

## **Traditional science and *scientia sacra*: Origin and dimensions of Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s concept of science**

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**Abstract:** Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian philosopher and an exponent of traditional Islam, is considered one of the most important scholars of Islamic and religious studies in the world today. His conception of science is interesting in the sense that he strives to rejuvenate the notion of traditional science and *scientia sacra* (sacred knowledge), which lie at the heart of traditional civilization. He considers these two notions (traditional science and *scientia sacra*) as antithesis to modern science. Nasr’s elaboration of traditional science and *scientia sacra* serves as an alternative to discourses of Islamization of science which have been put forward by some scholars. This paper tries to examine the core ideas of Nasr’s construct of science, to highlight their ontological, epistemological, and axiological bases, and to trace the root of Nasr’s conception of science to living Islamic philosophical tradition.

**Keywords:** Tradition, Traditional science, *Scientia sacra*, Modern science, Philosophical basis, Neo-Suhrawardian.

**Abstrak:** Seyyed Hossein Nasr merupakan seorang ahli falsafah Iran dan juga seorang pembela tradisional Islam. Beliau dianggap sebagai salah seorang cendekiawan Islam yang paling unggul dalam pengajian-pengajian agama di dunia masa kini. Konseptualisasi sains beliau adalah menarik dalam erti kata bahawa beliau berusaha sedayaupaya untuk mencerna dan meremajakan sains tradisi dan *scientia sacra* (ilmu yang suci) yang terletak di pusat tamadun tradisional. Beliau mengambil kira dua tanggapan (sains tradisional dan *scientia sacra*) sebagai antitesis kepada sains moden. Nasr telah menerangkan dengan lanjut lagi bahawa sains tradisional merupakan salah satu alternatif

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bagi perbincangan sains Islamisasi, yang diutarakan oleh beberapa orang cendekiawan terdahulu. Kertas kerja ini cuba menguji pendapat-pendapat asas Nasr tentang pembentukan sains, dengan mengutarakan asas-asas ontologikal, epistemologikal dan axiologikal. Di samping itu, kertas kerja ini juga turut menjejak konsepsi Nasr terhadap sains dalam kehidupan tradisi falsafah Islam.

**Kata kunci:** Tradisi, Sains tradisional, *Scientia sacra*, Sains moden, Asas falsafah, Neo-Suhrawardian.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) belongs to the few scholars who advocate a concept of science that does not negate the spiritual dimension of science. Nasr, who occupied himself with the history of science and philosophy with emphasis on Islamic science and philosophy, has persevered in this area with a resultant competency and respect.

The time Nasr spent studying in the U.S. is one of the major events marking his career, enabling him to enrich his horizon regarding the Western intellectual tradition (Aslam, 1998, p. 1). Nasr was very lucky to have met proponents of traditionalism in the West who furnished him with the profoundest meaning and foundation for his conceptualizations, after his long journey through a whole variety of schools of thought, and modern sciences in the West.

In 1968, Nasr began his teaching career as an associate professor in history and philosophy of science at Tehran University. In Iran, he profited from the teaching of the traditional masters of Islamic philosophy, by being able to view the classic aspects of Islamic philosophy through their eyes, after having seen them through the eyes of his Western professors (Aslam, 1998, p. 18). In 1984, he was appointed professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University where he was responsible for developing courses on perennial philosophy, comparative religion, science, and mysticism (Nasr, 2001, p. 79-80).

Nasr's thoughts are grounded in living Islamic philosophical tradition, mostly from the school of illumination (*al-ḥikmat al-ishrāqiyya*). When we examine the structure of Nasr's concepts and those of the founder of the school of illumination Shahāb al-Dīn Yahyā ibn Habash Suhrawardī (1155-1191), we can observe the affinity between the two. Suhrawardī argued about the unity and universality of the Divine Principle, to which end he introduced such terms as *al-ḥikmat al-laduniyya* (divine wisdom) and *al-ḥikmat al-'atīqa* (ancient wisdom)

(Nasr, 1964: 61-62). Such a standpoint is shared by Nasr, who holds the conviction that there is such a thing as perennial and universal wisdom; therefore he has developed and advocated the school of Perennialism.

The perennial philosophy (*philosophia perennis* or *sophia perennis*) was probably first used in the West by Agustino Steuco (1479-1548) as the title of his work *De perenni philosophia libri X*, published in 1540 (Shariati, 1995, p. 133; Wiener, 1973, vol. III, p. 457-459; Schmitt, 1966, p. 515-517). Perennial philosophy connotes the universal truth related to *sanatana dharma* in Hinduism and *al-hikmat al-khālida*<sup>1</sup> in Islam. This philosophy shakes the foundations of the ordinary distinctions between philosophy and religion, emphasizing the affinity between religions and the universal principle underlying all religions (Butterworth, 2002, p. 101). It opposes the rationalism of the Enlightenment philosophers and tries to furnish tradition with a divine position (Ernst, 1994, p. 176; Omar, 1995, p. 2-3; Smith, 1984, p. 111).

