Phenomenology and Historicism in the Study of Islamic Philosophy: The Significance of Corbin's Approach

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Abstract: This essay concerns the significance of Henry Corbin's methodology for the 'Western' study of Islamic philosophy and its relevance for the revival of traditional metaphysics in postmodernity. This methodology established itself as an alternative to the traditional scholastic and modern colonial approaches to the study of Islamic philosophy. Under the influence of Heidegger, Corbin developed a methodology wherein the inadequacies of modern historicism could be consummated into a reassessment of traditional metaphysics. The aim of this essay is to articulate the foundations and demonstrate the justifiability of Corbin's approach. This is done for the purpose of elucidating how the metaphysics of Corbin and the Islamic Platonism from which he draws can contribute to the revitalization of contemporary Western philosophy. This essay thus constitutes an exploration of the problem of returning to traditional metaphysics through phenomenological hermeneutics and a corresponding mysticism.

Keywords: Henry Corbin, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Historicism, Metaphysics, Islamic Philosophy, Martin Heidegger, Mulla Sadra

Introduction

Perhaps no individual of the 20th century has exerted a greater influence on the reception of Islamic philosophy among Western scholars than Henry Corbin (1907–1978).[1] Prior to his development of a 'postmodern' phenomenological approach, the study of Islamic philosophy among European scholars had largely taken place within either a traditional Scholastic or a modern colonial paradigm.[2] Where traditional Scholasticism is characterized by an attempt to integrate the rational truths of Islamic philosophy into medieval Christian and Jewish philosophy, the paradigm of modern colonial discourse (in which the Scholastic approach found its terminus) is generally characterized by attempts to minimize the historical significance and independence of Islamic philosophy both from the Greek tradition and for the medieval and Renaissance Latin tradition. Corbin's approach came as a rejoinder to both the extinction of the

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[1] The conventional use of the designation 'Western' (roughly the Jewish-Christian and Greco-Roman Western European synthesis to the exclusion of Islam) is taken as standard for this is the sense in which it is used by Corbin. Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi" [edition lacks page numbers]; Shayegan, "Henry Corbin," 268–272.

[2] This is not to suggest that Corbin himself was a postmodernist but simply that his methodology integrates elements of post-Nietzschean philosophy in order to overcome the problems raised in and after Nietzsche.

metaphysical realism of the medieval worldview and, more importantly, the apparent spiritual insufficiency of the post-Cartesian modern and post-Nietzschean postmodern philosophical worldviews.[3] It was through the latter, however, that he developed a methodology whereby the insufficiencies of modernity might be consummated towards a reassessment of traditional metaphysics.

Beyond his classical training in philosophy, Corbin was an adept student of both Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Karl Barth (1886–1968), and the first to translate the works of either into French. This background in both the phenomenological hermeneutics of Heidegger and the Protestant hermeneutics of Barth opened a horizon for Corbin that was characterized by a dual fascination with the question of the meaning of Being and "the phenomenon of the holy book."[4] The 'theological-phenomenological hermeneutic' made possible by Heidegger permitted the development of a method that is both ahistorical and willing to treat Islamic philosophy as an authentic source of philosophical truth. Indeed, what distinguishes Corbin from his contemporaries is, as Muhsin Mahdi notes, an "effort to think both historically and philosophically when dealing with Islamic philosophy."[5] While the degree to which Corbin rejects historicism has been criticized by a multitude of scholars, it nevertheless has garnered recognition for its radical break with the rejectionism and reductionism of modern and postmodern historicism.[6] At the heart of Corbin's oeuvre, runs a profound concern for modernity's loss of a hierarchical vision of spiritual realms, a concern shared by Heidegger despite being often accused of perpetuating this loss.[7] Samir Mahmoud notes that, "Corbin doubted whether the problems posed by the modern world could be solved by a wholesale rejection of the spiritual worlds."[8] For modernity to overcome its "agnostic reflect," i.e. a skepticism born out of the separation of thought and Being, it must undergo a restoration of its spiritual dimension.[9]

The introduction of Islamic philosophy to Corbin's personal spiritual quest, came in 1928 when he was introduced by Louis Massignon to the *Ḥekmat al-ešrāq* (*Philosophy of Illumination*) of Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi (1154–1191).[10] Sohrawardi, onto whom Corbin bestowed the illustrious titles of the " Iranian theosopher of Illumination" and "Imam of the Persian Platonists [*Ishrâqîyûn*]," came to be for him nothing less than his personal

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[3] While this work would benefit from a more thorough treatment of the problem of modernity, it suffices to assert that the problem identified by Corbin parallels that which is identified by Martin Heidegger (see: "The Question Concerning Technology"). For Heidegger, modernity can be understood as a 'technological' mode of relating to Being in which a more authentic 'poietic' or revelatory mode is overtaken by the inauthenticity of 'enframing' (*Gestell*). The former corresponds to a treatment of reality in terms of 'bringing-forth', cultivation, and care rather than the 'challenging-forth' of enframing whereby reality is experienced in terms of the possibility of exploitation, production, and answerability to demand and extraction. For Heidegger, this relation to Being negates the possibility of authentic experience, is essentially nihilsitic, and demonstrates the necessity of new and restorative modes of relating to Being.

[4] Shayegan, "Henry Corbin."

[5] Mahdi, "Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy," 93.

[6] Again, while a more thorough treatment of this term would be of benefit, it must rest beyond the scope of this work. Althought, there are a multiplicity of views regarding the nature of historicism, this work takes for granted Corbin's understanding of historicis as "the view that all reality is historical and that there is nothing that is not subject to historical change." This implies the possibility of reducing the truth or value of a philosopher's thought to various historical contingencies and is, as he states, thereby "antithetical to the first principle of all traditional metaphysics." (Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi").

