SUHRAWARDĪ ON MODAL SYLLOGISMS

Tony Street

On first encounter, Suhrawardī’s modal syllogistic in the *Philosophy of Illumination* looks to be quite different from Avicenna’s. Closer inspection, however, reveals that Suhrawardī’s system is deeply Avicennan, more so than, for example, the system in Najm al-Dīn al-Kātibī’s *Shamsiyya*. In this paper I examine what Suhrawardī achieves by reading all modal propositions as embedded in the phrase ‘by necessity’ (bi’l-dari‘a), what help it can offer the historian of Arabic logic, and what it means for assessing Suhrawardī’s larger philosophical project.

1. The Problem

Scholars who have looked at Suhrawardī’s treatment of modal syllogisms to date have tended to take it to be one of the areas of Peripatetic philosophy which he attacks and reformulates. Prompting these assessments is the way Suhrawardī lays out the syntax of the propositions in his syllogistic. Here is how John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai describe his procedure:

In the second discourse…Suhrawardī attacks the complex structure of the Peripatetic modal syllogistic. He argues that for any scientific purpose the modal proposition can be reduced to a universal necessary affirmative proposition with modality, quantification, and negation incorporated into the terms of the proposition. For example, ‘It is possible that any man is literate’ may be reformulated as ‘It is necessary that all men are contingently literate.’…By means of this, all syllogisms can be reduced to one, a modalized iterated form of Barbara: ‘Necessarily all A are B, and necessarily all B are C; therefore, necessarily all A are C.’

Elsewhere, Ziai names the ‘Peripatetic’ from whom Suhrawardī is distancing himself, saying, ‘This is among the important areas of formal

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logic where Suhrawardī has departed from the Peripatetics (here specifically Avicenna)… Ziai further remarks that Dānesh-Pazūh regards this attempt to reduce all propositions to one type as ultimately Aristotelian, but Ziai clearly doubts this claim. Overall, however, Ziai looks on these departures from Avicenna’s logic as technical matters which should be left ‘for a more specialized study of Suhrawardī’s logic.’

More recently, Walbridge has dealt with Suhrawardī’s syllogistic in his Leaven of the Ancients. Walbridge believes that Suhrawardī has made important metaphysical decisions and rejected assumptions that motivate Aristotle’s term logic.

One large motivation to use term logic vanished with Suhrawardī’s rejection of Aristotelian essentialism and essential definition […] Term logic, as Aristotle formulates it, is particularly useful for unpacking statements of essences and thus requires essentialist definition […] Suhrawardī rejected Aristotelian essentialism and held that essences could be known, if at all, only through direct acquaintance. It was in principle impossible to create definitions that were both complete and actually conveyed new knowledge. Detached from its scientific context, term logic loses importance in Suhrawardī’s thought and can be reduced to his ‘few simple rules’.

I think—and I’m not sure I follow Walbridge’s argument—this means that the new modal syntax is occasioned by a rejection of Aristotelian essentialism. Later on, while treating the propositional logic, Walbridge claims:

Having rejected key features of Aristotelian essentialism as it applies to logic, Suhrawardī is thus pushed towards giving greater importance to propositional logic.

To be fair, Walbridge admits that he is proceeding speculatively, and that more precise appraisal of Suhrawardī’s logic will have to await editions of more of his works, and that, in any event, it’s not always clear that his distinctive logical doctrines are exploited in the rest of his philosophy. Still, for Walbridge, the most promising line of speculation assumes an anti-essentialist motivation and function for the new logic and its distinctive form.

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2 H. Ziai, Knowledge and Illumination (Atlanta, 1990), p. 69.
3 Ibid., p. 69, n. 3.
4 Ibid., p. 75.
6 Ibid., p. 155.
7 Ibid., p. 155.