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ISLAMIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS

1 (2026) 190–216



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Historiography and the “Substitution of States” in Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkiwarī’s *Maḥbūb al-qulūb*

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Received: 14 August 2025 | Accepted: 12 September 2025 |

Published online: 11 September 2026

Abstract

If *ḥikma* is the highest form of knowledge an individual may attain, its transmission across nations and languages represents the embodiment of divine wisdom within the historical order of things. Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkiwarī (d. between 1088/1677–1095/1684), a Safavid thinker and doxographer, seems to have had this view in mind when composing *Maḥbūb al-qulūb* (*The Heart’s Beloved*), a work on the “history of philosophy,” where he writes about the preservation and transmission of divinely ordained wisdom (*ḥikma*) among the prophets, philosophers, sages, and scholars of the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. This paper argues that one of Quṭb al-Dīn’s signature approaches in composing and structuring this work is inspired by a well-known Sufi technique of soul-crafting, namely, the deliberate and methodical *substitution* of blameworthy traits of character with praiseworthy ones—the “substitution of states” (*tabdīl al-aḥwāl*). Using the biographical entries on four Muslim philosophers (al-Fārābī, Avicenna, al-Suhrawardī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī), I show how this approach allows Quṭb al-Dīn to embrace an ecumenical vision of philosophical knowledge within a historical perspective—a vision that embraces diverging strands of Islamic thought without having to negate or minimize the real differences that exist between the personalities embodying *ḥikma*, their respective subjectivities, and their historical agency.

* The research upon which this article is based was funded by the FRQSC (Fonds de recherche du Québec–Société et culture) with institutional support from the Carleton Centre for the Study of Islam. I wish to thank Prof. Rula Abisaab for her guidance on this paper. Any errors are my own.

Keywords

Islamic philosophy – history of philosophy – Islamic historiography – Islamic doxography – Sufism – Safavid empire – Twelver Shi‘ism

1 Introduction

Maḥbūb al-qulūb (*The Heart’s Beloved*; heretofore *MQ*) is a major doxographical and biographical work written by the *shaykh al-Islām* of Lāhijān and reported student of Mīr Dāmād (d. 1041/1631), al-Sharīf Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkiwarī al-Lāhijī al-Daylamī (d. between 1088/1677–1095/1684).¹ This paper examines the literary and historiographical techniques used in the second major division of this work, where the author deals with the philosophers, Sufis, legal scholars, and theologians of the Islamic period.²

MQ belongs to a genre of literary works that present a “history of philosophy” from Antiquity to the Islamic period. Intended for a non-specialist readership of the educated class, these works curate notable philosophical opinions and instances of exemplary personal conduct that are intellectually and morally edifying.³ More importantly, the diverse roster of thinkers included in

1 Mathieu Terrier has extensively discussed the life of Quṭb al-Dīn in the introduction to his translation of the first volume of *Maḥbūb al-qulūb: Histoire de la sagesse et philosophie shī‘ite: “L’aimé des cœurs” de Quṭb al-Dīn Aṣḥqavarī*, (Paris: Les Éditions du CERF, 2016), 41–50. Terrier argues that Quṭb al-Dīn may have been Mīr Dāmād’s student (p. 58), but only for a brief time during his youth. Quṭb al-Dīn’s biographical notice for Mīr Dāmād is the only evidence we have for this teacher-student relationship. This notice is the source of Henry Corbin’s famous analysis of the Mīr Dāmād’s ecstatic experience, where the existence of a “School of Isfahan” is first posited: “Confessions extatiques de Mīr Dāmād, maître de théologie à Ispahan,” in *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, 3 vols. (Damas: Institut Français de Damas, 1956–1967), 1:331–378. For recent scholarship on the School, see Janis Esots, *Patterns of Wisdom in Safavid Iran: The Philosophical School of Isfahan and the Gnostics of Shiraz* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2021).

2 Only the first and second parts of the trilogy have been edited: Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkiwarī, *Maḥbūb al-qulūb*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Dībājī and Ḥamid Ṣidqī, vols. 1–2 (Mirāth-i Maktūb, Tehran: 1999–2003). Mathieu Terrier has published a translation of this first part and with it a comprehensive study of *MQ* in *Histoire de la sagesse et philosophie shī‘ite*. See also Terrier’s earlier works on *MQ*: “Le *Maḥbūb al-qulūb* de Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkevarī: une oeuvre méconnue dans l’histoire de la sagesse en Islam,” *Journal Asiatique* 298.2 (2010): 345–387; “Apologie du soufisme par un philosophe shī‘ite de l’Iran safavide: Nouvelles remarques sur le *Maḥbūb al-qulūb* d’Ashkevarī,” *Studia Islamica* 109.2 (2014): 240–273.

3 I use the term “historiography” in the loose sense of a genre intended to record the life and opinions of figures associated with the transmission of philosophy, understood here as the knowledge and discipline that lead to the perfection of the human mind. The historiography

MQ share in the preservation and transmission of “wisdom” (*ḥikma*), understood here as the universal knowledge of “the reality of things (*ḥaqāʾiq al-ashy-āʾ*),” as expressed in a standard definition offered, for instance, by the Ishrāqī (“illuminationist”) philosopher and historian Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī (d. ca. 687/1288).⁴ Quṭb al-Dīn adds to this statement the equally standard qualification, “within the measure of human capacity (*bi-ḥasab al-ṭāqa al-bashariyya*).”⁵ Wisdom is universal because it is ultimately concerned with principles of thought and reality, rather than discrete facts about things. When wisdom obtains for a person without instruction and includes the legislation of divine law (*tashrīʿ*), it is called “prophecy” (*nubuwwa*). When it is obtained through study and instruction, it is called “philosophy” (*falsafa*).⁶ When it relates to the special knowledge of the mystics and saints, it is called “recognition” (*ʿirfān* or *maʿrifa*).⁷

Though not all the personalities Quṭb al-Dīn writes about in *MQ* are of equal importance, their life and thought bear witness to the divine presence in history.⁸ For while wisdom is transhistorical, in the sense that it is predetermined

of philosophy in the narrower and technical sense refers to scholarship that emerged in the wake of Johann Jacob Brucker (d. 1770), whose criteria for what counts as “philosophy” would exclude many figures included in *MQ*. See Leo Catana, *The Historiographical Concept ‘System of Philosophy’: Its Origin, Nature, Influence and Legitimacy* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008); see also Mario Longo, “A ‘Critical’ History of Philosophy and the Early Enlightenment: Johann Jacob Brucker,” in *Models of the History of Philosophy Volume 11: From the Cartesian Age to Brucker*, ed. Gregorio Piaia and Giovanni Santinello (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011).

