Philosophy in Early Safavid Iran: Najm al-Din Mamd al-Nayriz and His Writings by Reza Pourjavady (review)

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“established,” the very beginnings of such a “systematic, coherent body of thought” might be traced to the Eastern Han, a century and a half after Dong lived (p. 40). Other scholars, such as Michael Nylan, have in recent years argued along similar lines. We have them to thank for pressing us to think about the words we use. Is a “Confucian” the same as a Ru (儒家, 儒者, 儒家)? Is this an “insider versus outsider” question, like whether “Daoism” existed before Zhang Ling, or “Christianity” before Paul? Or is this a matter of the slow amalgamation of many strands of thought: of “classicists” (儒家) evolving into “Confucianists” (儒教)? I suspect that if we define our terms, the question will answer itself.

Notes


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In the study of the history of Islamic philosophy, most researchers have focused on certain distinguished figures and/or periods during which some highly remarkable developments took place. It is probably for this reason that until very recently the period between Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (597/1201–672/1274) and Mullā Ṣadrā (ca. 79/1571–1045/1636 or 1050/1640) attracted relatively little attention—it was almost commonly believed that, due to certain unfavorable historical circumstances, philosophical thought made few, if any, major breakthroughs during these three centuries. I will not say that this opinion is absolutely wrong—after all, it is evident that this period did not produce any thinker comparable in status with al-Fārābī or Mullā Ṣadrā. However, it is also evident that, in spite of the unfavorable circumstances (invasions, wars, and general instability in many parts of the Muslim world, Iran in particular), Islamic philosophy continued as a living tradition. This is attested by its renaissance during the Safavid (1501–1722) era—a renaissance that continued, some believe, throughout Qajar (1796–1925) and even Pahlavi (1925–1979) rule.
Among the major philosophers of this age, one would mention ‘Allāma Ḥillī (Ṭūsī’s student, 648/1250–726/1325), Qūṭb al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 766/1364), Sayyid Sharīf Jurjānī (d. 816/1414), Ṣā‘īn al-Dīn ‘Alī Turka Isfahānī (770/1369–835/1432), Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (ca. 830/1426–909/1504), and two Dashtakīs, Ṣadr al-Dīn (828/1425–903/1498) and his son Ghiyāth al-Dīn (966/1461–949/1542). A student of the latter, Mīr Fakhr al-Dīn Sammākī (d. 984/1576), became the teacher of Mīr Dāmād (d. 1041/1631)—thus, the chain of transmission was never broken.

In his elegant book Philosophy in Early Safavid Iran: Najm al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Nayrīzī and His Writings, Reza Pourjavady introduces us to a hitherto little known thinker of this time—Najm al-Dīn Maḥmūd Nayrīzī (d. after 943/1536), a student of the two Dashtakīs. In fact, some of his works were examined by the late H. Ritter and H. Corbin in the 1930s and 1940s, when both worked in Istanbul libraries. However, Ritter misread “Nayrīzī” as “Tabrīzī” and, what was worse, attributed two of Nayrīzī’s works—namely his commentaries on Suhrawardī’s Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq and Hayākil al-Nūr—to different authors, “al-Wadūd al-Tibrīzī” and “Najm al-Dīn al-Tibrīzī.” Corbin then treated these two fictional characters as the principal representatives of the Ishrāqi school of Tabriz. Pourjavady rejects these two fictional characters and, by doing so, virtually invalidates the concept of the “Illuminationist School of Tabriz” itself, demonstrating that, in Iran of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was Shiraz, the “fortress of knowers” (burj al-urafā’), which served as the main seat of learning and high culture.

The book consists of an introduction, four chapters, and four appendices. The introduction (forty-four pages) deals with the philosophers of Shiraz at the turn of the tenth/sixteenth century. The first of the seven subchapters provides a brief summary of the intellectual life in Shiraz in the given period; the remaining six are devoted to six thinkers who were active in the city at that time (along with Dawānī and both Dashtakīs, these were Mīr Husayn Maybudī, Shams al-Dīn Khāfī, and Kamāl al-Dīn Ilāhī Ardabīlī). The sections on the first three are particularly detailed and informative.

The first chapter begins with a short review of previous scholarship and then deals with Nayrīzī’s life and general aspects of his thought. The biographical account is based on ijāzās (permissions to teach a certain book or books) and dates of the completion of particular works, mentioned in the colophons, as well as on some passing remarks, scattered in the corpus of the texts. Pourjavady argues that Nayrīzī studied philosophy because he believed it to be the path leading to the greatest happiness possible for human beings and discusses in detail his approach to the issue of the compatibility of reason and religion. The author then examines the evidence of Nayrīzī’s adherence to Twelver Shi‘ism and the reception of his work in the later period.

The second chapter deals with two strands of philosophy in Shiraz, represented by two leading philosophers—Dawānī and the older Dashtakī. Pourjavady first provides an account of the history of their dispute, then examines its main subjects, which, according to him, are as follows: (1) the liar paradox, (2) the distinction between the Necessary Existent as wujūd and contingent as mawjūd (which constituted
the core of Dawānī’s ontology), (3) mental existence (which entailed a sophisticated discussion on the status of quiddities in mental existence), (4) God’s knowledge, and (5) the relationship of the human body to the soul.

The third chapter provides a description of the contents of seventeen of Nayrīzī’s works (two original treatises, seven commentaries, six glosses, and two superglosses). The works on which Nayrīzī wrote commentaries and glosses, apart from Suhrawardī’s two aforementioned books, include, among others, Ṭūsī’s *Tajrīd al-Itiqād* and *Tajrīd al-Mantiq*, Abhari’s *Hidāyat al-Ḥikma*, Quṭb al-Dīn Rāzī’s commentary on Kātibī’s *Shamsiyya*, Jurjānī’s commentary on Ījī’s *Mawāqif fī ʿIlm al-Kalām*, and Dawānī’s *Risālat fī ʿIthbāt al-Wujūd*.

The fourth chapter deals with Nayrīzī as a commentator and critic of Suhrawardī (which tells us that, in all likelihood, Pourjavady believes his importance—or at least the main reason for our interest in him—to lie in his elaborating the latter’s tenets and/or criticizing some of them). The author discusses Nayrīzī’s critique of Suhrawardī concerning six issues: (1) prime matter (the existence of which Suhrawardī denies, assigning its role to magnitude), (2) the theory of vision (which, according to Suhrawardī, is the work of the soul), (3) the imaginary world, (4) the nature of sound, (5) political thought (Nayrīzī evidently suspects Suhrawardī of attempting to attain kingship), and (6) bodily resurrection (in which, according to Nayrīzī, Suhrawardī did not believe).

Four appendices (an inventory of Nayrīzī’s writings, the list of philosophical writings copied by Nayrīzī, Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dahtaki’s *ijāza* to Nayrīzī, and quotations from unpublished sources) form an indispensable part of the monograph. Sadly, for reasons unknown, it lacks a conclusion, which is an unfortunate structural defect of this otherwise very refined and subtle work, which brings to our notice some virtually forgotten examples of the intellectual history of pre-Safavid and early Safavid Iran.

However, some important questions remain without a clear answer. For example, one wonders what exactly Nayrīzī’s original contribution to Islamic philosophy is and what impact he left on the later philosophical tradition. In order to answer these questions, we need, among other things, access to critical editions of at least some of Nayrīzī’s works, and in particular to the edition of his commentary on Suhrawardī’s *Al-Alwāḥ al-Imādiyya*. It is hoped that Pourjavady will prepare and publish such an edition soon.