

POURJAVADY Reza (ed.)  
*Philosophy in Qajar Iran*

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The book under review examines one of the understudied aspects of intellectual history in Qajar Iran: the lives and contributions of the most prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers and theosophists. Under the Qajars (r. 1796-1925), Iran came under the influence of Western modernization, a development that triggered the process of transition from the traditional to the modern. Put in the context of these trends and events, the history of philosophical thought in Qajar Iran is, therefore, worth close attention by students of modern Iran.

The edited volume under review stands out for its detailed coverage of the history of philosophy in 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran. Organized into eight chapters, it brings into focus the development of philosophical thought in Qajar Iran as reflected in the works of seven philosophers and theosophists. The life and contribution of each of these seven thinkers are contextualized and analyzed as continuations of the themes and perspectives synthesized and investigated in the works of the Safavid-era philosophers and theosophists. The closing chapter takes a look at philosophy in the past century with special reference to the reception of the philosophical legacy of Qajar-era thinkers in contemporary Iran. The philosophers, whose work and thought are discussed in this volume, include Mulla Mahdi Naraqi, Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i, Mulla 'Ali Nuri, Mulla Hadi Sabzawari, Aqa 'Ali Mudarris Tihriani, Muhammad Rida Qumsha'i, and Mirza Abu l-Hasan Jilwa. The chapters covering the life and intellectual portrait of these seven Qajar-era philosophers bring into sharper focus their life and education, their teaching career, and philosophical works.

The introduction provides a detailed account of the research done by several generations of Iranists and historians of religion on the development of philosophy in Qajar Iran. The study of philosophy under the Qajars dated back to the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, the well-known theoretician of racism, includes information on a number of contemporary Iranian philosophers and theosophists in his *Les religions et philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale* (1865). Almost a century later, Henry Corbin (d. 1987) started studying the works of Persian philosophers and theosophists in a systematic manner. Central to Corbin's research

were the works of the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Mulla Sadra (d. 1045/1635-36), whom Pourjavady in his introduction to the edited volume describes as "the major authoritative philosopher of Iran" (p. 7). In fact, Mulla Sadra's thought has remained at the center of philosophical discourse in Iran ever since the opening part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapter 1 examines Mulla Mahdi Naraqi's life and philosophical thought. It is argued that Mulla Sadra's philosophical contributions deeply influenced Naraqi's thought as a theosophist. Even so, according to Pourjavady, "there are some crucial ontological issues with respect to which Naraqi took a different position, his discourse remains invariably post-Sadrian [*sic*]." After examining Naraqi's theological and philosophical writings, it is concluded that he was by no means a Sadraian thinker. All his life Naraqi remained critical of Mulla Sadra's concept of "existence" which had its origins in the ideas of medieval theosophists such as Ibn 'Arabi and Simnani.

Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i's works and philosophical views are discussed and examined in the next chapter. Here, Ahsa'i emerges as one of the most innovative philosophical minds in Qajar Iran. However, it is stated that underlying Ahsa'i's thought is a "presuppositionless approach" which makes it harder for students of Qajar-era philosophy to understand his philosophical methodology (p. 90). Ahsa'i's philosophical views represent "the dialectical phase of Islamic philosophy and illuminationism" (p. 121). Even so, Ahsa'i's philosophical discourse is remarkable for its logical objectivity and flexibility of its dialectical tenets (p. 122).

Chapter 3 is devoted to the Isfahan-based theosophist Mulla 'Ali Nuri. The emphasis has been given to the way in which Nuri's philosophical views were shaped by Mulla Sadra's teachings. Nuri's career as a master philosopher and theosophist prepared the way for the revival of Sadrian philosophical scholarship and teaching in Isfahan. It is argued that Nuri's teachings epitomized philosophical theory as synthesized and expounded in early Qajar Iran (p. 157-9).

The chapter on Mulla Hadi Sabzawari pivots on the life and works of "one of the most important advocates and commentators" of Sadrian philosophy (p. 201.) While his years of studying and teaching enabled Sabzawari to criticize aspects of Sadrian philosophy, he narrowed the focus of his teachings and scholarly output on epistemology and natural philosophy, the two issues that do not belong to Sadrian philosophy (p. 202). The remainder of chapter 4 is devoted to Sabzawari's scholarship and views on topics such as matter and form, mental existence, the unity of the knower and the known, the estimative faculty, and divine perfection.

Chapters 5-7 deal with three little-known Qajar-era theosophists and philosophers. These include Aqa 'Ali Mudarris Tihrani, Muhammad Rida Qumsha'i, and Mirza Abu I-Hasan Jilwa. Mudarris Tihrani is represented as one of the few commentators of Sadrian philosophy who had studied the works of Aristotle and Neoplatonist philosophers (p. 250). Mudarris Tihrani's familiarity with the tenets of Aristotelian philosophy had enabled him to pepper his "ontological" comments on Mulla Sadra's teachings with a series of innovative and original insights and comments. Central to Mudarris Tihrani's critique of Mulla Sadra are the concepts of primacy and simplicity of existence, divine perfection, and non-essential nature of the "Necessary Existent." (p. 251). A late Qajar-era philosopher, Qumsha'i had been visited by Gobineau during the latter's stay in Iran. Qumsha'i spent his early years in Isfahan and after moving to Tehran achieved fame and preeminence as the only scholar and teacher of Islamic mysticism in the capital. A Sadrian philosopher, Qumsha'i drew closely on Ibn 'Arabi's concept of "the individual oneness of existence," a methodological feat that turned mysticism to a key source of inspiration for the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century commentators of Mulla Sadra's philosophical teachings. Qumsha'i is also notable for his close attention to the issue of Shiite imamate and its philosophical and mystical connotations (p. 279). Abu I-Hasan Jilwa's teachings, which are discussed in chapter 7, stand out for their eclecticism as reflected in his efforts to approach Sadrian philosophy from the vantage point of Avicenna's philosophical opinions (p. 298).

The concluding chapter provides a comprehensive overview of philosophical scholarship in 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran as well as the introduction of Western philosophy. Primarily, it focuses on the introduction of modern Western philosophy in Iran, highlighting the contributions of a number of early Qajar-era travelers and thinkers such as Mirza Salih Shirazi. The emphasis has been placed on the emergence of new literary genres during the period in question and it is argued that these literary innovations «belong more to the realm of *littérature engagée* than to that of academic treatises» (p. 317). Reform of educational system and translation of texts in Western languages are two other factors that Seidel points up as of main importance. Be that as it may, he singles out the Qajar intellectuals as the main driving force behind the introduction of the modern western philosophy in Iran. Accordingly, he pays close attention to the works of this group of intellectuals. The chapter closes with suggestions regarding the need in modern scholarship for a more systematic evaluation of the writings of Iranian intellectuals which could enable us to attain "a more

comprehensive image of the reception process one has to locate these intellectuals in their respective contexts and reconstruct their intellectual networks more thoroughly" (p. 362).

A pioneering contribution to the intellectual history of Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Philosophy in Qajar Iran* constitutes an indispensable reference work for students of Qajar society and politics.

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