[7] The appropriateness of identifying Heidegger with 'postmodernism' is contentious. For the purposes here, this identification is justified through Heidegger's integration (and even hypothetical overcoming) of Nietzschean 'metaphysics' into his thought alongside the concomitant localization of meaning in the 'subject' or 'soul' (albeit by way of the unconventional designation of Dasein).

[8] Mahmoud, *From 'Heidegger to Suhrawardi'*, 6.

[9] Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis."

[10] Shayegan, "Henry Corbin."

"sheikh."[11] As stated in his famous 1976 interview, Corbin characterized his movement from Heidegger to Sohrawardi as the passage from post-Nietzschean philosophy to "a world of profound spirituality."[12] Just as his formative teacher Heidegger had undertaken a resistance to modernity through an attempt at recovering a more primordial understanding of Being by way of the pre-Socratics, Corbin attempted to fulfill this same endeavor through a turn to the *Ishrâqîyûn*.

This means nothing less than an overturning of the historicist methodologies that comprise modern approaches to Islamic philosophy and the introduction of a way of understanding Being that had been lost in the mainstream of Western philosophy since the Renaissance. Through an elaboration on Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics, Corbin developed a method whereby Islamic philosophy, particularly that of the *Ishrâqîyûn*, could not only be accessed and made meaningful but provide an alternative to the nihilism of modernity. Given the weight Corbin ascribed to the possibility of Islamic philosophy assisting in the re-spiritualization of Western philosophy, an understanding of the method whereby Islamic philosophy can be made meaningful to modern Western philosophers is potentially of immense value.

The aim of this essay is then to articulate the nature and demonstrate the justifiability of Corbin's approach with the intention of elucidating how his metaphysics and that of the *Ishrâqîyûn* (particularly, Mulla Sadra) can contribute to the revitalization of contemporary Western philosophy. This task is approached by, first, reconstructing Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics; second, presenting Heidegger and Corbin's critique of historicism; third, describing Corbin's interpretation of and elaboration on Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics in dialogue with the *Ishrâqîyûn*; fourth, providing an overview of common criticisms of Corbin's approach; fifth, developing an independent assessment of Corbin's approach with considerations on the mentioned criticisms, metaphysics, and the meaning of Corbin's thought for contemporary Western thought. It should finally be noted that this work is written as an internal explication and defense of Corbin's thought in its own idiom. For this reason, with the exception of the prominent critiques of Corbin discussed in the penultimate section, there is no treatment of his thought from alternative perspectives. This is to say, that Corbin's methodology is not established in relation to anything other than its immediate Heideggerian background, and his visions of historicism and modernity to which he is opposed are taken for granted.

The Heideggerian Analytic

Before venturing into the subject of historicism, it is necessary to first establish the foundation upon which Heidegger and Corbin constructed their critique. This involves clarifying the basic project of Heidegger's corpus in terms of the development of phenomenological hermeneutics as a response to the problem of modernity's essential inauthenticity. Historicism, as is explained in the following chapter, is one expression of an inauthentic mode of relating to Being. The examination in this chapter unfolds by first examining the distinction between authentic and inauthentic discourse in terms of the "forgetfulness of Being" and then exploring phenomenological hermeneutics as an approach to ontology predicated on an analysis of the subject's role in determining access to beings. For Corbin, it was Heidegger having focused "the act of philosophizing upon hermeneutics" that was the "*clavis hermeneutica*" that gained him access to a meaningful understanding of dimensions of Islamic philosophy inaccessible to the methods of historicist scholarship.[13]

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[11] Mahmoud, *From 'Heidegger to Suhrawardi,'* 1.
[12] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi."
[13] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi."

The basic orientation of Heidegger's thought finds its initial and principal articulation in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*. While certain dimensions of this work, especially those developed in its second division, were revised in Heidegger's later thought, its general tendencies are preserved through the works of both Heidegger and Corbin. Similar to other interwar 'Conservative Revolution' responses to modernity, the principal task of *Being and Time* is an attempt at recovering an essential dimension of human existence lost to modernity. For Heidegger, this recovery must unfold in relation to a critique of the origins of modernity in terms of an understanding of Being that he takes to have progressively been forgotten since Plato. The forgetfulness of Being (*Seinsvorgessenheit*) he attributes to Plato's doctrine of Ideas, indicates a movement towards the treatment of beings in a way that progressively occults intrinsic mystery of the Being itself. Philosophy—which Heidegger regards as synonymous with metaphysics and Platonism—is guilty of obscuring the *a priori* conditions of Being necessary for beings to present themselves and thereby, the more original question of the meaning of Being (*Seinsfrage*) itself.[14] The history of Western philosophy can be narrated as an ever-accelerating decline culminating in the nihilistic "inverted Platonism" of Nietzsche's eternally recurring will to power.[15] From this understanding of the crises of modernity, Heidegger called for a "collective Renevatio" that would overcome traditional metaphysics as a failure to understand that the Being of beings is not a particular being but the condition for the appearance of beings in general.[16]

