

SABZAWĀRĪ, A NINETEENTH CENTURY PERSIAN PHILOSOPHER

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Mullā Hādī Sabzawārī, the greatest of Persian philosophers and mystics of the nineteenth century, was born in the year 1797 in Sabzawār. This city, situated between Tehrān and Mashhad in the province of Khurāsān, was famous as a centre of learning and scholarship for centuries. Sabzawārī began his studies when only seven years old and completed his education in Persian, Arabic grammar and rhetoric at a very early age. In order to pursue his studies in theology and jurisprudence he went to the city of Mashhad, where he remained for five years. From there, hearing of the fame of *Mullā* 'Alī Nūrī as a master of philosophy, he went to Isfahān to study under him. Isfahān, it should be noted, was at that period a major centre of Islāmic studies, especially philosophy and logic. Sabzawārī remained for eight years in Isfahān, where he completed the rational part of Islāmic studies. Then he returned to Sabzawār and began to teach in a *madrasah*.

After a few years his fame became so great that disciples from all over Irān, as well as from India and the Arab world, came to the small city of Sabzawār to benefit from his vast knowledge and also to benefit from his personal conduct as a Ṣūfī guide. Sabzawārī's life was extremely simple; he lived in a

small and humble dwelling, and his food and clothing were kept at the level of mere subsistence. When the Qajar king Naṣīr al-Dīn Shāh visited the philosopher, he was surprised by this great simplicity. Sabzawārī understood the king's surprise and recited this verse:

If the house is humble and dark

I shall give you a place to sit in my bright eyes.¹⁶⁴

As a master of theoretical philosophy and an exemplar of its practice, Sabzawārī continued to teach and to direct students for forty years. His death occurred in 1872.

Sabzawārī was a prolific and industrious scholar; he wrote many books, both in Arabic and in Persian, on logic, philosophy, theology and mysticism. Besides these, he wrote a volume of Persian poetry and a commentary on the *Mathnawī* of the great Persian mystic-poet, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī.

The most famous of Sabzawārī's writings is the *Sharḥ-i Manzūmah*. This work, written in Arabic, consists of a series of poems on the essential questions of philosophy with the author's own commentary. In a remarkable way Sabzawārī has been able to gather and analyse in this work the ideas of many different schools of Islāmic philosophy. The *Sharḥ-i Manzūmah* has gained great popularity among students of both religion and

¹⁶⁴ M. M. Chahardehi, *Life and Philosophy of Mullā Hadī Sabzawārī* (Tehrān: Tahūrī Bookshop, 1955), p. 49.

philosophy in Irān where it is still used as a text-book. It is noteworthy that during the past 100 years at least five important commentaries have been written on this book and several lithographed editions of it have come out.

The *Sharḥ-i Manzūmah* is divided into seven books, each of which is divided into several chapters and each chapter into several sections. Books one and two are the most basic parts of the whole work; they deal with the problems of existence, essence, substance and accident. The rest of the book is devoted to theology and natural philosophy.

In view of the important contribution of Sabzawārī to philosophical thought, Prof. T. Izutsu of the Institute of Islāmic Studies at McGill (Montreal, Canada) and myself decided to prepare an English translation of books one and two of the *Sharḥ-i Manzūmah* in order to introduce a yet relatively unknown thinker to Western scholarship. Part one of the translation has been published in the Islāmic series of McGill University Press.¹⁶⁵ We also published a critical edition of the Arabic text, which is the first volume of a series called Persian Wisdom (Dānish-i Iranī). It was also published by the Institute of Islāmic Studies at its Tehrān Branch in 1969.

It is not possible to deal with all aspects or even a substantial part of this work in the present paper, but in accordance with the Persian proverb:

¹⁶⁵ *Supra*, p. 39, n. 1.

"Since you cannot pour out the water of the river,
drink at least enough to satisfy your thirst,"

I shall try to present a brief survey of Sabzawārī's position regarding the problem of existence and essence as contained in the first part of book one.

He says, "Existence is self-evident and there is no definition for it, because a definition must always be more immediately known and clearer than the object defined; but nothing is more immediately known and clearer than existence. So all definitions of existence are nothing but explanations of the word,"¹⁶⁶ He asserts that, although the notion of existence is self-evident, its reality lies in the inmost depths of hiddenness. The concept of existence, he says, is shared by all things and all things are "degrees" of one single reality. This idea was in opposition to that of Ash'arite theologians, because it necessitates resemblance and cognation between the cause and the caused, or, in other words, between the Creator and the creatures. Sabzawārī defends his position by asserting that the cognation of a thing and its shadow are one of the conditions of causal relationship. In support of this assertion he cites the verse of the *Qur'ān* in which God says: "We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in their souls, so that it may

¹⁶⁶ Sabzawārī, *Sharḥ-i Manẓūmah* (Arabic text), Part I, ed. M. Muḥaqqiq and T. Izutsu (Wisdom of Persia Series, No. I; Tehrān: McGill's Institute of Islāmic Studies, Tehrān Branch, 1969), p. 39.

become clear to them that it is the truth.¹⁶⁷ Sabzawārī says, "If the universe and human beings are signs of God, how is it possible that they should be completely different from Him? How can darkness ever be a sign of sunshine and shadow a sign of heat."¹⁶⁸ He accuses the Ash'arite theologians of agnosticism by asserting that when we say that God is existent we understand thereby that the same existence is shared by all the creatures. If, on the contrary, we do not accept the word existence in the above sense, we have to take the opposite of that sense, which is non-existence, so that the world becomes devoid of an existent origin. Further, if we understood nothing of existence, we would be depriving our intellect of all knowledge of God; and this is the state of agnosticism. Finally, he relates the position of ancient Irānian philosophers, whom he calls *al-Fahlawīyyūn*, and shows his agreement with them. They believed that existence is only a single reality having different stages and degrees like the stages or degrees of richness and poverty, intensity and weakness, priority and posteriority, just as light is of various degrees — strong, moderate, and weak. The difference in degree of intensity between various lights is not a difference of species; rather, it is a difference of strength and weakness, for it is the basic characteristic of light that it is self-apparent and that it makes other things apparent. This characteristic is present in every degree of light. Thus, a weak light is light just as much as a

¹⁶⁷ *Qur'ān*, 41: 53.

¹⁶⁸ Sabzawārī, *Sharḥ-i Manzūmah*, Part I, p. 48,

moderate one or even a strong one is. Similar to the case of "sensible" light is that of "real" light, which is existence.

Sabzawārī then raises the question: Since existence is only a single reality, what is the source of the multiplicity of existent things? For instance, one thing is abstract and another material, one thing is heaven and another is earth, one thing is man and another horse. He answers the question by saying that it is the essences which are the cause of difference and multiplicity. The essences are different from each other by their nature and they spread "the dust of difference" throughout existence. As light is a good example to cite of existence, so colour is a suitable example of essence. If existence is like sunlight, the essences are like coloured window glasses which limit the sunlight according as they are clear or dark, and change the one sunlight into different degrees of light. By means of the above example, Sabzawārī expresses his mystical views. According to him, man must purify himself by removing the dust from the mirror of the soul in order to get away from the world of multiplicity and join the world of unity and peacefulness. This mystical view is very clearly expressed in the following saying of his:

Love is universal peace; all else is war and struggle; lovers are united, but sects are scattered groups. The word of love was originally only one; groups of ignorant people invented all these different words.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹Sabzawārī, *Diwān* (Tehran: Mīrkamāli, 1338 A. H. [solar]), p. 60.