum, the fourth probability underestimates the generality of Suhrawardī's philosophical reasoning and misconstrues the function of his chosen argumentative paradigms.

Weaknesses of the Fifth Probability

The fifth probability suggests that mental existence arises only after direct perception by the soul, thus, as a secondary or subsequent cognitive event. This reading is also problematic: 1) Textual Evidence: Suhrawardī's remarks in major treatises flatly contradict this sequencing. In *Bustān al-Qulūb* (*The Garden of Hearts*), he writes: "If you want to perceive something, its image (*ṣūra*) should be formed in your mind; for example, if you want to perceive the sky, the image of the sky ought to be formed in your mind". Similarly, in *Hayākil al-Nūr* (*The Temples of Light*), he states, "If you obtain knowledge of something that you did not have before, your knowledge would be in a way such that the image of that thing appears in your mind, and should be similar to it." The logical implication of such statements is that the formation of a mental image is a prerequisite or concurrent condition of perception, not its effect or consequence; 2) Philosophical Coherence: To defer the advent of mental existence to a post-perceptual stage would introduce a conceptual rift between knowledge and perception that Suhrawardī never articulates and which would be at odds with his underlying illuminationist framework, where knowledge and presence are intimately conjoined.

In conclusion, the fifth probability fails to correspond with Suhrawardī's explicit accounts of the structure of perception and is undermined by both scriptural and philosophical considerations.

Weaknesses of the Sixth Probability

The sixth probability distinguishes between sense perception (in which mental existence is denied) and imaginative perception (in which it is affirmed). This dualistic reading faces two critical objections: 1) Direct Contradiction with Suhrawardī's Text: Suhrawardī affirmatively states that sense perception involves the mediation of mental existence. Several key passages point out that the formation of a mental image (*ṣūra dhihiyya*) is requisite for the act of perceiving external objects, nullifying the claim that sense perception can dispense with such mediation; 2) Misreading of Imaginative Perception: This probability presumes that, in memory or imaginative recall, one refers to an abstract mental existence to remember an object. In contrast, Suhrawardī identifies the principal faculty here not as "mental existence" in a narrow sense, but as the "common sense" (*al-ḥiss al-mushtaraka*), which serves

to integrate and coordinate sensory impressions (cf. Suhrawardī, 1993a, pp. 352, 355; Suhrawardī, 1993c, p. 29; Suhrawardī, 2009, pp. 51, 130). To attribute the entire function of imaginative recall to the mediation of mental existence is misleading, both conceptually and textually.

Probabilities of One to Three: Primacy of the Third Probability

When examining the first three probabilities, it becomes apparent that Suhrawardī's works contain both explicit affirmations and apparent negations of the necessity of mental existence in perception. Attempting to attribute both views to him as simultaneous and coherent would create internal inconsistency within his philosophy. The most philosophically and hermeneutically robust interpretation acknowledges diachronic development: at certain stages of his career or in certain texts, Suhrawardī accepts the mediation of mental existence (possibly reflecting the Avicennan theory or traditional philosophical epistemology); at later stages, particularly under the influence of his illuminationist philosophy, he transitions toward a more radical view of direct perception, dispensing with the need for mental mediation. This developmental or evolutionary reading accommodates the textual tensions and offers an integrated understanding of Suhrawardī's epistemological trajectory.

Summary

Upon close textual analysis and consideration of the broader context of Islamic epistemology, it becomes evident that the fourth, fifth, and sixth probabilities are not only weakened by Suhrawardī's explicit statements but also by the structure of philosophical argumentation common to the tradition. The third probability, which recognizes an evolution in Suhrawardī's position over time, reconciles the disparate strands in his works and presents the most coherent and substantiated account of his theory of perception and mental existence.

Conclusion

Suhrawardī's epistemology of sense perception appears to have developed through two distinct phases. In the first phase, he adopts a form of indirect realism, maintaining that the act of sense perception is mediated by what he terms "mental existent" (al-wujūd al-dhihī). According to this position, sensory data are not apprehended directly; instead, an immaterial form or representation of the external object must be realized within the perceiver's mind as a prerequisite for perception. This mediated account of perception is established in his earlier treatises, including *Kitāb al-Talwīḥāt* (Intimations), *Kitāb Hayākil al-Nūr* (The Shapes of Light), *Kitāb al-Lamahāt* (Glimpses), and *Kitāb al-Mashārī' wa al-Mu'āraḥāt* (The Ways and Conversations). In these works, Suhrawardī frequently employs terminology and arguments reminiscent of the Avicennan framework, where the existence of an internal, mental form is regarded as a necessary condition for the knowledge of particulars. In a subsequent phase, chiefly represented by his later work *Hikmat al-Ishrāq* (The Philosophy of Illumination), Suhrawardī transitions to direct realism. Within this later framework, he posits that sense perception takes place without the mediation of a mental existent; rather, the soul (al-naḥs) establishes a direct luminous relation (al-iḍāfa al-ishrāqiyya) with the object of perception. This account does not require the formation of an intermediary

internal image but describes perception as an immediate presence or illumination of the external object to the perceiver.

This later stance aligns with his broader Illuminationist ontology, which centers the notion of intuitive and immediate knowledge (al-'ilm al-ḥudūrī) rather than discursive or representational cognition. Comparison of Suhrawardī's early and late texts demonstrates a transition from an account of sense perception that is fundamentally representational to one that is non-representational. This shift can be documented through textual analysis of the relevant works mentioned above and is reflected in the divergence between his reliance on "mental existent" as a mediating principle in his early period and its rejection in his later period, especially in the case of the perception of external realities. This transition in Suhrawardī's position may be understood as reflective of his engagement with different philosophical traditions and his subsequent attempts to provide an alternative to the Avicennan model within the context of his own system. Thus, in his corpus, one finds explicit traces of both the mediation model of perception and the later advocacy for an immediate, intuition-based model of sensory awareness, depending on the period of writing and the conceptual context.

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