The appropriate method for asking the question of the meaning of Being, and thereby restoring an authentic relation to Being, is phenomenological hermeneutics. Interpretation (*Auslegung*) or the principle of hermeneutics entails not the attribution of signification to entities but the working-out of, "an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world."[17] It is, therefore, a logos or a mode of discourse (*Rede*), an unfolding of language, in which we explicate and come into awareness of an understanding of Being which precedes and determines our experience. Interpretive or hermeneutic discourse is properly contrasted with the Aristotelian notion of apophantic discourse, where the former corresponds to an intimation of two modes of projecting signification onto entities, namely readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) and the latter to presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*). In Heideggerian terminology, these terms denote two modes of intelligibility where *Zuhandenheit* suggests a non-reflective availableness and *Vorhandenheit* the reflective or conscious presence of an object.[18] This dichotomy generates or elucidates the problem of defining Being. Being cannot be defined because definitions only concern the present-at-hand. In order for Being to be defined it would need to be what it is not, namely a present-at-hand entity. Rather, Being is appropriately understood as the non-entity that is the precondition for the appearance of entities. Consequently, the foundation of phenomenological hermeneutics is not an apprehension of beings or entities, but of a pre-theoretical understanding of Being in terms of the activity by which beings appear.

This concept of hermeneutics reveals a distinction between metaphysical and pre-metaphysical understandings of truth. Metaphysical truth, which is present in apophantic discourse, operates on the basis of the Being of beings, i.e. of essences that precede existence. It, therefore, takes on correspondence or adequation as its criterion.[19] Heidegger understands the *adequatio* model of truth as insufficient given its dependence on a more primordial, pre-

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[14] Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," 433.

[15] Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

[16] Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 138–139; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 62.

[17] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 190–191.

[18] Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 60–62.

[19] The traditional formulation of this principle is found in Aristotle, "to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it its and of what is not that it is not, is true" (Metaphysics 1011B26).

metaphysical mode of truth as the precondition for the possibility of adequation in any form.[20] This pre-metaphysical understanding of truth is referred to by Heidegger as the classical Greek word for 'truth', namely as *aletheia*—most often translated also as disclosure (*Erschlossenheit*) or unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*). Additionally, the term phenomenology bears a meaning derived from the convergence of "phenomen," understood as deriving from *phainestai* which itself signifies "to show itself" or "to come to light,"[21] and "logos" understood principally as discourse which reveals what is spoken about.[22] Phenomenology, which Heidegger understands to be essentially hermeneutical, is, therefore, the mode of apprehending whereby the meaning of Being might be disclosed or unconcealed.[23] The inquiry into the meaning of Being, moreover, must proceed by way of a preliminary analysis of that being for which the meaning of Being can present itself as a question. This being, traditionally identified with the 'soul', receives from Heidegger the novel designation of 'Dasein'.[24] This is due to the Western tradition's alleged treatment of the soul as a present-at-hand entity and, therefore, as already existing within a determinate response to the question of the meaning of Being. For Heidegger, what distinguishes Dasein from the soul is that the former exists as the precondition for the appearance of entities.[25] Dasein is always already thoroughly absorbed within a context and, therefore, essentially characterized by its embeddedness or "being-in-the-world" (*In-der-Welt-Sein*). Dasein's transparency and connection to other beings is necessarily conditioned by its status as always already embedded in a given world. The hermeneutics of Dasein is, therefore, an attempt at a fundamental ontology, *namely* a logos of the necessary preconditions for beings through an articulation of the conditions that determine Dasein's access to entities.

This fundamental ontology finds its apogee in an investigation into the self-understanding of Dasein as "an interpretation of Dasein's projection of a self in terms of its various possibilities."[26] Possibility here is not understood in the conventional sense of a generic end but as the "for-the-sake-of-which" of Dasein's self-projection. In a fundamental way, Dasein always already exists in primordial truth by its givenness in the world and its full possession of the knowledge of how to be itself. This primordial truth, however, is obscured by Dasein's movement away from its original possibility through a flight into the inauthenticity of the apophantic as it manifests in social reality. Dasein is then either authentic or inauthentic depending on whether it understands itself in relation to its primordial purpose and projects itself accordingly.[27] Authenticity, therefore, suggests that one does not act in accordance with conventional ideals but appropriately in relation to the calling of the situation, i.e. ethically.[28] The authenticity of Dasein, furthermore, allows for an authentic encounter with things themselves and not as they would appear through the lens of extrinsic ideals.[29] If phenomenology "grasp[s] its objects in such a way that everything about them which is up for discussion must be treated by exhibiting it directly and demonstrating it directly," then authenticity must be understood as a precondition for a sufficient phenomenology.[30] Authenticity, by liberating Dasein from hermeneutical limitations, makes possible the ideal of

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[20] Young, *Heidegger's Later Philosophy*, 6–7.
[21] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 51.
[22] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 56.
[23] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi."
[24] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32.
[25] Azadpur, *Reason Unbound*, 26.
[26] Azadpur, *Reason Unbound*, 26.
[27] Azadpur, *Reason Unbound*, 26-27.
[28] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 355.
[29] Azadpur, *Reason Unbound,* 27.
[30] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 59.

phenomenology.[31] In authentic phenomenological encounters, entities appear in their proper context free from the limitations of interpretive prejudice.

In authentic phenomenology, Dasein opens itself to "dwelling autonomously alongside entities within-the-world. In this kind of 'dwelling' as a holding-one's-self-back from any manipulation or utilization, the perception of the present-at-hand is consummated."[32] Phenomenology, therefore, does not encounter entities as present-at-hand or in apophantic terms. Rather, it is grounded in an authentic mode of being distinct from any predilection towards apophaticism. Evading the tendencies of apophantic discourse, particularly the positive sciences, the object of interpretation is treated in terms of ready-to-hand entities that are "things themselves as they show themselves" such that Dasein is permitted to experience the "entities which are accessible to it be encountered unconcealedly in themselves."[33] Thus, the self-understanding formed through the authenticity opened up by phenomenology is concomitant with direct access to things in themselves. This, as shall be argued, is the precondition for overcoming the relativizing and reductive tendency of historicism to distance the subject from any possibility of unifying with the hypothetical object of knowledge.