- 4 Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī, *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ wa-rawḍat al-afrāḥ fī tāʾrīkh al-ḥukamāʾ*, ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm Abū Shuwayrib (Paris: Dar Byblion, 2007), 8. See Jean Jolivet, “L’Idée de la sagesse et sa fonction dans la philosophie des 4e et 5e siècle,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 1 (1991): 31–65.
- 5 *MQ*, 1:99. For the Neoplatonic background to this definition, see Dimitri Gutas, “Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation: A Study in the Literary Transmission of Popular Ethics” (PhD Diss., Yale University, 1974), 225–226. For the Islamic reception of this definition, see D. M. Dunlop, “The Existence and Definition of Philosophy,” *Iraq* 13.2 (1951): 76–94; S. M. Stern, “Ibn al-Ṭayyib’s Commentary on the ‘Isagoge,’” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 19.3 (1957): 419–425.
- 6 Al-Shahrazūrī, *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*, 9 and *MQ*, 1:99.
- 7 For the meaning of this term and its translation into English, see William C. Chittick and Mohammed Rustom, “*Maʿrifa*,” in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al., 2025: <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/Recognition> (last accessed: February 17, 2026); Mohammed Rustom, “Recognizing Recognition: *Maʿrifa* in Sufi Thought,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 37.1 (2026): 31–53.
- 8 Quṭb al-Dīn writes that “[t]hose who practice the Divine Sciences and Lordly Wisdom (*al-ʿulūm al-ilāhiyya wa-l-ḥikma al-rabbāniyya*) are those who have taken from the Lights of Wisdom from the Niche of Prophecy and Sanctified Authority. These are the true philosophers” (*MQ*, 1:99).

by the universal and eternal order of things (*qaḍāʾ*) emanating from divine knowledge, it is from the human point of view manifested in and made relative to the constraints of temporality and materiality. Consequently, wisdom is accessible to human beings, but only in *embodied* knowledge, that is, within the realm of matter, subject to the conditions of historicity (*qadar*).⁹ Quṭb al-Dīn thus affirms the historical condition of human beings. But he does so insofar as they have made themselves worthy of the determinations of the divine order. This is what gives meaning to the temporal sequence of events and the succession of historical personalities featured in *MQ*.

This hermeneutic allows the author to organize his biographical entries in ways other than strict chronology, by synchronizing events in terms of common themes and cycles, or as Michael Terrier puts it, quoting Wittgenstein, a “family resemblance” of ideas.¹⁰ This paper explores the structure of this synchronic presentation of history and the ideas motivating it.

MQ adopts a literary form that must have been familiar to the intended audience, as it conforms to the conventions of historiography and doxography that had been firmly established since the 13th century. What makes *MQ* stand out from its forbears, however, is the distinctly Sufi perspective of the work, one that is epitomized in the overarching theme of the “substitution of states” (*tabdīl al-aḥwāl*) introduced at the beginning of the text. Quṭb al-Dīn seems to have taken a standard technique of soul-crafting in Sufism—namely, to substitute blameworthy traits of character with praiseworthy ones—and made it into a historiographical and literary technique, one that determines how the life of a figure is presented, and which aspect of his work is highlighted.¹¹ It also directs the reader’s attention to which aspect of *ḥikma* is uniquely perfected in a figure or a group of figures, and how they each contribute to the perfection of the whole.

The theme of “substitution of states” suggests itself from a key passage in the introductory section of this work. Personifying *MQ*, Quṭb al-Dīn writes that this work is

[like] a substitute [*badal*] for a sage, but one who is free from the pretense of authority [*taḥakkum*] and mere dialectics [*judāl*]; a theologian,

9 The themes of *qaḍāʾ* and *qadar* are a major preoccupation in *MQ* and are discussed in the entry on Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī as an independent treatise (*MQ*, 2:428–446).

10 Terrier, *Histoire de la Sagesse*, 109, 115–129.

11 Indeed, one of the most important aspects of *MQ* is the author’s concerted attempt to defend Sufi teachings and harmonize them with Shiʿism, as shown by Terrier, “Apologie du soufisme,” 242–243 and 252.

but one who speaks the language of spiritual states [*al-ḥāl*], rather than mere doctrine [*al-maqāl*]; a Sufi, but one who avoids tittle-tattle [*fuḍūl al-qīl*]; a legal scholar, but one who does not slavishly follow what people are saying. Thus, the character of this book is in accordance with what some of the masters of spiritual states have said, namely that “if you desire the rank of the Substitutes [*al-abdāl*] then you must substitute states [*‘alayka bi-tadbīl al-aḥwāl*].”¹²

This passage continues a line of thought where the author confesses that he had no choice but to seek recourse to the companionship of books to find wisdom and truth, because many among his contemporaries are no longer interested in truth; they are duplicitous and are in love with the world.¹³ He claims that the “practitioners of experiential knowledge” (*ba‘ḍ ūlī al-tajārib*) have advised him to substitute the “brethren of the present time and the companions of the moment” with the companionship of the book. Thus, Quṭb al-Dīn seems to have conceived *MQ* to serve as a substitute for the lack of dependable spiritual companionship (*ṣuḥba*) among the living.

The complaint against contemporary decadence is a standard refrain for ethical and literary works of this kind. Quṭb al-Dīn seeks to remedy the situation by composing *MQ* in such a way as to reproduce a simulacrum of *lived* wisdom, believing that this approach would prove more tangible and helpful than a purely conceptual approach of, say, handbooks or treatises on theoretical Sufism or metaphysics.¹⁴ Each biographical entry, then, should bear witness to a transformative or “substitutionary” event where some aspect of *ḥikma* is fulfilled both within the life of a single figure and, as we shall see, in relation to a cluster of adjacent biographies. The theme of the “substitution of states” announced at the beginning, therefore, does not only amount to the moral effect of reading his work but is baked into the very parts and method of its composition.¹⁵

I will begin my analysis with an overview of *MQ* as a work of *ḥikma* historiography and where it stands with respect to other works of the same genre. Then, I will discuss the question of embodied knowledge and how *MQ* is intended to

¹² *MQ*, 1:94.

¹³ *MQ*, 1:89–90.

¹⁴ “It is clear that whoever seeks the content (*al-amr*) without [going through] the method (*min ghayr turqihī*), he is not concerned with ascertaining its truth” (*MQ*, 1:93).

¹⁵ Quṭb al-Dīn’s adoption of an explicitly Sufi technique as an overarching theme of *MQ* supports Terrier’s view that he is best regarded as “un soufi dissimulé et, plus certainement, un esprit indépendant de toute orthodoxie” (“Apologie du soufisme,” 272).

serve as a substitute for a living archetype of wisdom within a horizon of history, rather than limited to the example of an individual or group. The method of substitution requires that the life and thought of the selected figures conform to the overall “personality” of the work rather than determining for themselves the content and direction of their respective biographical notices. We shall see that what seems to be an idiosyncratic curation of biographical elements conforms to the stated purpose of the work.¹⁶

2 Sources and models for Qutb al-Dīn’s *MQ*

MQ’s genealogy can be traced to the Late Antique Greek doxographical tradition, which catalogued the teachings and lives of the Ancient sages (*mutaqad-dimūn*).¹⁷ In contrast to the heresiological writings of Late Antique Christian authors, which treated Greek philosophy primarily as a set of erroneous doctrines, these works typically reflect a Neoplatonic outlook that emphasizes the harmony and unity of philosophical teachings.¹⁸ Thus, the main philosophical authorities and sages of Antiquity were collectively presented as *ḥukamā* (“sages”), such as Plato, Aristotle, and their inheritors, as well as those associated with the Neopythagorean, theurgic, and Hermetic traditions.¹⁹ By the late tenth century, this historiographical framework expanded beyond the Hellenistic world to include sources of knowledge recognized within Islamicate culture. Figures from the Quranic tradition were incorporated into the lineage of ancient wisdom, as the idea took hold that the “niche of prophecy” (*mishkāt al-nubuwwa*) was the ultimate source of all forms of wisdom transmitted to the different nations.²⁰ This perspective made it possible to imagine an unbroken continuity between prophetic revelation and philosophical inquiry, and a link was forged between wisdom (*ḥikma*) and religious law (*sharʿ*).²¹

16 Terrier discusses at length the pattern of such interventions in *Histoire de la Sagesse*, 261–264.

17 Terrier, *Histoire de la Sagesse*, 125.

18 Terrier, *Histoire de la Sagesse*, 126.

19 This Neoplatonic harmonization of ancient philosophical authorities is an essential feature of Suhrawardian or Ishrāqī historiography; see John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardī and the Heritage of the Greeks* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 27–38, and John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 5–16.

