
Revelation Over Rationalism: The Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone, Jr. *The Library of Living Philosophers, Volume XXVIII*. Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2001. xviii + 964 pages. Index to p. 1001. \$59.95.

Since the Library of Living Philosophers series was founded in 1938, only twenty-eight individuals, or fewer than one every two years, have been selected as subjects. The format of each volume calls for an intellectual autobiography or authorized biography of the person so honored, a number of essays by critics and allies that probe the individual's teaching along with that person's replies to each, and an extensive bibliography of his or her writings (a volume on Marjorie Grene is in preparation). Seyyed Hossein Nasr first came to scholarly attention in the U.S. in 1964 with the publication of his *Science and Civilization in Islam* and *Three Muslim Sages*, and his scholarly activity has continued un-

abated ever since. He is best known for his espousal of what he calls traditional or perennial philosophy, an approach that collapses ordinary distinctions between philosophy and religion to emphasize the core of similarity within all religions or at least all orthodox ones. Nasr thus privileges intuition—intellect as he would prefer to say—without completely dismissing reason or rational thought, though he does subordinate the latter to the former.

Nasr focuses his intellectual autobiography on his family background and its influences on him, his educational itinerary, the stages of his career (with special emphasis upon his forced exile from Iran since the Islamic revolution of 1979), and on

individuals who shaped his thought in one way or another. Although he writes in English, apparently without the assistance of an editor, he deems himself a man of the East and considers one of his tasks to be reconciling the different worlds of East and West or at least serving as an intermediary between them. In this respect, Nasr is highly attentive to the common meaning of traditionalism—the unexamined opinions and customs that distinguish peoples and cultures—and seems to suggest that they cannot be overcome even in pursuit of the truth. Indeed, for him, people must be understood as pursuing truth differently insofar as they start from, and never fully overcome, their traditional opinions and customs.

Privileged to be born into a prominent, socially important, and affluent family in Teheran, Nasr received an excellent early education and had the determination as well as the ability to profit from it. His natural gifts and sound habits served him well when he was sent to the U.S. for secondary school, then continued through undergraduate training in physics at MIT and a Ph.D. program in the history of science at Harvard. He distinguished himself at each level and constantly achieved honors as well as other forms of recognition. Of special interest are the exceptional scholars whom he had as teachers and advisors during these years: Norbert Wiener, Giorgio de Santillana, George Sarton, Hamilton A. R. Gibb, Harry A. Wolfson, Alexandre Koyré, and Werner Jaeger, to

name just a few. Equally interesting are the fellow students he mentions in passing, especially those whom he encountered in his classes with H. A. R. Gibb: Leonard Binder, William Polk, Ira Lapidus, Malcolm Kerr, Robert Haddad, Marshall Hodgson, James Kritzeck, and Yusuf Ibish. In sum, Seyyid Hossein Nasr has known as teachers or as aspiring contemporaries many of the most outstanding scholars who have specialized in the history of science or of philosophy as well as in Middle East studies. These acquaintances continued, deepened, and expanded as circumstances after Nasr's return to Teheran permitted him to travel abundantly and encounter yet other luminaries of the academic world. Most important, as he rose to increasing intellectual prominence under the reign of the Shah, Nasr was able to invite several of his older and newer academic colleagues to attend conferences or give lectures in Iran.

Because Nasr focuses so on those whom he met or whose writings he read at various stages of his career and on his relations with them or the way they influenced his thought, names that constitute a veritable Who's Who of academic and general intellectual life, his silence about others with whom he also must have come into contact or whom he must have read leads one to wonder. How is it, for example, that he never speaks of scholars known for their work in ethical and political philosophy, especially those who—like Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin—were as commit-

ted to refuting positivism as he? Is his failure to mention having met or read them merely an instance of his lack of esteem for practical philosophy? The lacuna is more enigmatic as the list of those whom he did meet and read is so extensive and as he says nothing about Muhsin S. Mahdi, Wolfson's successor at Harvard, unquestionably the leading authority on Islamic political philosophy, and someone with whom Nasr has had extensive contact over the years.