I consider Nasr to be one of the heirs to Suhrawardī's tradition of thought. When we trace the history of Islamic philosophy, we come across such figures as the medieval Iranian philosopher Mīr Dāmād (d. 1630), and the leading Iranian Shi'ite philosopher of the Safavid period, Mullā Sadrā (ca. 1571-2 to 1640), both of whom appreciated Suhrawardī and his school. They are all the heirs to Suhrawardī's philosophy. When we go through Nasr's books we see that Suhrawardī is one of the outstanding figures whom Nasr appreciates deeply and is influenced by his thoughts. Sadra is another of the prominent figures who has influenced Nasr's philosophy. However, I see Sadrā as the one of the cogs in the framework of Suhrawardī's tradition of thought, although in some ways he has tried to develop and criticize it. That is why I think it is of relevance to consider Nasr as Neo-Suhrawardian, the heir of Suhrawardī's tradition of thought in the contemporary world.

This paper tries to explore the conception of science as envisaged by Nasr. It attempts to investigate the core ideas of Nasr's construct of science, and to highlight their ontological, epistemological, and axiological basis. It likewise endeavours to place and to correlate this conception within a broader domain of the structure of his ideas. To do so, I likewise will trace the root of the influence of Nasr's conception of science in the living Islamic philosophical tradition.

### **Modern science and the process of the desacralization of science**

From the metaphysical point of view, Nasr (1981, p. vii) argues, there was a true relationship between knowledge and being. It was the process of secularization and humanism in the Western world that triggered the separation of the process of knowing from being.

Nasr depicts the current condition of modern man as having lost the sense of wonder. This condition is a consequence of the loss of the sense of the sacred (Nasr, 1981, p. 2-3). The loss of the sense of the sacred in Western civilization brings about the segmentation of various disciplines of science and furthermore the separation of science and ethics (Nasr, 1993, p. 82) –which has led to a crisis in the modern world. As a consequence of this very perspective, Nasr argues, logic and mathematics are alienated from the sacred even though they are used as the main agency for the desacralization of the process of knowing. Depriving knowledge of its sacred nature makes man overlook the pre-eminence of the sapiential dimension in various traditions. Consequently, in Western science, the profane turns out to be central and the sacred edges towards the periphery (Nasr, 1993, p. 5-7).

Nasr is convinced that Ionian natural philosophy and the rise of rationalism in classical Greece are highly pertinent among the underlying factors of the process of desacralization. In the long run, the tendency of thought based mainly on reason and empiricism also plays a role in the process of secularization of science in the West. The flourishing of empiricism in the West robbed the sacred function of intellect of its reason. For him, the spread of Aristotelianism and Averroism<sup>2</sup>–which advocate the rational-- in the West has likewise played a role in the process of desacralization (Nasr, 1993, p. 32-38). Aristotelianism and Averroism have contributed to the advancement of Western civilization, mostly in developing rational thinking since the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, these two schools left an impact on the process of desacralization since these schools ignored the role of intellect in the production of knowledge.

René Descartes with his adagio “cogito ergo sum” sought to establish the dualism of mind and matter (Bakar, 1999, p. 20). Nasr (1968, p. 69-71, 115) points out that Descartes diminished the external reality –which is by nature diverse and hierarchical-- to mere quantity. This “Cartesian mathematicism” –which can basically be considered “the

impoverishment of reality”-- is then accepted as the main component of scientific method and world view.

The desacralization of cosmos, in the eyes of Nasr, then also relates to the desacralization of reason. The Cartesian world view implies the mechanization of the world. For this reason, the process of desacralization in the West is marked among other symptoms, by the diminution of intellect to reason, and to a limiting of the intelligence to mere cunning and cleverness. All subjects studied using this secularized instrument turns out to be void of sacred qualities (Nasr, 1981, p. 42-45).

Nasr envisages modern science as reducing the notion of quality to quantity and the metaphysically essential to the material sense. Mathematics, for instance, is perceived as dealing only with pure quantity, depleting it of its symbolic aspects (Nasr, 1968, p. 21-22). The world view of modern science, Nasr is convinced, sees symbols in the cosmos as meager facts, discrete entities cut off from other level of realities. The cosmic realm has been reduced simply to something empty of spiritual and symbolic meaning (Nasr, 1968, p. 17-21). Here Nasr underlines the shift in the paradigm of science from symbolic interpretation of nature into the so-called “naturalism” (Nasr, 1968, p. 54).

In modern science, Nasr elucidates, there is a reduction of multiple domains of reality into a mere psycho-physical domain. Hence it is concerned only with the changes in this particular domain (Stenberg, 1996, p. 112). As a consequence of the obliteration of the notion of hierarchy of being, the ancient and medieval sciences which are based on this perception appear – even are regarded-- as superstition. Without the notion of hierarchy, scientific theories and discoveries grow to be merely facts neglecting the truths that belong to a higher order. Once this premise is accepted, modern science can be considered “an incomplete science” since it deals with certain parts of reality while refuting others (Nasr, 1968, p. 23, 31). Science, in Western conception, is then identified with a particular mode of knowledge which has nothing to do with the Sacred (Nasr, 1981, p. 8-9). In such a situation the Sacred plays no role in the discovery and application of science. Western science after the Renaissance, Nasr argues, produces new forms and paradigms derived from rationalistic and anthropomorphic thought and the secularization

of cosmos. This new form comes up with a monolithic and unilateral form of science (Nasr, 1993, p. 72-73).