20 As acknowledged by Qutb al-Dīn himself in *MQ*, 1:121.

21 Qutb al-Dīn makes this very point in the introduction to the *MQ*, 1:99, 101–102.

The doxographical works above constitute what Terrier has designated as “ancestors” and “authorities” of *MQ*.²² Quṭb al-Dīn’s direct sources were other works of the early Middle period that combined aspects of the Greek and Neoplatonic doxographical tradition with the Arabic genre of *ṭabaqāt* historiography. These works include al-Qifṭī’s (d. 647/1248) *Tārīkh al-ḥukamā’* (History of Wise Figures) and Ibn Abī Uṣaybī’a’s (d. ca. 668/1270) *Uyūn al-anbā’ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā’* (Essential Accounts on the Classes of Physicians).²³ The *ṭabaqāt* form of composition cohered with that of the Greek doxography, because both rely on biographies to structure their historiographical presentation. As the division of classes carries with it a certain corporate identity and cohesiveness with respect to the kind of vocation concerned—e.g., poets, traditionists, narrators, and legal scholars—the emergence of such works reinforced the collective identity, legitimacy, and transhistorical solidarity between sages across time and nations, whether “pagan” or monotheists.²⁴

Finally, *MQ* relies heavily on the authority of the Illuminationist al-Shahrazūrī, who wrote an influential doxographical-*ṭabaqāt* work, *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ* (The Promenade of Souls).²⁵ Two central elements of *MQ* show the marked influence of Ishrāqī historiography. The first is the inclusion of Persian religious thinkers and kings in the lineage of sages. The second is the inclusion of Sufis, especially early figures who were on the margins of the “orthodox Sufism” of al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910) but highly rated by the Master of Illumination al-Suhrawardī for their commitment to the ecstatic and the occult, such as Bayāzīd al-Bastāmī (d. 234/848 or 261/875), Dhū al-Nūn al-Misrī (d. 245/859), and Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896).²⁶

Unlike philosophers and prophets, Sufis represent a special manifestation of *ḥikma*, unconnected in its fundamental form to the production of worldly

22 Terrier, *Histoire de la Sagesse*, 124–134.

23 Terrier, *Histoire de la Sagesse*, 135–136.

24 Quṭb al-Dīn is also indebted to al-Shahrazūrī’s (d. 548/1153) *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal*, which contains elements of the heresiological writings of Sunni authorities.

25 Emily Cottrell, “Le Kitāb *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ wa-rawḍat al-afrāḥ* de Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī: composition et sources,” *Annuaire EPHE, Section des sciences religieuses* 113 (2004–2005): 383–387, and Emily Cottrell, “Šams al-Dīn al-Šahrazūrī et les Manuscrits de ‘La Promenade des âmes et le jardin des réjouissances: Histoire des philosophes’ (*Nuzhat al-arwāḥ wa-rawḍat al-afrāḥ fī tā’rīkh al-ḥukamā’*),” *Bulletin d’études orientales* 56 (2004–2005): 225–259.

On Ishrāqī historiography, see Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients*, 27–38; and *The Wisdom of the Mystic East*, 5–6.

26 Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East*, 44–47, and Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien II: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques, Suhrawardī et les platoniciens de perse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 35–36.

order and laws (that are the remit of prophets) and scientific knowledge (that is the remit of philosophers). Rather, they represent human beings' original revelatory experience of God, which, though systematized in theoretical Sufism, remains connected to the reservoir of experience and revelation. Where jurisprudence and scientific knowledge seek to enact wisdom through the institutions of society, Sufism pulls the devotee back to the non-articulated center that is the divine. The realm of authority that Sufism represents is the spiritual government of the world, with its hierarchy of saints, and—for Quṭb al-Dīn—the Shi'i imams.

Indeed, plenty of rough edges needed to be smoothed out to include Abrahamic prophets, Greek and Muslim philosophers, Hermetic sages, legal scholars, and Sufis under the arch of *ḥikma*. But the resulting perspective represents a distinctly ecumenical vision of human knowledge whose expansiveness and breadth remain unsurpassed in the Muslim world. This "inclusive" approach does not betray a lack of discernment but is chiefly due to the correspondingly broad and universalist notion of "philosophy" or *ḥikma* at work, and the implicit recognition that the path towards it cannot be restricted to some narrow form of normativity.²⁷

3 The "substitution of states" at work in *MQ*

Quṭb al-Dīn thus inherited a complex tradition of *ḥikma historiography* whose ever-expanding roster of figures must have presented him with fewer points of convergence. Perhaps aware of this entropic trend, Quṭb al-Dīn formulated a historiographical technique that would allow him to harmonize seemingly irreconcilable differences between thinkers and shed light on the underlying continuity and harmony that preserve *ḥikma* throughout the ages. By adopting the Sufi technique of the "substitution of states," he can show how a certain figure, in his own way and circumstance, exemplifies a moment of transformation toward some idealized aspect of *ḥikma* despite what he might lack in some other aspect thereof. In fact, what Quṭb al-Dīn chooses to showcase in

27 This broad outlook on philosophy also prevailed during the Italian Renaissance, especially among authors who sought a return to *prisca theologia*; see Luciano Malusa, "Renaissance Antecedents to the Historiography of Philosophy," in *Models of the History of Philosophy: From Its Origins in the Renaissance to the "Historia Philosophica,"* ed. Giovanni Santinello (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993). For a recent survey on "inclusive" and "exclusive" approaches to the history of philosophy, see Lloyd Strickland and Jia Wang, "Racism and Eurocentrism in Histories of Philosophy," *Open Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2023): 76–96.

the former often correlates with the latter, that is, if a figure is deficient in the pietistic aspect of wisdom measured by one's conformity to divine law, Quṭb al-Dīn will highlight aspects of that person's life and thought that counteract this potential divergence, pulling him back to the center and source of *ḥikma*.

One section of *MQ* that encapsulates this method at work is a cluster of four sequential entries on al-Fārābī (d. ca. 339/950), Ibn Sīnā or Avicenna (d. ca. 428/1037), al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). This sequence seems to originate from al-Shahrazūrī's *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*, which features a similar cluster. However, in this latter work al-Fārābī is placed separately with the Baghdad Peripatetics. The effect of placing al-Fārābī with Avicenna, al-Suhrawardī, and al-Rāzī is a significant move on Quṭb al-Dīn's part, as it allows him to create a sequence of philosophers (*ḥukamā'*), beginning with the "second teacher" to whom the famous account of the "emergence of philosophy" (*ẓuhūr al-falsafa*) in the Islamic world is attributed and who first instituted systematic philosophical learning in the Arabic context, while ending with the controversial figure of al-Rāzī, who is often presented as a mere pretender to philosophy, and as one who sought to ruin it from the inside.

3.1 *Al-Fārābī as Classical Archetype*

Al-Fārābī's entry begins with the oft-cited account of his authoritative role in the transmission of Peripatetic philosophy to the Arabic world.²⁸ Quṭb al-Dīn cites al-Fārābī's claim that had he lived during Aristotle's time, he would have been his student—a pious response to the (apparently) widespread opinion among his peers that he rivalled the First Master.²⁹ The authenticity of this citation is questionable, but one of the running themes in *MQ* is the natural superiority of the ancient authorities over modern thinkers.³⁰ For Quṭb al-Dīn, al-Fārābī is one of the most excellent of the "Islamic sages," because his personality evokes the venerable conduct of the ancient philosophers (*sīrat al-falāsifa al-mutaqaddimīn*).³¹ Two of the most important expressions of this conduct are al-Fārābī's renown as an ascetic and his disassociation from temporal rulers.

28 This famous account is culled from a statement attributed to al-Fārābī by Ibn Abī Uṣaybī'a in *'Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'*, August Müller (repr., Frankfurt am Main: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 1995), 2:134–135.