Heidegger, Duns Scotus, and Corbin's Concept of Historiality

Before addressing Corbin's reception of phenomenological hermeneutics, it is necessary to outline Heidegger's understanding of historicism. It is against this background that Corbin justifies superseding Heidegger's worldview by forging a phenomenological connection with traditional metaphysics.[34] Historicism, as understood by Corbin, denotes the view that, "all reality is historical and that there is nothing that is not subject to historical change" and, moreover, stands as "antithetical to the first principle of all traditional metaphysics."[35] While the meaning of this term is perhaps more multifaceted than this definition, it should be taken as standard from this point on as the relevant meaning for Corbin. This aside, Corbin's justification for the phenomenological approach is born out of the critique of historicism originating in Heidegger. The foundation of Heidegger's critique of historicism is found as early as his habilitation thesis on Duns Scotus (1266–1308). His connection with Duns Scotus, moreover, is as Étienne Gilson has demonstrated, a connection with the Islamic intellectual tradition, particularly Avicenna.[36] Beyond his habilitation thesis, the significance of Duns Scotus for Heidegger's own thought is present as early as *Being and Time* in which Heidegger indicates his concern not for Being as such, but for the meaning of Being, i.e. the essence of the logos to which the designation 'Being' refers.[37] Likewise, Heidegger's claim that, "higher than actuality stands possibility" is an echo of Scotus' view, in opposition to Aquinas, that potentiality is superior to actuality insofar as Being is understood as *essentia*.[38] With the transmutation of Scotus' notion of *haecceitas* into Heidegger's notion of facticity Heidegger was permitted the possibility of understanding all questioning, including ontology, as originating in Dasein's being-in-the-world.[39] Heidegger took, as McGarth notes, *haecceitas* to be the "understandable

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[31] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 50, 58.

[32] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 89.

[33] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 187.

[34] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."

[35] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."

[36] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."

[37] McGrath, "Heidegger and Duns Scotus on Truth and Language," 340.

[38] McGrath, "Heidegger and Duns Scotus on Truth and Language," 340.

[39] Haecceitas, literally "thisness": a principle of individuation denoting the irreducible determination of a universal within a particular. E.g., the common nature (*natura communis*) of humanity exists in both Socrates and Alexander yet in each it is individuated as Socrates' particular *haecceitas* and Alexander's particular *haecceitas*. See: Williams, Thomas, "John Duns Scotus"; Facticity: understood as the 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*) of individual

oneness and onceness [of historical life]" and thus a basis for reconceptualizing the experience of history as a pre-theoretical manifestation of a more primordial form of intelligibility.[40] It is this primordial ahistorical mode of intelligibility that allows Corbin to negate historicism as a definitive arbitrator of knowledge. This is represented conceptually through his distinction between 'historiality' and 'historicity' where the former denotes "the existentiating roots of history and of the historical" and the latter, the content present within a particular historical mode of understanding.[41] Thus, historiality is to historicism as existentiating is to existential where the former denotes potency and the latter, an attribute. The meaning of history, ultimately, cannot be found in a historicist hermeneutic for it is only in the existentiating roots of history that its underlying meaning can be apprehended. Historicism, therefore, carries with it its own 'Da', i.e. a primordial philosophical choice that determines the horizon of possible interpretation.

The purpose of Corbin's critique of historicism is born out of the conviction that for the phenomenologist, historicism presents a number of 'false keys'. This critique of historicism proceeds with the claim that the historicist establishes "the course of events of the past" and even attributes meaning to them without feeling responsible for either the course or the meaning.[42] The methodology of historicism is essentially opposed to that of phenomenology because the former has as its precondition a detachment from the object. While for the historicist, the immediate presence of the past is an impossibility, the hermeneutical phenomenologist is required to enact a mode of presence, i.e. to exist within the worldview of the 'Other' in such a way that events past are experienced as immediately present. The making immanent of the past by way of immediate presence essentially differs from the "inoffensive and metaphorical literary 'presence' of the 'living past'" that characterizes the historicist.[43] The hermeneutical phenomenologist, alternatively, sets themself as accountable to the object by allowing it to presence itself internally. Hermeneutic levels are, therefore, conditioned by modes of being. Corbin states that, "There can be no question of dialectically contesting the modes of being. One can understand them, one can refuse them, but they are not such that one can refute them."[44] Thus, while the historicist may not find meaning in higher modes of being, refuting these modes is not possible within the historicist paradigm for it does not directly engage with them. It merely attempts to represent one mode of being through another, incommensurate mode of being.

Corbin's Appropriation of Phenomenological Hermeneutics

Although Corbin is largely in continuity with Heidegger, a notable divergence is evident in his appropriation of phenomenological hermeneutics for ends beyond Heidegger's explicit consideration. If one understands hermeneutics as proceeding from an 'act of presence' (signified by the 'Da' in Dasein) to an illumination of a previously conceal horizon, namely the situatedness of Dasein, then it becomes fathomable how the hermeneutical process could be separated from any particular act of presence. As such, Corbin states that "It wasn't even a question of using Heidegger as a key, but rather of making use of the same key that he had himself made use of, and which was at everyone's disposition."[45] This movement through and

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existence, i.e. the givenness of man's existence in the world. Heidegger states: "Whenever Dasein is, it is as a Fact." See: *Being and Time*, §56; Toner, "The Univocity of Being," 34–35.