In his autobiography, Nasr speaks briefly of the wrenching hardships he had to endure after the Islamic revolution of 1979 forced him into exile. His account emphasizes, above all, the loss of books, notes, and manuscripts, as well as the extraordinary gestures of individuals who helped him find new footing in the U.S. But, despite the importance he attaches to having to learn to live apart from the roots he cherishes, he does not reflect upon the experience of exile and the way it affects him. That is a pity, for he could offer insight into a condition that he shares with so many other Iranians as well as Arabs, that is, other people from the Middle East who have had to make a new home in the West due to circumstances of one sort or another that are largely beyond their control.

Nasr does not dwell upon his particular philosophical understanding in the autobiography. Nor, with the exception of the article by Huston Smith, do those by any of the other contributors attempt to set forth its

tenets. Smith's largely sympathetic exposition provides Nasr the opportunity to clarify points about which others have criticized him and to make a stronger case for certain aspects of the teaching. From that exchange and other remarks, the following features come to light as central to Nasr's thought.

Proud to identify himself as a mystic or Sufi, he affirms a belief in "inner illumination" and insists both that there is "such a thing as the Truth" and that it is to be "attained through knowledge gained by means of the heart-intellect and also through revelation" (p. 27 with p. 19). He goes further and maintains that only mystics can pretend to what Aristotle termed the active or agent intellect (p. 161). Consequently, Nasr prizes demonstration and deduction above dialectic and induction, and metaphysics above politics and practical philosophy. A further indication of what his position entails is that, as sources of enlightenment, he cites Plato rather than Socrates, Suhrawardi but not Alfarabi, and Ibn al-Arabi as opposed to Averroes or Maimonides.

Reflection upon this list of preferences shows that Nasr's traditional or perennial philosophy has no room for Socratic rationalism or the practical aspect of Aristotelianism within Islamic philosophy. Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, Nasr's view of philosophy is partial or parochial rather than universal or catholic. David Burrell gently points to this problem in his "Islamic Philosophical Theology" critique of Nasr

(see pp. 640 and 643). Above all, Nasr ignores the philosophical attempts of the most famous philosophers within the medieval Islamic tradition to discover the elements of sound political order by probing the relationship between prophecy and revelation. For Alfarabi and Avicenna in the East, as well as for Ibn Bajja, Ibn Tufayl, Averroes, and Ibn Khaldun in Andalusia, and also for their Jewish fellow Andalusian, Maimonides, the prophet represents the most highly developed instance of human intelligence. And revelation is investigated in order to understand how this unique human being grasps and then articulates what he perceives of a higher intelligence that is above and beyond, but not distinct from, his own. Nasr, in keeping with his mystical and theological leanings, views prophecy and revelation differently. For him, the prophet somehow reaches out to a source that surpasses intelligence, one that cannot be spoken of in rational terms. As Nasr readily admits, he thinks it demeaning to investigate the thought of prophets like Moses or Muhammad as one does that of other clear-sighted individuals ("those to whom revelations were sent possessed all that we associate positively with genius but also infinitely more," p. 166). Differently stated, prophecy for Nasr represents something beyond our rational grasp, as do the elements of

sound living based on prophetic revelation. That is, Nasr leans decidedly more to the speculative and metaphysical, even to the theological and eventually the theosophical, than to the practical. Indeed, at times one wonders how, if philosophy is to be judged in rational terms, his thought qualifies as philosophical at all.

In sum, the present volume is a handsome, even fulsome tribute to a serious scholar and thinker. Each and every contributor has carefully reflected upon one or another aspect of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's teaching, and he has replied to each with extraordinary grace as well as exceptional tact. For the reader, what makes the format of this published "dialogue" most appealing is precisely this aspect: the honored thinker's judicious replies to the various comments by his critics and allies so couched at every juncture as to clarify or defend his general thought. All of this is highly commendable, so very commendable that the absence of a critique that would expand more upon the way Nasr's teaching stints practical philosophy and glosses over the deeper problems of prophecy and revelation is all the more to be regretted. Much as one might admire his rejection of positivism, something more is needed. After all, praise of contemplation and speculation does not constitute a refutation of positivism.