29 Also related in Ibn Abī Uṣaybī'a's *'Uyūn al-anbā'*, 2:136, where the questioner is the famous grammarian of Baghdad, Abū Bakr b. al-Sarrāj.

30 *Inter alia* in *MQ*, 2:150 and 369.

31 *MQ*, 2:150.

Though the account of al-Fārābī's asceticism appears to present a conventional picture of the ascetic, fastidious, and devoted scholar, it serves a greater thematic purpose when read as the first entry of the aforementioned cluster. When we turn to the entry on Avicenna, it becomes clear that Quṭb al-Dīn wanted al-Fārābī's asceticism to serve as a counterpoint to his successor's apparent indulgence in bodily pleasures. After quoting at length a section of Avicenna's autobiography in which the philosopher candidly talks about his medicinal self-prescription of wine during his night study sessions to overcome fatigue, Quṭb al-Dīn cites al-Shahrazūrī, who observes that whereas the ancient sages like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were all ascetics (*zuhhād*), Avicenna was not: "He was stained by his consumption of wine and his discharge of sexual powers [and] those who followed him followed him in this corruption and gross preoccupation."³² For Quṭb al-Dīn, Avicenna's dominating passions have led him to ignore the strict Quranic prohibition of wine and gambling with the explicit warning that their sin is greater than their benefit.³³

Another customary practice (*sunan*) of the ancients which Avicenna disregards is the disassociation from temporal rulers. Quṭb al-Dīn writes that

[among] the differences from the exemplary practice [*sunan*] of the ancient sages that the Master [i.e. Avicenna] displayed was [that he entered] the service of kings [*khidmat al-mulūk*] and undertook the ministerial office. The ancient sages prohibited and stood aloof from serving kings. For they say that if you serve kings, they will be impatient with you, and if you serve them in accordance with their natures, they will humiliate you.³⁴

It is well-known that Avicenna was also a man of the world, taking up political roles that are often dangerous. Among Muslim philosophers, Avicenna is hardly unique in this circumstance. The immediate effect, however, is the stark contrast between the virtues of al-Fārābī and the "lifestyle" failings of Avicenna. Though both thinkers are the greatest philosophers of their respective generations and defined the central doctrines and methods of *falsafa*, al-Fārābī

32 MQ, 2:165; al-Shahrazūrī, *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*, 368. Quṭb al-Dīn's source for Avicenna's notoriety in this regard may also be al-Qifṭī or Ibn Abī Uṣaybī'a's recension of al-Juzjānī's biography of his teacher, which recounts the famous story that Avicenna precipitated his death by engaging in too much sex during illness. Joep Laméer has shown that this story is most likely a later distortion of the text; see "Avicenna's Concupiscence," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 23 (2013): 277–289.

33 Q 2:219.

34 MQ, 2:168.

surpassed his successor on these two important ethical traits inherited from the ancients.

Yet the asceticism of al-Fārābī was not simply a trait of intellectual discipline but was for Quṭb al-Dīn an expression of religious piety. The early figures of *fal-safa* were not known as particularly pious men—this was at least their polemical reputation. Yet half of al-Fārābī's entry deals with the question of prayer (*ṣalāt* or *du'ā'*). Quṭb al-Dīn begins by using the Neoplatonic motif of ascent to structure his discussion of al-Fārābī's philosophical education and output.³⁵ Rightly noting the philosopher's unique contribution to ethics and political philosophy in his seminal work *al-Madīna al-fāḍila* (*The Virtuous City*), Quṭb al-Dīn links up earthly government with the divine government of the celestial world by the planets and intellects. He quotes the pseudepigraphic work, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*Ringstones of Wisdom*), where pseudo-Fārābī talks about how the rotation of the celestial spheres is a form of prayer.³⁶ The celestial spheres, like virtuous human beings, are obedient to God. Yet given their perfected nature, they never cease to be moved by the desire for union (*ittiṣāl*) and this takes the form of the most perfected kind of movement possible for a physical body, namely circular movement.³⁷ The whole world is a sentient entity (*ḥayawān*), and the highest form of speech it has is prayer. The entry on al-Fārābī ends with a long litany attributed to the philosopher, consisting of ten or so separate invocations (*Allāhumma*), most of which are requests for opening oneself to divine emanations through the celestial entities.³⁸ This prayer is taken from Ibn Abī Uṣaybī'a's '*Uyūn al-anbā'*' and is most likely apocryphal.³⁹ In this original source, the litany is presented as a sampling of al-Fārābī's writing, as one would give to get a sense of the personality of the figure in question. Quṭb al-Dīn, however, presents it as a centerpiece of al-Fārābī's philosophy.

3.2 *Avicenna as a Theoretician of Sufism*

If al-Fārābī's entry focuses on establishing the primitive archetype of the philosopher embodied in a Muslim thinker, the following entry on Avicenna focuses on establishing Avicenna's Sufi credentials. This focus has the effect of

35 *MQ*, 2:153.

36 *MQ*, 2:154. This work is most likely a work of the Avicennian tradition and misattributed to al-Fārābī. However, it was widely read and commented upon during the Safavid period. See K. Georr, "Fārābī est-il l'auteur des *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*?" *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 46 (1941), 31–39.

37 *MQ*, 2:155–156.

38 *MQ*, 2:159–161.

39 Terrier, *Histoire de la Sagesse*, 111. See Ibn Abī Uṣaybī'a, '*Uyūn al-anbā'*', 2:136–137. This prayer is not reproduced in al-Shahrāzūrī's *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*.

offsetting the philosopher's apparent concupiscence and unfitting proximity to temporal power. Indeed, most of the entry is a summary and analysis of *namaṭs* 9 and 10 of *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt* (*Pointers and Reminders*), which Quṭb al-Dīn reads as Avicenna's attempt at theorizing Sufi doctrine.

From one point of view, the decision to assign the task of systematizing Sufi doctrine for *MQ* to Avicenna makes sense, given the centrality of Sufi thought and practice to Quṭb al-Dīn's understanding of *ḥikma* and given the significance of *namaṭs* 9 and 10 of the *Ishārāt* as a philosophical analysis of Sufi experience. Quṭb al-Dīn quotes approvingly al-Rāzī's assessment in the latter's famous commentary to the *Ishārāt* that these sections amount to a theoretical examination of Sufi practices and modes of knowledge, which was unprecedented and to his day unmatched in complexity and depth.⁴⁰

The two *namaṭs* contain the conceptual germs of the embodied practice of *ḥikma* as exemplified by the personalities included in *MQ*. In them, Avicenna discusses the different ranks of Sufi practitioners, the highest of which is the recognizer (*ʿārīf*), distinguishing his station from those of the ascetic (*zāhid*) and the worshipper (*ʿābid*). Avicenna also discusses the need for prophecy as the highest stage of human knowledge, the sources and nature of prophetic knowledge, the stages of attaining union (*ittiṣāl*), and the external virtues associated with knowers. In *namaṭ* 10, he discusses the sources of the knower's occult powers. This is the theory that the human soul is not only receptive to divine emanations from the celestial world but can also produce effects on earthly matter in the same way that the souls and intellects of planetary spheres (*aflāk*) and stars (*kawākib*) produce effects on their respective planes of governance. This discussion includes the nature and efficacy of prayer and other means of invocations, an analysis of veridical dreams and visions, the role of intuition (*ḥads*) in the prophet's perception of the divine realm, the origins of prophetic legislation (*tashrīʿ*) as the earthly manifestation of the divine order channeled and enacted through the active imagination of the prophet, and finally an analysis of the occult properties of talismans, the evil eye, conjurations, and other occult objects and techniques of wonder-working. Avicenna thus discusses a range of human activities that we would designate now as belonging to "supernatural phenomena" in the wider sense of the term. But