[40] McGrath, "Heidegger and Duns Scotus on Truth and Language," 357.
[41] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[42] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[43] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[44] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[45] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."

away from Heidegger is consummated by his affirmation of acts of presence untreated by the latter. Through Corbin's contention that phenomenology has the potential to unveil entities in themselves, he opens the possibility of extending the dimension of presence to "the interworlds of the imagination" and "the intermediary world of the soul" possible only within a vertical cosmology.[46] This interworld of the imagination is a central concept of the *Ishrâqîyûn* which refers to an archetypal world (*alam al-mithal*) located between the mundane and intelligible world accessible through the Avicennian imaginative faculty. For Corbin, the presence of the realm indicates the possibility of access to mystical and prophetic experience by way of phenomenology understood as a means of gaining access to things themselves. For comparative and contextual purposes, it should be noted that Corbin is cited by Nasr as having claimed the Perso-Arabic equivalent of phenomenology to be the Sufi notion of "*kashf al-mahjub*" (lit. the revelation of the hidden) which signifies the essential elucidatory approach of Sufism.[47] For Corbin, *kashf al-mahjub* denotes, "a matter of leading the observer to a point where he allows himself to see what it is that lies hidden."[48] Phenomenology, in likeness, typifies "that project that aims to present the individual with the choice of authenticity and its consequent unveiling of the phenomena (if one accepts the challenge of authenticity)."[49]

While the extent to which Heidegger himself would have opposed this is uncertain, it is worth noting that he was by no means opposed to mysticism and, on the contrary, was very deeply influenced by the medieval theological and Christian Neoplatonic mystical traditions.[50] Nevertheless, Corbin's engagement with the Heideggerian *clavis hermeneutica* as a means of gaining access to traditional metaphysics marks a radical break with the mainstream reception of Heidegger. Given Heidegger's at least minimal receptiveness to mysticism, the criticism frequently directed towards Corbin that he had misappropriated Heidegger or had undergone a radical break with him, is, for Corbin, sufficiently tenuous to be denied outright.[51] While there is certainly a gap between Corbin and Heidegger, whether this ought to be framed in terms of a full-on break remains an open question that, as Corbin notes, might only be resolved through a careful study of Heidegger's *Nachlass*.[52]

Returning to the question of Being, it should be noted that for both Corbin and Heidegger, meaning is the connection between signifier and signified determined by the presence of a mode of being (*modus essendi*) to a mode of understanding (*modus intelligendi*). Dasein, therefore, is the enactment of a presence through and toward which meaning is revealed in the present. The act of presence, thus, is revelatory in such a way that the revelation is itself the revelation of its own meaning.[53] Importantly, this connection between *modi intelligendi* and *modi essendi* is essentially in accordance with the *Ishrâqî* view, most fully expressed in the 'existentialism' of Mulla Sadra, in which the intensification of the being of one's soul is the precondition for accessing higher forms of knowledge. For both Heidegger and the *Ishrâqîyûn*, therefore, knowledge is never merely "deliberating upon concepts" but "the unveiling of that which is happening within us."[54] The divergence becomes conspicuous, however, when one considers how for the latter this transformation is an ascension within a hierarchical vision of Being.[55]

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[46] Mahmoud, *From 'Heidegger to Suhrawardi'*.
[47] Azadpur, Reason Unbound, 35. See also: Nasr, "Henry Corbin," 280.
[48] Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée*, 33.
[49] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[50] See: Sikka, *Forms of Transcendence*; Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*.
[51] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[52] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[53] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[54] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[55] Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics*, XX.

Corbin, furthermore, has been accused by his detractors of suggesting a unity between the worldview of Heidegger and the *Ishrâqîyûn*. The question is then whether the Heideggerian Analytic maintains implicit presuppositions that underlie a specific *Weltanschauung*. This, for Corbin, is not only not the case but is also a major point of separation between himself and Heidegger. While Heidegger's hermeneutics centers around the *situs* of human finitude, which he designates with the term 'being-towards-Death' (*Sein zum Tode*), the *Ishrâqîyûn* center themselves around a *situs* of Presence (*hozûr*) which terminates not in death but in there hereafter and hence, Corbin's coinage of the term 'being-towards-Beyond-Death'. It is through this difference in pre-existential determination constituting the 'Da' of Dasein that the respective horizons of Heidegger and the *Ishrâqîyûn* are distinguished. Corbin states that the task is then, "to hold and press this notion of Presence, as closely and as intently as possible. To what is this human presence, this Being-there, present?"[56] From this approach, Corbin ultimately transmutes the Heideggerian 'being-towards-death' into the Sadrian 'being-towards-beyond-death' with the necessary consequence of revealing not only the aforementioned connection between *modus essendi* and *modus intelligendi* but also the complementary nature of philosophy and mysticism for it is only in conjunction with the latter that presential knowledge can be fully apprehended.[57]

