

The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed. L.E. Hahn, R. E. Auxier, and L. W. Stone, Jr., Chicago/LaSalle, Open Court, 2001.

‘*By their fruits ye shall know them.*’ One can scarcely imagine a richer illustration of that scriptural lesson, in our own day, than the 30 essays included in the 1001 pages of this latest volume of the ‘Library of Living Philosophers’. Certainly the breadth and depth of the enterprise of ‘philosophy’, if that term is to be applied to the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, must be understood in the classical, truly universal sense of *hikma* (or ‘*irfān*). And only Martin Buber, among the many figures who have earlier appeared in this prestigious series, was also a spiritual teacher, creative author, activist and truly global figure whose prolific works, teachings, students and vast range of influences so undeniably merit the term *hakīm*. Given the immense scope (and volume!) of Dr. Nasr’s writings and deeper personal influences, each of the essays included here is not so much a ‘criticism’ (only a handful even remotely fit that description) as a personal homage and testimony to the manifold facets of that work, a kind of symphonic composition in which even those who may think they have known either the man or his writings will be constantly surprised by the discovery of new ‘voices’ and instruments—and where those who are encountering him more or less for the first time will no doubt experience something of that *hayra*, or illuminating wonder, with which he concludes his own ‘intellectual autobiography’ (p. 85).

Almost all readers even marginally familiar with Dr. Nasr’s writings are likely to find his opening autobiographical essay (pp. 1-85; covering his childhood through to 1998) the most enlightening, informative and potentially challenging part of this book. What is so striking about this section is the way it highlights the series of *personal relations and encounters*—extending from famous thinkers, scholars and religious figures from all over the world to dozens of his own students and colleagues in every corner of the globe—which from childhood on have providentially formed the living framework (the ‘roots’, branches and prolific fruits) and ever-expanding expressions of Dr. Nasr’s influence and of all the multiple ‘traditions’ which have shaped and given impetus to his work. Readers who have only encountered him through this or that published volume might understandably take this profusion of names to be a kind of celebrity ‘name-dropping’, but anyone who has known the man even briefly will recognise how absolutely essential, foundational and integral this element of personal interaction has always been to his own personality, work and the notion of ‘tradition’ which has informed it from his earliest years.

More particularly, for that vast majority of Dr. Nasr's international 'public' (readers and listeners) who have never known directly of his roots and connections in the many different fields of traditional Iranian philosophy, spirituality and religious learning—and who might otherwise see him simply as another spokesperson for the 'perennialist' school of thought—the most personally revealing, detailed and evocative portions of his rich autobiography (which is far more than merely 'intellectual'!) will be the many pages where he speaks of his own youth and then of his later years spent studying with so many of the today almost mythical Iranian masters of the varied fields of traditional wisdom in his homeland, not to mention a sort of 'who's who' of the formative figures of twentieth-century Islamic scholarship in virtually every area of the Islamic world and the West.

The immense bibliography of Dr. Nasr's publications (pp. 833-964, covering the period from 1961 through 1999) must also be understood in the context of that same almost unimaginably rich network of personal contacts and expressions. In particular, all those who have seen him as a passionate and persuasive public speaker (in—at least—equally fluent and gripping Arabic, French, German, Spanish or English, as well as his native Persian) will realise that simply a listing of his typically crowded, long-awaited and memorable public presentations and lectures (and in recent years, more and more prominent appearances in the international mass media) would far surpass in length this bibliography of written works. And more commonly, it has been through those unforgettable personal speaking appearances all over the globe, rather than his written works, that he has awakened the hundreds of life-long vocations which are so concretely and significantly reflected here in this catalogue of translations of his works into the 22 languages (by no means simply Islamic ones) which are included in this bibliography. In most cases, each of those translations, in itself, represents another philosophical and spiritual 'autobiography'—almost all of them hidden from the public spotlight—which would speak volumes about the hidden transformations and more lasting influences which have been brought about all over the world through all the expressions of this extraordinarily 'catalytical' work.

Certainly one of the most distinctive defining features of S. H. Nasr's written works, as with his speaking and other public activities (and from his earliest writings onward), has been its truly phenomenal and genuinely '*cosmo-politan*' scope, both in terms of intellectual or academic fields, and in its equally remarkable range of cultural and religious reference-points and audiences. That unparalleled range of subjects, audiences and civilisational perspectives is beautifully reflected in the broad spectrum of contributors to this volume.