40 *MQ*, 2:281. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt: Natural Sciences, Metaphysics*, ed. Alireza Najafzāda, vol. 2 (Tehran: Society for the Appreciation of Cultural Works and Dignitaries/Institute of Islamic Studies Tehran — McGill Universities, 2005), 589.

instead of segregating it from the spheres of philosophy and science, he integrates them as the “fruit” (*ḥāṣil*) of metaphysics.⁴¹

Though Quṭb al-Dīn fully credits Avicenna for this theory, he argues that *namaṭs* 9 and 10 were written under the guidance of the “Master, Knower, Practitioner of the Way,” the famous Sufi and poet Abū Saʿīd b. Abī al-Khayr (d. 440/1049).⁴² Quṭb al-Dīn cites the widespread account that Avicenna engaged in intimate discourse with the Sufi master.⁴³ Their supposed encounter is subject to many speculations and it seems to have been widespread in Safavid circles. Quṭb al-Dīn discusses a conversation between “the recognizing master” (*al-shaykh al-ʿarīf*) and “the leading master” (*al-shaykh al-raʾīs*) regarding the nature of sin, obedience, punishment and forgiveness. He also discusses letters exchanged between the two men regarding the nature of unbelief (*kufr*).⁴⁴ Though the entry tries to establish the close link between the Sufi and the philosopher, it does not mention the oft-quoted part of the famous story of their brief meeting in Nishāpūr, where Avicenna came out of the encounter saying that “all that we know he sees,” whereupon Abū Saʿīd retorted, “all that we see he knows.”⁴⁵

That an archetypical philosopher should meet a Sufi master who initiates him into the Path (or some aspect of it) is a common literary motif. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī is said to have met Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. early 13th century), a meeting that reportedly led to his increased pessimism in rational thought (*naẓar*) as a way of knowing God.⁴⁶ But the paradigmatic example for Quṭb al-Dīn is Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) conversion to Sufism following

41 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill), 288–298 and Jean Michot, *La destinée de l’homme selon Avicenne: le retour à Dieu (maʿād) et l’imagination* (Leuven: Peeters, 1986). See also Michael Rapoport, *Science of the Soul in Ibn Sīnā’s Pointers and Reminders: A Philological Study* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2023).

42 *MQ*, 2:177–178.

43 The original source of this story seems to be the famous account of Abū Saʿīd’s life in the work, *Asrār al-tawḥīd fī maqāmāt al-Shaykh Abī Saʿīd*: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 193.

44 *MQ*, 2:177.

45 The meeting in Nishāpūr probably did not happen. But as noted by G. Böwering, ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn Zarrinkūb suggests that they may have met in 1001 in the city of Miḥanī (or Mayhanī), where Abū Saʿīd lived, and thereafter corresponded; see G. Böwering, “Abū Saʿīd Abī l-Ḳayr,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*: <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abu-said-fazlallah-b/> (last accessed: February 17, 2026).

46 An analysis of this encounter can be read in Ayman Shihadeh, “The Mystic and the Sceptic in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” in *Sufism and Theology*, ed. Ayman Shihadeh (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 103–106.

his moral crisis in Baghdad. In the entry on al-Ghazālī, Quṭb al-Dīn reads this conversion story as the movement of the exoteric scholar into the inner chambers of experience.⁴⁷ Thus, he follows up the story with an extended discussion on the doctrines of the Sufis, rehabilitating their standing as inheritors of the inner knowledge of the prophets. The entry reproduces much of the central discussions in Avicenna's entry, but in summary form and relevant specifically to Sufism. Avicenna's task, however, is more general than the rehabilitation of Sufism. Quṭb al-Dīn assigns to him the task of harmonizing Peripatetic philosophy with phenomena associated with sainthood (*walāya*) and prophecy (*nubuwwa*), such as visions, inspired knowledge, thaumaturgy, miracles, and law (*sharī'a*). Al-Ghazālī's entry, on the other hand, attempts to establish how "recognition" (*ma'rifa*) forms the inner core of religious practices and doctrines and possesses an ancient pedigree across time and religious traditions.

The involvement of Abū Sa'īd in Avicenna's composition of *namaṭs* 9 and 10 speaks to the anxiety of having a philosopher of his reputation lay out in such authoritative fashion the theoretical foundations of inner *ḥikma* without having been initiated by a Sufi master. Indeed, al-Suhrawardī's critical assessment of the *mashā'i* (Peripatetic) method, which he associates with the separation of discursive reason from spiritual practice, was still influential in the Safavid intellectual scene.⁴⁸ This situation mirrors in many ways contemporary debate over the figure. Some insist he was a rationalist with a cool view of religious practice, though non-antagonistic as befitting his social context and the equanimity of a scientific mind.⁴⁹ Others emphasize the "mystical" and visionary aspects of his thought, bringing him in line with Sufi thought.⁵⁰ Quṭb al-Dīn can be placed in the second group. He is aware of Avicenna's worldly and intellectualist reputation, which he does not shy from mentioning, as we have seen. However, he is also keen on promoting a reformed and *initiated* Avicenna under the guidance of Abū Sa'īd and as confirmed by the doctrine he expounded in the *Ishārāt*.

3.3 *Al-Suhrawardī as Paradigm of "Lived Wisdom"*

With the figure of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, we encounter the figure that exemplifies the balance of the inner and outer sciences. Echoing his earlier

47 *MQ*, 2:453.

48 Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques Tome. iv: L'école d'Ispahan, l'école shaykhie, le douzième imām* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), xiv–xv.

49 E.g., Dimitri Gutas in *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*.

50 E.g., Henry Corbin in *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire* (Paris: Berg, 1979).

concern regarding the importance of following the “conduct of the ancients,” Quṭb al-Dīn writes that

[al-Suhrawardī] was a prodigy in intelligence and intuition, excellent in disposition, eloquent in expression, had very little concern for the world, not inclining to it, in accordance with the conduct of the ancients among the sages. He combined the two wisdoms [*ḥikmatayn*], that is, the experiential and the discursive [*al-dhawqiyya wa-l-baḥṭhiyya*]. None among the sages of Islam naturally thrived in the perfection of these two wisdoms as this great master did. It is evident to those who possess understanding that perfection of correct discourse and true and transcendental wisdom are impossible for those who do not possess wayfaring [*al-sulūk*], tasting [*al-dhawq*], and avoidance of worldly and bodily appetites. One is not counted among the sages who is deficient in [relying] solely on discursive knowledge [*al-baḥṭh*].⁵¹

For al-Suhrawardī, experiential wisdom is obtained through unveiling (*kashf*) and not by discursive thought (*fikra*), theory (*naẓar*), proofs (*dalīl*), definitions (*ḥadd*), and descriptions (*rasm*); rather, “by means of a light that God casts into the heart.”⁵² This last formulation is a quotation from a prophetic tradition, quoted several times in this entry.⁵³ It features prominently in al-Ghazālī’s autobiography, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*—a fact that Quṭb al-Dīn mentions in his entry on this figure.⁵⁴ The *ḥadīth* draws our attention to the importance of transforming theoretical knowledge of spiritual states (*‘ilm*) into practice (*‘amal*) and habit (*‘āda*) in order to produce the effect of “tasting” the divine presence.⁵⁵ Central in achieving this transformation are the techniques of Sufism, which Quṭb al-Dīn enumerates as “spiritual discipline, retreat, and remembrance.”⁵⁶ If in al-Fārābī’s entry we find asceticism and philosophical piety with no mention of Sufi theories and techniques, and if in Avicenna’s we find a theoretical treatment of “recognition” (*‘irfān* or *ma‘rifa*), al-Suhrawardī represents a higher synthesis of these models, where theory and practice combine for a paradigmatic example of *lived wisdom*.

⁵¹ MQ, 2:345.

⁵² MQ, 2:345.