The Imaginal from Heidegger to Mulla Sadra

Corbin held that the restoration of the spiritual dimension in modern man is the precondition for overcoming the problems of modernity.[58] The Heideggerian Analytic brings us close to an understanding of the historically contingent motives behind regarding historical reality as singularly or primarily real. This is evidently a point of continuity between Corbin's understanding of hermeneutics and the traditional Islamic notion of hermeneutics as *ta'wil*. As described by Nasir Khusraw, a notable Ismaili influence on Corbin, *ta'wil* comprises the exegetical unveiling of the esoteric (*batin*) dimension, i.e. the inner truth, of, for instance, the Qur'an. It is, therefore, a system by which one can "bring the word back to its point of origin", for "[t]he first of all existing things is Origination (*ibdaʿ*), which is one with the Intellect, and the Intellect is that which sustains (*muʾayyid*) all of the emissaries [of God]."[59] There is, thus, a necessary connection between hermeneutics and the ascension of the existential hierarchy. Corbin, furthermore, was incredibly concerned by what he took to be the decline of Occidental philosophy into metaphysical nihilism characterized by an ever-increasing gap between knowledge and faith, a total separation of philosophy from theology, and the characterization of man as doomed to nothingness.[60] Historicism, through its reduction of the world to only that which can be apprehended within the material intellect, deprives the world of any spiritual fecundity.[61] Metaphysical nihilism, in this sense, negates all realities that exceed the horizon of material experience and rational demonstration such that spiritual experience is rendered entirely incomprehensible insofar as it is irreducible to psychological or sociological phenomena.[62] This demystification and negation of the sacred can be characterized as a reduction of the world to the exoteric (*zahir*) dimension with the total exclusion of the esoteric (*batin*) or spiritual dimension. Thus, reality is reduced to the purely horizontal and deprived of any transcendental or vertical horizon.

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[56] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[57] Neuve-Eglise, "Hermeneutics and the Unique Quest of Being." X.
[58] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[59] Ormsby, *Between Reason and Revelation*, ¶112.
[60] Neuve-Eglise, "Hermeneutics and the Unique Quest of Being," 18.
[61] Neuve-Eglise, "Hermeneutics and the Unique Quest of Being," 18.
[62] Corbin, "On Apophatic Theology as the Antidote Against Nihilism."

The philosopher, according to Corbin, should not allow himself to be influenced by reductionism and instead should contend with the maximal scope of Being as well as the range of possibilities that this may open for the Being of all particular beings.[63] The task of the philosopher then is not merely to accumulate and synthesize concepts in reason but consists in "responding to a Call which relentlessly interpellates us," i.e. to discover our complete being through the recovery of its spiritual dimension.[64] In accordance with Mulla Sadra, Corbin holds that the fulfillment of a being's destiny can only be actualized within the Imaginal world as this is the point of reconciliation between spirit and intellect.[65] The implication present here is that Western philosophy requires the restoration of a dimension lost at least since Descartes and Mersenne.[66] Here, most expressly in Descartes, the traditional notion that the transformation of the soul is a necessary precondition for knowledge was replaced by an empty conception of the soul through which the correctness of propositions is the sole condition for knowledge. This restoration, therefore, cannot take place by way of the psychologism of, for instance, C.G. Jung (although this may serve as an initial step) but must proceed by way of a recognition of the reality of the Imaginal as imminent and not merely concurrent.

The meaning of this reorientation is made apparent when one considers Corbin's view that the differences between Heidegger and Mulla Sadra represent the divergent paths taken by 'Occidental' and 'Oriental' philosophy respectively. Although the two converge on the idea that beyond all beings there is the underlying reality of Being, as has been ascertained, there is a critical diverge in their respective apprehensions of the meaning of Being. Where for Heidegger, man's philosophical understanding of Being is constrained by the limitations imposed upon him by death, Mulla Sadra—through a synthesis of mysticism and reason—extends the purview of philosophy to what for Heidegger is exclusively the domain of mysticism.[67] This is made possible for Mulla Sadra through his ideas of inner intuition (*shuhud*) and presential knowledge (*'ilm huduri*) unified as visionary presential knowledge (*al-'ilm al-huduri al-shuhudi*). He asserts that, "Being can only be known by visionary presential knowledge (*al-'ilm al-huduri al-shududi*), and the inner-reality of light can only be perceived by an immediate illuminative correlation (*al-idafa al-ishraqiyya*) and actual presence (*al-hudur al-ayni*).[68] From this, it can be understood that the apprehension of higher modes of being is made possible conceptually and experientially only through the non-linguistic and non-conceptual ascension of the soul. Through the intensification of the act of presence, the material body undergoes a process of spiritualization whereby the soul ascends to higher spiritual modalities such that the imminent apprehension of that which rests beyond the transcendental horizons of man's death is made possible. This process is described by Corbin as one in which the, "intensification of the acts of the exister, as professed in the metaphysic of Sadrâ Shîrâzî, raises the status of the body to the state of a spiritual body, or even a divine body (*jism ilâhî*)."[69] Thus, through the supersession of the existential horizon of Dasein demarcated by Heidegger, Mulla Sadra gains access to a higher order of signification, namely the domain of Imaginal Intuition. This, for Corbin, can be regarded as a demonstration of the possibility of a restoration of 'post-metaphysical' man's vertical dimension.

