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CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical Wisdom

While Ṭūsī produced his philosophical texts within Ibn Sīnā's conceptual framework, he also relied on two other speculative traditions—the Illuminationist philosophy of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) and Isma'īlism. As much of the discussion below will focus on Ṭūsī's reliance on Ibn Sīnā, it is important to alert the reader from the start to the influences also of Suhrawardī and Isma'īlism on his thought and output. There are several places in Ṭūsī's works where the influence of Suhrawardī is obvious, most prominently in his theory of divine knowledge, which will be discussed later in the book. Suhrawardī must have appealed to Ṭūsī on two counts. First, Ṭūsī must have sensed a wind of change in Suhrawardī's daring use of ancient pre-Socratic and Persian narratives, not to mention a restoration of ideas that had been forgotten under the hegemony of the Peripatetic discourse. In this spirit, like Suhrawardī, Ṭūsī contributed to the tradition of producing intellectual texts in Persian and wrote some of his major works in his native language, which set an example for his students and colleagues, including the famous philosopher and scientist Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 710/1311). The second reason for Ṭūsī's attraction to Suhrawardī must have been the esoteric character of the latter's thought and the possibil-

ity of interpreting some aspects of his philosophy, especially his political philosophy, in a Shi'a light. Although he does not comment on the possibility of reading Suhrawardī from an Isma'ili perspective, he could not have missed the Shi'a undertones of Suhrawardī's writings.

Regarding the Isma'ili influence, apart from Ṭūsī's earlier writings written during his long residence in Isma'ili fortresses and apart from his focus on Isma'ili themes, there are also traces of Isma'ili narratives in his other works. It would be methodologically wrong to ignore or underestimate Ṭūsī's Isma'ili writings on the pretext of dubious authorship, which has been overemphasized by some Twelver scholars. In addition to his autobiography, which offers strong textual evidence for his attraction to Isma'ili philosophy, his major work on ethics *Akhlāq-i Nāṣiri* (Nasirean Ethics) also shows the influence of Isma'ili thought.¹ Herman Landolt adds to this list Ṭūsī's commentary on Ibn Sīnā's *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*,² which will be discussed below. There seems to be no justification for accepting the latter two as free expressions of his own thought while dismissing the autobiography as forced on him by his Isma'ili patrons. Whether Ṭūsī did or did not genuinely convert to Isma'ilism does not alter the presence of Isma'ili concepts and narratives in his writings. The fact that Ṭūsī spent three decades of his life among Isma'ilis, studied their texts and composed some of his major works in conversation with them is a strong

1 On this subject, see Wilferd Madelung, 'Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī's Ethics between Philosophy, Shi'ism, and Sufism', in Paul Luft and Colin Turner, eds., *Shi'ism*, London & New York: Routledge, 2008, vol. II, pp. 69–85.

2 Herman Landolt, 'Kwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, Isma'ilism and Ishrāqī Philosophy', in N. Pourjavady and Ž. Vesel, eds., *Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī Philosophe et Savant du XIIIe Siècle*, Tehran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 2000, pp. 13–30.

motivation to pay attention to Ismaʿili connections at least in those of his works that do not have an outright Twelver theological focus.

It is important to note the centrality of the esoteric perspective for Ṭūsī; it may explain his leanings towards philosophy as opposed to theology *per se* and place his attraction to both the Illuminationist school and Ismaʿilism within his overall conceptual framework.

EXOTERIC AND ESOTERIC

In his autobiography *Sayr wa-sulūk*, Ṭūsī states that truth is in the possession of esoterists (*ahl al-bāṭin*) rather than exoterists (*ahl al-zāhir*).¹ Ṭūsī depicts his own spiritual and intellectual life as a journey from the exoteric (*zāhir*) to the esoteric (*bāṭin*). He uses these binary concepts in accordance with their meanings in Ismaʿili discourses. Broadly construed, Ismaʿili thinkers make a distinction between two levels of understanding: the exoteric, which is based on the literal meaning of religious texts as well as the apparent or physical layer of the cosmos, and the esoteric, which discloses the hidden meanings of religious texts and the cosmos through spiritual interpretation (*taʿwīl*). For example, regarding those who possess esoteric knowledge, the Fatimid jurist and judge Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974) holds the Shiʿa imams to be the most authoritative sources of this knowledge; and this is reinforced by their immunity (*ʿiṣma*) from sin and errors of judgement.²

In *Sayr wa-sulūk*, Ṭūsī calls exoterists (*ahl al-zāhir*) ‘those who blindly follow the rules of the *Shariʿa* (the religious law).’ He also expresses his disappointment with dialecti-

1 Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action*, p. 27.