⁵³ References for the *ḥadīth* can be found in the editor’s footnote in the *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl: al-muwaṣṣil ilā dhī l-‘izza wa-l-jalāl*, ed. Jamīl Ṣalībā and Kāmil ‘Ayyād (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1987), 68.

⁵⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 68; MQ, 2:448.

⁵⁵ MQ, 1:99.

⁵⁶ MQ, 2:346.

Everything that Avicenna mentions theoretically regarding the stations and powers of the knowers in *namaṭs* 9 and 10 al-Suhrawardī practices and experiences through the Sufi path. Quṭb al-Dīn mentions how after his education in Marāgha, al-Suhrawardī kept company with the Sufis, practiced their techniques, and reached the "furthermost station of the sages and the final stages of the unveilings of the saints."⁵⁷ He also mentions al-Shahrazūrī's defense of al-Suhrawardī's practice of letter magic (*al-ṣīmiyā*). This is a testament to the capacity of the human soul to produce effects when it has reached a certain purity and intensity of substance, measured respectively by its disengaging (*tajrīd*) from bodily needs and the natural strength (*shidda*) of its imagination (i.e., intensity). As we have seen, these are the two key elements of the occult powers of the rational soul. As Quṭb al-Dīn writes, paraphrasing al-Suhrawardī, the soul is like a knife heated by intense light, a state that allows it to easily cut through matter.⁵⁸

Though this theory was already discussed in the commentary on *namaṭ* 10 in Avicenna's entry, Quṭb al-Dīn introduces another theoretical model to complete the picture, namely the Ishrāqī doctrine of *mundus imaginalis* (*al-ʿālam al-mithālī*).⁵⁹ For al-Suhrawardī, the direct objects of thaumaturgy, miracles, and magical operations are the imaginal objects (*muthul*) whose loci of manifestation (*maẓāhir*) are the sensible entities of the physical world.⁶⁰ The sage performs his operations primarily on these imaginal objects, which in turn affect the transformation of matter in the sensible world to which they correspond.⁶¹

Al-Suhrawardī's credentials as the perfect sage are established not only by his attainments in the experiential and theoretical wisdoms, but also in his

57 MQ, 2:346.

58 MQ, 2:356

59 Henry Corbin coined the term "*mundus imaginalis*" to refer to this ontological realm and first highlighted its centrality in al-Suhrawardī's philosophy; see, Henry Corbin, "*Mundus imaginalis* ou l'imaginaire et l'imaginal," *Cahiers internationaux du symbolisme* 6 (1964): 3–26; reprinted in *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme* (Flammarion, 1983), 27–58; translated into English as "*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal," in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, trans. Leonard Fox (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), 1–33.

60 MQ, 2:346.

61 In this intervention—and the entry on al-Suhrawardī in general—we see how Quṭb al-Dīn's philosophical affiliation is closest to the Ishrāqī's. The imaginal world is the subject of one of his treatises, *Fānūs al-khayāl fī irāʾat ʿālam al-mithāl*, recently edited and translated by Mathieu Terrier, *Le guide du monde imaginal: Présentation, édition et traduction de la Risāla mithālīyya (Épître sur l'imaginal) de Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkevarī* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023).

proximity to the ancient authorities. Quṭb al-Dīn adheres to an Ishrāqī form of antiquarianism that sees in ancient teachings a pure and venerable source of universal wisdom.⁶² The lengthier the line of transmission, the more mediating elements it accrues.⁶³ The hard work needed to distill the kernels of true teachings makes them difficult for moderns to attain, and this is the cause of the loss of wisdom and philosophy among nations.⁶⁴ Al-Suhrawardī's proximity to the ancients, however, is proven not only in terms of adherence to their ascetic conduct, but also in his steadfast disassociation from temporal rulers. In this regard, he evokes al-Fārābī's character. However, unlike his predecessor, al-Suhrawardī paid the ultimate price for his non-compliance with worldly kings, which was death.⁶⁵

Asceticism and disassociation, however, are indirect methods of approaching the teachings of the ancients, given the temporal gulf separating them from the moderns. But as befitting al-Suhrawardī's spiritual station and his mastery of the way of direct experience, horizontal temporality presents no barrier to direct communion with the ancients. I am referring to the famous veridical dream of his encounter with the First Teacher himself, Aristotle, who proceeded to teach him the inner aspects of Peripatetic teachings and initiated him in the famous theory of knowledge by presence (*al-'ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*).⁶⁶ Quṭb al-Dīn reproduces al-Suhrawardī's full account of this dream in *al-Taḥwīḥāt* (*Intimations*) as a conclusion to his entry.⁶⁷ The account ends with a question al-Suhrawardī posed to Aristotle, whether there exist among the adherents of Islam philosophers or sages that are on equal footing with Plato. Aristotle responded emphatically that there are none (not even "a part of a thousandth part of his rank"), except for some Sufis—such as Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī and al-Tustarī—who have gone beyond formal (*rasmī*) knowledge and attained unto knowledge of "presence, union, and direct witnessing."⁶⁸

If indeed formal knowledge refers specifically to Avicenna's Peripateticism, which I think is Quṭb al-Dīn's intention, the designation shall apply even when

62 Reza Pourjavady and Sabine Schmidtke, "An Eastern Renaissance? Greek Philosophy under the Safavids (16th–18th Centuries AD)," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 3.1–2 (2015): 248–290. On Ishrāqī antiquarianism in general, see Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients*, 27–38, and Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East*, 5–16.

63 Quṭb al-Dīn discusses the origins of philosophy in the introduction to *MQ*, 1:118–123.

64 *MQ*, 2:359.

65 Recounted in *MQ*, 2:347–348.

66 Translated by John Walbridge in *Leaven of the Ancients*, 224–229.

67 Yahyā b. Ḥabash al-Suhrawardī and Henry Corbin, *Majmū'a fī al-ḥikma wa-l-ilāhiyyāt, Opera Metaphysica et Mystica*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Maṭba'at al-Ma'ārif, 1945), 70–74.

68 *MQ*, 2:379, Walbridge, *Leaven of the Ancients*, 228–229.

the object of study is spiritual practice and the techniques (*turuq*) of recognition (*irfān*). Thus, Quṭb al-Dīn seems to have intended Avicenna's theoretical discussion on these themes in the previous entry to be juxtaposed with al-Suhrawardī's dream, since it completes the lesson, as it were, with an admonition for the necessity of direct experience and practice. Thus, the methods and doctrines of Avicenna and al-Fārābī's revival of Peripatetic philosophy are not superseded but rather integrated to a higher synthesis. Al-Suhrawardī's initiation into the "inner doctrine" of Aristotle signals the fulfillment of *falsafa* and its transfiguration, through Sufism, into a more ancient form of wisdom.