The unveiling of the imaginal through the act of presence described by Corbin is then the precondition for understanding not only, as he states, "the spirit of Shia Islam" but any mode of knowing situated in a likeness to the perennial wisdom of the Shi'ite esotericists. Corbin

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[63] Neuve-Eglise, "Hermeneutics and the Unique Quest of Being," 18.
[64] Neuve-Eglise, "Hermeneutics and the Unique Quest of Being," 18.
[65] Neuve-Eglise, "Hermeneutics and the Unique Quest of Being," 19.
[66] Corbin, "Biographical Post-scriptum to a Philosophical Interview."
[67] Corbin, "From Heidegger to Sohrawardi."
[68] Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysic*, 89.
[69] Corbin, "On Apophatic Theology as the Antidote Against Nihilism."

states that, "[t]he essential prerequisite to understand the spirit of Shia Islam is to become its spiritual host. And being the host of a spiritual universe means starting by building it a dwelling place in yourselves."[70] The philosopher has then a responsibility, through imaginative engagement with texts, to situate him or herself in the act of presence that made possible the experience behind the expressed ideas. The condemnation of transcendental philosophy to the dustbin of history is only meaningful insofar as philosophers are unwilling to be the host of this ever-present knowledge. Transcendental philosophy, then, is not dead in itself but only in the minds of those consumed by purely immanent horizontal ontology that underlies the paradigm of historicism. In summation, Corbin found in Islamic philosophy, and particularly that of the *Ishrâqîyûn*, an answer to the problems posed by historicism and the tendency of modern nihilism to negate spiritual phenomena. The meaning of the *Ishrâqîyûn*, and especially the Sadrian theosophy, for modern Occidental man is nothing less than a profound invitation to the restoration of philosophy's primordial relation to wisdom understood in the classical sense of Sophia.

Criticisms of Corbin's Approach

Prior to venturing into broader considerations on the nature and significance of Corbin's approach, it is appropriate to address the three predominant criticisms. The first is that of Orientalism. Some have charged Corbin with engaging in a form of "reverse Orientalism" in which the "Orient" is sacralized towards the end of the profanization of the "Occident." From this angle, Corbin can be interpreted as having approached the interpretation of the "Orient," particularly Shia Islam and its intellectual-mystical tradition, with an eye not to accuracy but to the ulterior purpose of foiling his true target, namely the Western modernity.[71] The principal instance of this is apparently found in Corbin's tendency to "over-mystify" the Islamic intellectual tradition. Gutas contends that Corbin's Illuminationist or "theosophical" approach interprets Illuminationism as a synthesis of *falsafa* (i.e., Peripateticism) and Islamic mysticism. From this synthesis, Corbin is purported to have held that all Arabic philosophy is essentially "theosophic," and thereby prophetic, in orientation.[72] Gutas takes this characterization of Islamic philosophy as a form of Orientalism not only for its essentialism but above all for its apparently deliberate ahistoricism. Postulating Gutas' claim that there is no evidence of mysticism in Avicenna, the credibility of Corbin's characterization of the theosophic essence of Islamic philosophy deteriorates. This, however, remains contentious given Corbin's devotion of an entire work to the mystical, visionary dimension of Avicenna.[73] Beyond this, according to a criterion of Orientalism described by Sajjad Rizvi, Corbin can be labeled an Orientalist insofar as he can be accused of making claims without historical or contextual substantiation.[74] It has also been noted by Muhsin Mahdi that Corbin is the last of the German Romanticists. This is perhaps true insofar as Corbin can accurately be characterized, as Gutas has, of conflating the theosophical orientation of the *Ishrâqîyûn* with the totality of Islamic philosophy.[75] In continuity with Edward Said, Mahdi notes the importance of recognizing that the Orientalism of German Romanticism is of different strain from that of French and English forms of Orientalism which are essentially interwoven with colonial interests.[76]

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[70] Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 7.
[71] For more on this topic, see: Corrado, "Orientalism in Reverse."
[72] Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy", 17.
[73] See Gutas: "Intellect Without Limits," 351–372; Corbin. *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*.
[74] Rizvi, "Philosophy as Way of Life in the World of Islam," 34–35.
[75] Mahdi, "Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy," 73–98.
[76] Mahdi, "Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy," 75.

The second principal criticism, to which the first is closely related, is that of skepticism concerning the tenability of Corbin's approach on both a metaphysical and an epistemological level. Metaphysically, there is the question of how Corbin can rationally justify the existence of the Imaginal realm. This issue, while certainly central to the justification of Corbin's entire approach, can likely only be resolved by similar means to those prescribed by Corbin, namely an active participation in the act of presence. The precondition for knowledge of this kind is a particular mode of experience that cannot be accessed through mere deliberation on concepts. That is, it cannot simply be deconstructed through argumentation because its foundation is not conceptual but spiritual and experiential. Although this 'Gnostic' attitude may not be palatable to all, the cogency of its internal reasoning demands sufficient respect for scholars to take seriously the possibility of its truth. Epistemologically, one may doubt the tenability or value of rejecting historicism when, as Rizvi notes, a contextual understanding of a given philosopher is necessary for understanding the true meaning of their writings. That this is the case can in no way be denied. While it is likely that Corbin himself would have agreed with this supposed criticism to some degree, evidence to the contrary is found in his deliberate selection of only those phenomena that relate to his philosophical concerns.[77] Fazlur Rahman notes, furthermore, that Corbin misrepresents Mulla Sadra by placing him virtually exclusively with a visionary or imaginal framework when it would be more appropriate to set him within a rational framework.[78] The point of difference, where the independent value of Corbin's approach is preserved, is in his assertion that historicist reductionism is not only insufficient but antithetical to accurate interpretation. Thus, insofar as the instrumentalization of historical knowledge is towards the end of making the text accessible, for example, an insistence on philological accuracy, the historicist reduction need not take place. The problem of historicism arises only when it is taken as a lens through which one can determine the veracity or reality of spiritual experience.