Although all of them appear here in English, they include figures from at least twenty other national, linguistic or religious backgrounds. As a result, readers who have primarily encountered Dr. Nasr's works (and students and disciples) in such areas as several traditions of Islamic philosophy, the 'perennial philosophy' and comparative religious thought, Sufism, the history and philosophy of science, or the contemporary ideologies of Islamic 'reform', will all find penetrating summaries of, or novel particular insights into, his distinctive contributions in each of those often academically separated areas, usually by prominent international scholarly authorities in each of the fields in question.

But even assiduous students of his writings will also discover fascinating windows onto possibly lesser-known facets of his work, such as Luce Lopez-Baralt's essay (pp. 393-428) on his own poetry and other writings in Spanish, or L. Lewisohn's condensed summary (pp. 669-684) of his influential and still seminal insights (usually expressed in short essays and public lectures) into the essential spiritual dimensions of the traditional Islamic arts, especially where he has taken up the quintessentially Islamic (and Persian!) arts of music and spiritual poetry. On the other hand, readers who might be encountering Dr. Nasr's thought and writing for the first time will probably find that Pierre Lory's remarkably insightful and sensitive essay entitled 'Know the World to Know Yourself' (pp. 717-734) probably gives the best overall, synthetic explanation of the *intrinsic inner connections* of all the facets of his work.

One of the most satisfying features of this particular volume is that the editors have essentially abandoned the medieval '*disputatio*' format of the Living Philosophers series, and instead have allowed Dr. Nasr to amplify and elaborate on (rather than to rebut) the positive insights and contributions of each essay. Perhaps the one relative omission we noted is the lack of an essay focused on what has surely been one of the most 'prophetic' and lastingly influential areas of Dr. Nasr's writings, from his earliest days: i.e., his focus on the 'ecological crisis' and the fundamental spiritual—as well as environmental and economic—dimensions of both that crisis itself and the necessary elements of any lastingly constructive and humanly satisfying response. Although aspects of that topic are brought up in passing at various points, his pioneering writings in this area offer a beautifully inclusive and practically unavoidable illustration of the cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and trans-historical (while historically informed) breadth of vision which has characterised Seyyed Hossein Nasr's individual contributions and creative insights in all the many fields that are highlighted in this volume.

Finally, we would like to point to what is certainly the most central and unavoidable *practical* lesson of this monumental volume, and of the immense work and far wider range of influences it represents. One could not find more concrete proof that true philosophy today, in all its equally indispensable dimensions, has become an explicitly—not just ideally—universal and unavoidably *global* endeavour. When Dr. Nasr began his long and prolific career fifty years ago, one could still speak confidently, accurately and empirically of a multiplicity of ‘civilisations’ and authentic religious ‘traditions’, and hopefully live out what was reflected in that speech. As a result, some of his more recent readers have surely tended, perhaps understandably, to view much of his writing—and of the wider ‘perennialist’ school with which he has been associated—as a kind of nostalgic longing (to take a stock expression from classical Persian poetry) for a long-lost, once real, but now irretrievably utopian Beloved. This volume, insofar as it constantly re-situates the recurrent abstractions of Dr. Nasr’s religious and philosophic writings much more concretely in their actual living and changing contexts, should be most helpful in dispelling any such misconceptions.

From that perspective, the most memorable new contribution here—in addition to the multiple insights flowing from his autobiography—is his revealingly personal and open-ended reply (pp. 381-392) to Eliot Deutsch’s essay on the actual existential dilemmas (simultaneously philosophic and eminently practical) of the practising artist and architect today, since this safely ‘aesthetic’ subject of *ihsān* momentarily avoids all the familiar minefields of most religious and philosophical discussion. Like the accomplished Sufi teacher that he also is, Dr. Nasr’s single paragraph describing his long youthful philosophic discussions with Walter Gropius (in Cambridge in the 1950’s) beautifully encapsulates and communicates, better than whole volumes of analytical prose, the lifelong practical tensions, philosophic dilemmas and truly *philo-sophic* aspirations which have informed and driven his phenomenally prolific life’s work—and its increasing global appeal to ever more diverse audiences—from that day down to this new century.

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