3.4 *Al-Rāzī: The Skeptic's Return to the Quran*

However, from the peak of al-Suhrawardī's synthesis, Quṭb al-Dīn follows up the discussion with an entry on a controversial figure who is often left stranded at the shores of *ḥikma historiography* (both pre-modern and modern), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.⁶⁹ The decision to do this is I think deliberate. The immediate model present for Quṭb al-Dīn must have been al-Shahrazūrī's *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*, which as mentioned above has a sequence of Avicenna, al-Suhrawardī, and al-Rāzī. The reason for devising this cluster in the *Nuzhat* seems to be the observation that al-Suhrawardī and al-Rāzī were exact contemporaries and produced two of the most influential yet diverging interpretations of Avicenna.⁷⁰

However, al-Shahrazūrī seems to have included al-Rāzī in this sequence mainly to warn the readers that this is a theologian masquerading as a philosopher and that his opinions should not be taken seriously. Al-Shahrazūrī writes that al-Rāzī's doubts "would not take hold except in vulgar and impure souls (*al-nufūs al-ʿāmmiyya al-kadira*), who are ill-disposed to [receiving] holy emanations and are not prepared for [receiving] the divine light, by means of which the breast is enlarged and the heart quickened."⁷¹ Affirming this, Quṭb

69 Al-Rāzī's ambiguous reputation in the later period of philosophy in the East seems to originate in al-Ṭūsī's criticism of the former's critical commentary on the *Ishārāt* of Avicenna; see Robert Wisnovsky, "Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries on the *Ishārāt*," *Oriens* 41.3–4 (2013b): 349–378, and "Towards a Genealogy of Avicennism," *Oriens* 42.3–4 (2014): 323–363. Al-Rāzī's reputation as a skeptic and antagonist to philosophy is a major aspect of modern Iranian historiography; see Hanif Amin Beidokhti, "Historiography of *Falsafa* in Post-Qajar Iran: Its History and Classification," *Die Welt des Islams* 66.1 (2025): 1–38. For al-Rāzī's reputation in general see M. Şağhır Hasan Ma'sūmī, "Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and His Critics," *Islamic Studies* 6.4 (1967): 355–374.

70 Robert Wisnovsky, "Avicenna's Islamic Reception," in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013a), 206–208.

71 Al-Shahrazūrī, *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*, 392; *MQ*, 2:370.

al-Dīn writes “many people who came after [al-Rāzī] were led astray by his doubts and were incapable of purifying themselves from them except those for whom God has bestowed a sound heart.”⁷² This speaks to the lasting influence al-Rāzī’s interpretation and criticism during the post-Avicennian period and how fundamentally at odds it must have been from intellectual circles aligned with the Ishrāqī tradition.

For an Ishrāqī, the problem with al-Rāzī was not that he criticized Avicenna. Al-Suhrawardī, after all, also did the same. What was ultimately unsatisfactory about al-Rāzī was that he made a philosophical career out of criticizing his predecessor without realizing that what is fundamentally lacking in the Peripatetic system is not better arguments or doctrines, but the second face of *ḥikma*: experiential knowledge.⁷³ Indeed, for al-Shahrazūrī and Quṭb al-Dīn, al-Rāzī never transcended the role of critic of small things. This prevented him from reaching the goal of philosophy, which is self-realization and experience of the divine.

Another major reason that barred al-Rāzī from being counted as a true philosopher is that he completely lacked any inclination to asceticism. Despite “the strength of his disposition and the vigor of his soul,” his major “fault” (*‘ayb*) was that he completely lacked disengagement from the body (*tajarrud*) and spiritual wayfaring (*sulūk*).⁷⁴ Al-Shahrazūrī emphasizes how al-Rāzī took much pleasure in eating, was in love with fame, quarrelsome, ill-tempered, easily provoked, and changeful.⁷⁵ He also spread himself too thin. Having busied himself with writing on almost all branches of learning, he was unable to penetrate “their essential realities” (*ḥaqā’iq*). He lacked depth and would thus often misconstrue the true intentions of the philosophers and the deeper meaning of their doctrines.

Quṭb al-Dīn’s entry on al-Rāzī shares many of al-Shahrazūrī’s concerns, though expressed with less malice. One aspect in which Quṭb al-Dīn’s account differs considerably from his predecessor is that he tries to rehabilitate al-Rāzī by showing aspects of his thought that are concurrent with his framework of *ḥikma*. In fact, he focuses on one element that is absent in the previous three entries on al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and al-Suhrawardī, but which is central to the overall argument of the *MQ*, namely the Quran. Though Quṭb al-Dīn follows the negative assessment of al-Rāzī’s credentials as a philosopher, he values highly his work as an exegete (*mufasssīr*), as shown by the monumental work

⁷² *MQ*, 2:369.

⁷³ *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*, 393.

⁷⁴ *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*, 394.

⁷⁵ *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ*, 395.

on Quranic exegesis, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (*Keys to the Unseen*), also known as *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (*The Great Exegesis*). He discusses, for instance, an "excellent discourse" (*kalāmuhu al-jayyida*) al-Rāzī offers on the story of the prophet Joseph and his encounter with his patron's wife, Zulaykhā, or also known in some accounts as Rā'il.⁷⁶ In his commentary on the twelfth chapter of the Quran, Sūrat Yūsuf, al-Rāzī acknowledges on the authority of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib as narrated by Ja'far al-Šādiq and Ibn 'Abbās that desire awakened in Joseph in response to Zulaykhā's advances. Against some exegetes who claim that the prophet had thereby sinned, al-Rāzī offers an extensive argument showing that he had not.⁷⁷ The point of the story is that Joseph ultimately withdrew consent for fear of God, despite undergoing the natural urges of a young man. Indeed, Quṭb al-Dīn agrees with al-Rāzī's defense of the theological doctrine of the sinlessness of prophets (*'ismat al-anbiyā'*).

Quṭb al-Dīn also cites several discussions in al-Rāzī's writings that hint at some understanding of ascetic and spiritual practices. One of them is a discussion in *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* on the nature and number of the Zabāniya angels, who are the keepers of hell (*Q* 96:18; 43:77).⁷⁸ The section Quṭb al-Dīn is citing seems to be al-Rāzī's commentary to chapter al-Mudaththir (*The Covered One*), v. 30, where he refers to the opinion of the "practitioners of philosophy" (*arbāb al-ḥikma*) that the number of the Zabāniya corresponds to the 19 bodily faculties that prevent the rational soul from recognizing God (*ma'rifat Allāh*).⁷⁹ This is not an opinion al-Rāzī necessarily endorses, but is simply one of three authoritative opinions on the meaning of the verse. Quṭb al-Dīn, however, uses al-Rāzī's discussion as a platform to criticize "the philosophers" (namely, al-Fārābī and Avicenna) who deny corporeal resurrection, arguing instead that the body, not just the soul, has an eschatological rebirth in the Hereafter. Commenting on al-Rāzī's exegesis, Quṭb al-Dīn holds that sensible pleasure should not be regarded as a lesser form of pleasure, since it anticipates bodily pleasures in the Hereafter.⁸⁰ This links up with the story of prophet Joseph earlier, where Quṭb al-Dīn cites al-Rāzī's view that sin does not lie with simply having bodily urges, but with the commission of adultery—the implication being that reward does not come with denying corporeal desire, but by withholding one-

76 Chapter Yūsuf, *Q* 12:22–25; *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (*al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*). 32 vols. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1999, 18:436–444. For a summary of the exegetical tradition on these verses, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 597–598.

77 *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 18:439–444.

78 *MQ*, 2:373.

79 "Over it are nineteen" (*Q* 74:30); *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 30:708–709.

80 *MQ*, 2:373–374.

self from committing sinful acts for fear of God. Thus, Quṭb al-Dīn arrives at the doctrine of corporeal resurrection (against the authoritative teachings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna) through the exegesis of an Ash‘arite theologian. As such, even someone like al-Rāzī had a positive role in the transmission of one central aspect of *ḥikma* as Quṭb al-Dīn understood it, namely that it should be consistent with prophetic teachings and the divine law (*sharī‘a*).⁸¹

To be sure these citations of al-Rāzī’s writings do not amount to a defense of his opinions, nor does it cover up his perceived failings. But it is far removed from al-Shahrazūri’s caustic entry. Indeed, Quṭb al-Dīn ends his entry on al-Rāzī with a full citation of the latter’s last testimony (*waṣīyya*). The recension seems to be based on Ibn Abī Uṣaybī’a’s *‘Uyūn al-anbā’*.⁸² In this testimony al-Rāzī acknowledges the limits of human rationality, whose “dominion increases not [even] by the recognition of the recognizers (*‘irfān al-‘ārifīn*),” and affirms his commitment to the manifest and commonly agreed theological doctrines of the Quran, prophetic traditions and consensus of the scholars. The minute discussions of theology and philosophy do not form the foundations of this core belief. In an oft-quoted passage, he writes that

[I] tried the methods of *kalām* and philosophy, and I did not find in them the profit which I found in the great Quran, for the Quran ascribes all greatness and glory to God and prevents preoccupation with objections and contradictions. These serve only to teach us that the human intellect comes to nothing and fades away in these treacherous defiles and hidden ways.⁸³

What is more, al-Rāzī acknowledges that, given his innate intellectual curiosity, he “has written something about everything,” whether it be of truth or falsity. He did so only that he may understand the nature of these sciences. Having asked God forgiveness for his mistakes, he ends his testimony with the following statement, as though anticipating al-Shahrazūri’s invectives:

As for the academic works I wrote, in which I multiplied the posing of questions on those matters considered by the ancients, if someone looks at them and finds something pleasing, let him remember me in his pious

81 *MQ*, 2:373.