The third form of criticism, which pertains to the problem of worldviews and their interrelation, is developed by Steven Wasserstrom in his work *Religion After Religion*.[79] Here it is argued that in Corbin—along with other Eranos thinkers such as Mircea Eliade and Gershom Scholem—contracts the locus of true religious meaning to something other than what religion has traditionally been. Under this view, Corbin reduces religion to the domain of myth and symbol, that is, the domain of the Imaginal. This characterization, for Wasserstrom, differs essentially from the traditional experience of religiosity that these men are attempting to restore. Prior to modernity, the domain of the social was the locus of religious meaning to an equal or greater extent than the Imaginal. This problem arises from a paradox in his approach: through his attempt to avoid reducing religion to societal causes and social theory, he is forced to contract the locus of religious meaning to the pre- or supra-social. Thus, while this contraction may have been necessary for the theoretical restoration of religious meaning, it sets his approach in a paradoxical relation to the traditional experience of religious meaning. As such, it would be inappropriate to characterize Corbin's interpretation of religion as 'traditional' despite his attempt to restore that which has been lost in modernity. The question here, which will be elaborated on in the final section, is whether this can truly be considered a fault given the possible necessity of a movement through and an integration of modern and postmodern modes of thinking in the restoration of verticality.[80]

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[77] Adams, "The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin," 140.
[78] Adams, "The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin," 140.
[79] Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 242–243.
[80] Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 242–243.

Concluding Remarks on Corbin's Approach

In this final section, the task of assessing the thought of Corbin is addressed. Although treatment of the three aforementioned criticisms may be in order, its lack of centrality to the broader philosophical project permits its exclusion. Furthermore, while historical accuracy and the overcoming of Orientalist bias is perhaps necessary for proper engagement with Islamic philosophy, it ought to be neither the starting point nor the ultimate aim of this engagement. As has been noted, this essay is essentially concerned with the meaning of Islamic philosophy for the task of the contemporary philosopher, not the task of the 'historian' understood as one who impersonally pursues contextually precise knowledge of a given phenomenon. While some degree of historicism is beneficial to philosophy—as the misunderstanding of philosophers is certainly undesirable—the goal of the philosopher differs from that of the historicist in that the philosopher, classically conceived, is in pursuit of the reality present in or represented by ideas and not the reduction of ideas to a non-ideational reality. Taking seriously Corbin's assertion that he is neither a "Germanist" nor an "Orientalist" but a "Philosopher pursuing his Quest wherever the Spirit guides him," the meaning of his interpretation of Islamic philosophy takes on a meaning different from what it might be for the historicist.[81] Although critics of Corbin are correct in asserting the untenability of an ahistorical approach given the necessity of philological accuracy and related concerns, Corbin nevertheless demonstrates that to a certain degree, the historicist study of Islamic philosophy is necessarily insufficient given its occultation of the relative meaning of the object of study.

The principal value of Corbin's approach is found in his demonstration of the possibility of undertaking a study of traditional metaphysics that is both true to its object and that addresses and integrates the theoretical and existential problems posed by post-Nietzschean ontology. While Corbin does not argue for a total denial of historicism, he does successfully argue for the insufficiency of historicism for the study of not only Islamic philosophy and mysticism but traditional metaphysics generally. This is evident through the connection drawn between the capacity to understand verticality and the necessity of the transformation of the philosopher's mode of being. A difficulty with an assessment of Corbin is that as with mystically oriented philosophy generally, it is not reducible to logical argumentation but carries with it a concomitant spiritual dimension that can only be apprehended through the development of the soul. There is thus, a 'Gnostic' and esoteric dimension to Corbin's thought whereby one must undergo certain initiatory transformations in order for the true meaning of the doctrines to be made comprehensible. Thus, the relevant propositions are almost by necessity incomprehensible to those who lack the capacity to intuit the metaphysical meaning of the Imaginal. As such, a purely rational negation of his extension of Heidegger is an impossible order for any such attempt necessarily ignores the first principle of its opponent. In other words, attempts to refute Corbin on a merely conceptual level would mean not having addressed the essence of his approach.

Granting this, one might be justified in treating Corbin similarly to how he treats Heidegger, namely as the articulator of a *clavis hermeneutica* separable from the particular worldview of the philosopher. Corbin's perhaps excessive ahistoricism need not be treated as an absolute condition of employing his approach. The value of his thought in this respect can be seen as a demonstration of not only the intellectual insufficiency of pure historicist methods but of the spiritual impoverishment that they engender. Insofar as one is willing to be open to the internal meaning of the claims made by Corbin, he can be said to successfully demonstrate that historicist scholarship and, indeed, much of post-Cartesian philosophy, are not genuine philosophy for they lack the authentic spiritual dimension that connects Philia to Sophia.

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[81]　Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi."

Beyond the significance of Corbin's approach for contemporary scholarship, the most profound elements of Corbin's thought are evidently found in those developments that merit him the title of philosopher. What distinguishes Corbin as an independent thinker with a contribution that ought to be taken seriously is his reformulation of postmodern metaphysics in such a way that reentry into verticality and, indeed, even to metaphysics is shown to be plausible. Corbin has demonstrated that Heidegger's ontology can be understood as reopening a door to the house of Platonism that had been increasingly concealed to us since the advent of modernity. In this light, the question of the meaning of Being is then the question of the meaning of the worldview that permits the appearance of verticality. The central principle here is not Platonism as understood by Heidegger, namely as the historical locus of essentialism, but of a more subtle, whole Platonism that has non-discursive mystical intuition as its foundation. This more primordial form of Platonism, which Corbin demonstrates to be perennially accessible for the philosopher, is both the home of verticality and the basis for the philosophical way of life for it is within the realm of verticality that the ascent of the soul is shown to be meaningful.

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