2 Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nuʿmān, *Asās al-taʿwīl*, ed. Aref Tamer, Beirut: Manshūrāt Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1960, p. 66.

cal theology (*kalām*) because ‘its practitioners seemed to force the intellect to promote a doctrine in which they blindly imitated their ancestors,’ and in contrast he regards philosophy (*‘ilm-i hikmat*) as noble (*sharīf*) for the liberty it gives to the intellect and the avoidance of blind imitation (*taqlīd*).¹ Thus, as a philosopher, Ṭūsī locates the activity of the intellect closer to esoterism, though he does not identify philosophy as the ultimate venue of certain knowledge. While appreciating the value of philosophy, he denounces the intellectual hubris of those who consider their human intellect as self-sufficient. Notwithstanding, he admits that he himself has benefited from philosophers and he freely adopts their philosophical tools to develop the main theme of his autobiography, namely the Isma‘īli doctrine of instruction (*ta‘līm*).

Instruction (*ta‘līm*), as systematically formulated by Ḥasan-i Šabbāḥ (d. 518/1124), the founder of the Nizārī community in northern Persia, is the central doctrine of Nizārī Isma‘īlism. Due to the significance of this doctrine for them, the Nizārīs are also referred to as the ‘people of instruction’ (*Ta‘līmiyya*). According to this doctrine, the attainment of true knowledge is only possible through the instruction of the imam or, in the imam’s absence, his representative (*ḥujja*). The significance of the imam’s role as an epistemic intermediary and teacher was also emphasized in Fatimid literature. For example, Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. 412/1021) discussed the necessity for instruction due to the imperfection of the human soul and used the term along with divine inspiration (*ta’yīd*). He also maintained that ultimate actualization of the potential of the human soul is only possible through the ‘instruction’ (*ta‘līm*) of ‘the pos-

1 Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action*, pp. 26–29.

sessors of divine inspiration' (*al-mu'ayyadīn*).¹ Ṭūsī, in his formulation of *ta'lim* as the cause of actualizing the potential of the soul, argues along the same lines as Kirmānī. For Ṭūsī, 'without the instruction of a teacher, and the bringing into perfection by an agent of perfection, the attainment of truth is not possible.'² In another treatise that he wrote in collaboration with the Isma'īli poet Ḥaşan-i Maḥmūd, Ṭūsī presents a hierarchical division of knowledge with instructional knowledge being one level below the inspirational.³ Below instructional knowledge is speculative knowledge, which is attained by philosophers. This knowledge is not divinely granted as in the case of inspirational knowledge (*'ilm-i ta'yīdī*). Philosophical knowledge is discursive in that it involves the thought process. As a philosopher himself, Ṭūsī does not denounce discursive knowledge but simply ranks it lower than inspirational and instructional knowledge. There is strong evidence that in his philosophical writings Ṭūsī's awareness of the limit of human reason influenced his approach to those philosophical positions he finds in contradiction with what he deems to be the teachings of the Prophet or the imams. Yet, Ṭūsī's overall intellectual career also proves that he always regarded the activity of the human intellect through philosophy as an essential stepping-stone for understanding the meaning of religious beliefs and practices. A telling example is to be found in his *Tajrīd al-i'tiqād* (The Summa of the Dogma), which is the first of his treatises on Twelver philosophical

1 Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-ʿaql*, eds., Kāmil Ḥusayn and Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ḥilmī, Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, 1953, p. 304.

2 Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action*, p. 30.

3 Ṭūsī, *Rawḍa-yi taslīm*, ed. and trans. S. J. Badakhchani as *Paradise of Submission: A Medieval Treatise on Ismaili Thought*, London: I. B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2005, pp. 49–50.

theology. It is impossible to understand and appreciate this treatise without a significant command of Islamic philosophy. This is also true of Ṭūsī's approach to Isma'ili doctrines of faith. While Ṭūsī argues that one learns pivotal doctrines of faith such as divine unity (*tawhīd*) and creation through divine decree (*amr*) via the instruction of those who possess inspirational knowledge, he explains them by using conceptual tools borrowed from Greek and Muslim philosophers. Ṭūsī continued to rely on theoretical wisdom as formulated by his philosophical predecessors in almost all his works. The most obvious example of this methodological predilection is his reliance on reason and logic even in his theological works and here he was responsible for establishing a strong tradition of philosophical theology in Shi'ism that has been pursued to this day.

WRESTLING WITH THE MASTER'S CRITICS

Although Ṭūsī was influenced by several intellectual traditions, he was mainly indebted to Ibn Sīnā for the general framework of his philosophical thought. His intellectual dedication to Ibn Sīnā was particularly visible in his attempts to defend the master in the face of criticisms by theologians. Ṭūsī's magnificent commentary on Ibn Sīnā's *al-Ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt* (The Pointers and Reminders), which he wrote during the period of his life among the Isma'ilis, and *Talkhīṣ al-muḥaṣṣal* (A Summary of the Compendium), which he wrote later in his life, are both responses to the critiques of philosophy made by the famous Ash'arī theologian Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 606/1209), who states in a poem, 'In front of my writings Bū 'Alī [Ibn Sīnā] would bend to prostrate/ I find Greek philosophy a kind of delirium.'¹

1 Nasrollah Pourjavady, *Daw mujaddid: Muḥammad Ghazālī wa-Fakhr-i Rāzī*, Tehran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Dānishgāhī, 2003, p. 564.