82 Ibn Abī Uṣaybī’a, *‘Uyūn al-anbā’*, 2:27–28; *MQ*, 2:380–382.

83 Translation by Tony Street, “Concerning the Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,” in *Islam: Essays on Scripture, Thought and Society: A Festschrift in Honour of Anthony H. Johns*, ed. Peter Riddell et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 135–136, with minor changes. *MQ*, 2:381.

prayers and ask blessings for me. If he does not find anything pleasing in my books, let him forgo wicked words about me. I only intended to increase research and sharpen the mind, relying in all things on God.⁸⁴

By ending the entry on this note, Quṭb al-Dīn has allowed al-Rāzī to respond, as it were, to the harsh words of his many critics. This is a dramatic departure from al-Shahrazūrī's method and tone. Despite being influenced by his predecessor's judgment and information, Quṭb al-Dīn did not allow it to cloud his own perspective and outlook, going out of his way to allow al-Rāzī to have the last word on his own legacy.

Thus, despite his shortcomings, al-Rāzī too had something to contribute to the transmission and preservation of *ḥikma* even when placed in the company of al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and al-Suhrawardī. To Quṭb al-Dīn he embodies the archetype of the intellectualist and worldly scholar, who has "done it all" in terms of academic prestige, but who found ultimate refuge and fulfillment in the revealed Scripture. Seen from this perspective, we may read the last testimony of al-Rāzī as the final concluding statement of this cluster of entries that begins with the introduction and institution of philosophy in Islam through al-Fārābī—the most "ancient" of the Islamic philosophers—and ends with the admonition, relevant to anyone who undertakes the path of *ḥikma*, for a return to revelation (*waḥy*) and the acknowledgement of the limits of human knowledge. Quṭb al-Dīn thus reaffirms the supremacy of "niche of prophecy" and reminds us of the traditional definition of *ḥikma* that always ends with the qualification "within the measure of human capacity (*bi-ḥasab al-ṭāqa al-bashariyya*)."

4 Conclusion

By this study of *MQ*'s literary and historiographic technique, I hope to bring out what I think is the unique personality of the work in relation to others of its kind. We see that Quṭb al-Dīn developed a distinct approach to *ḥikma* historiography, one that consciously tried to harmonize diverging aspects of Islamic philosophical thought. He achieved this by showing how sages, philosophers, and scholars *collectively* served as a vessel for the preservation and transmission of *ḥikma*. While the reception of divinely ordained wisdom has never been final and complete, given the diverse but natural imperfections of

84 Translation by Street in "Concerning the Life and Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," 138.

its recipient subjects, Quṭb al-Dīn has shown by careful comparison the perfections that did manifest in the lives of the personalities he included in his work. And when we extend these discrete and isolated actualities into the horizon of universal history, we shall find fulfillment and harmony in the whole. This is the method of substitution at work. This harmonization, however, was achieved not by establishing a grand theoretical edifice, like that of Mullā Ṣadrā's "Transcendent Wisdom" (*al-ḥikma al-muta'āliya*), which attempted to reconcile different sources of knowledge (e.g., Illuminationism, Avicennism, *kalām*, Akbārian Sufism, and Twelver Shi'ism), but by the embodiment of divinely ordained wisdom within the conditions of historicity and vagaries of subjective agency. It is this totality of lived wisdom that serves as a substitute for contemporary decadence and an intimate companion (*maḥbūb*) to the seeker estranged from his immediate empirical peers.

This ecumenical perspective does not compromise Quṭb al-Dīn's doctrinal commitment to Twelver Shi'ism. He makes the distinction, for instance, between "figurative wisdom" (*ḥikma majāzī*) and "real wisdom" (*ḥikma ḥaqīqī*), where the first refers preeminently to the Sunnis, while the second refers preeminently to Twelver Shi'ism.⁸⁵ However, Twelver Shi'ism is not understood here as a self-enclosed body of doctrines, an institution, or as a sect in the exclusive sense, as commonly understood in the oft-quoted term *al-firqa al-nā-jiya* ("the saved sect"). *MQ* is not an exercise in heresiology. Rather, Twelver Shi'ism seems to have served as a hermeneutic, a framework through which the inner passage of salvific history is disclosed, read, and ultimately transformed.⁸⁶ Within this perspective, figures from outside the Shi'i tradition—including major Sunni thinkers and Sufis—can still participate in the broader lineage of wisdom. Furthermore, Quṭb al-Dīn situates Shi'i Islam within a universal history of *ḥikma* while also asserting the autonomy of the scholarly community.⁸⁷ Against the backdrop of Safavid attempts to enforce doctrinal

85 The distinction is introduced in the introductory section (*muqaddima*) of *MQ*, 2:98 and is referred to *inter alia* in *MQ*, 2:178, in a discussion on Abū Sa'īd's encounter with Avicenna, and *MQ*, 2:448, where Quṭb al-Dīn talks about al-Ghazālī's conversion to Twelver Shi'ism.

86 Terrier, *Histoire de la Sagesse*, 115. This is of course the Corbinian idea of *ta'wīl*.

87 In the introduction to *MQ*, Quṭb al-Dīn reports a dialogue between Ja'far al-Šādiq and the Caliph al-Manṣūr, where the imam, in response to latter's invitation to join his company, said: "We have nothing that you fear; you have nothing of the things of the Hereafter that we hope for; you are not so felicitous that we [should need to] curry favors from you; we do not see that you are in some misery that we should [need to] console you. We have nothing to do with you!" (*MQ*, 1:92). In another section, Quṭb al-Dīn subverts royal astrological conventions by asserting the superiority of Saturn (responsible for the melancholy and poverty of scholars) over Jupiter (responsible for the power and wealth of kings) (*MQ*, 1:110). Typically, auspiciousness is attributed to Jupiter; but Quṭb al-Dīn does not seem to

and institutional orthodoxy, *MQ* presents the transmission of divine wisdom as occurring through the lineage of scholars and sages rather than through the authority of monarchs.⁸⁸

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accept this restriction. He subscribes to an "inward" (*bāṭinī*) astrological hermeneutic that recognizes the pitfalls of what typically falls under Jovian authority, namely, the acquisition of wealth and worldly status.

- 88 Rula Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 57–59; Andrew Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 69; Kathryn Babayan, "Sufis, Dervishes and Mullas: the Controversy over Spiritual and Temporal Dominion in Seventeenth-Century Iran," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 119–123; Terrier, "Apologie du soufisme par un philosophe shiʿite de l'Iran safavide." On universal history and political legitimizing claims of the Safavid monarchs: Sholeh Quinn and Charles Melville, "Safavid Historiography," in *Persian Historiography*, ed. Charles Melville (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 225 and 242 and on more general ideas of sacred kingship, Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shiʿite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 87, 95–100.

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