Nasr is convinced that modern science is “superficial science” for it is developed from the fringe of man’s being. Modern science has lost its symbolist spirit or in other words lost the dimension of transcendence. For that reason it does not merit being called “essential science” inasmuch as it repudiates the role of the intellect in pursuing knowledge and truth, and is based on the distinction between the knowing subject and the known object (Nasr, 1975, p. 5-10).

Nasr points out that Positivism, one of the prevailing schools of philosophy, tries to “de-ontologize” science, negating the ontological significance of science. In other words, this school is much more concerned with the empiriological<sup>3</sup> domain of a thing rather than its ontological aspect. Positivism, according to Nasr (1968, p. 25-26), denies the metaphysical importance in the discoveries of science.

Secularized knowledge, in the eyes of Nasr, claims to be the only genuine form of science. This type of science makes use of a single method called “scientific method” (Nasr, 1968, p. 20), which is much more concerned with sensual and rational truth than other truths. More specifically, Nasr argues, quantitative sciences of nature are alleged to be the only legitimate natural science, while other knowledge of nature and its order is considered “pseudo-science” or “occult science” (Nasr, 1968, p. 22).

For Nasr, the science that ignores the notion of harmony and hierarchy will produce disequilibrium and disorder (Nasr, 1968, p. 120) within human life and the environment. Environmental crisis, Nasr (1975, p. 37-38) supposes, is the consequence of the pollution of the human soul and a result of discarding the spiritual dimension from human life.

This clearly reveals that Nasr is trying to criticize the use of the term “science” in current English usage. His argument is that it has been used in a limited sense, designating the knowledge obtained by scientific method whereas the meaning of the Latin word *scientia* and the German word *Wissenschaft* are general, including all kinds of knowledge (Nasr, 1968, p. 75). This is a clear message that the monopoly and reduction

of the concept of science in the modern world have had an implication on the usage of language.

Any random glance at his works shows that Nasr –as many other thinkers who adopt a critical position to modern science and civilization-- believes that science in the Western world is undergoing a crisis true to the process of secularization. Using his salient perennial perspective, he does his best to explore this issue to reveal the weak points of the Western construct of science. Nasr’s criticism of modern science can be deemed as paving the way for his conceptions of science, namely traditional science and *scientia sacra*, which he believes can be alternatives to be used in solving the crisis in modern life. His criticism of modern science coincides with his criticism of modernity and all its apparatus. Modernity, for Nasr, is regarded as violating the perennial and universal ideas and teachings preserved by traditional civilization. Therefore his criticism of modern science should be understood as an inextricable part of his project to explore the encounters between tradition and modernity.

Hence, Nasr’s conception of modern science can be outlined as in the table below:

Ontology	Epistemology	Axiology
a. separation of knowledge from being	a. based on rationalism and empiricism (scientific method)	a. separation of science and ethics
b. secularization of cosmos	b. discarding the intellect	b. the Sacred plays no role in the discovery and application of science
c. dualism of mind and matter	c. based on “naturalism” paradigm (the impoverishment of the realities of cosmos)	
	d. denying metaphysical significance of the discoveries of science	

*Table 1: An outline of Nasr’s conception of modern science*

### **Traditional science: its philosophical foundation and characteristics**

In the eyes of Nasr, traditional civilizations such as Islamic, Indian, Egyptian, Aztec and Mayan emphasize the hierarchy of realities, the primacy of spiritual over the material, the sacred character of the cosmos, the unity of knowledge and interrelatedness of beings (Nasr, 1993, p. 37, 72). These are salient features in traditional civilizations which determine the nature of traditional science.

In traditional sciences, ontologically speaking, there is an intense relationship between the hierarchical chain of being and the hierarchical chain of knowing (Aslam, 1998, p. 81). In the Islamic tradition, for instance, there are ideas of the hierarchy of realities such as “Five Divine Presences” (*al-ḥḍarāt al-ilāhiyyāt al-khams*): Divine Essence (*hāhūt*), Divine Qualities (*lāhūt*), arch-angelic (*jabarūt*), subtle (*malakūt*), and material (*nāsūt*). Cosmic realities like *nāsūt*, *malakūt* and *jabarūt*—which are related to their ontological source, namely, *hāhūt*—represent the objective pole of the epistemology of traditional science. This objective pole correlates to the subjective pole of the epistemology of traditional science, namely: corporeal body (*jism*), psyche (*nafs*), and spirit (*rūḥ*) (Bakar, 1999, p. 23-25). Therefore in a traditional civilization as Islam, there is the idea of the classification of science (see: Bakar, 1997), and its aim to preserve its hierarchy.

Ontologically, traditional sciences are based on a hierarchic perspective on the universe, seeing the physical world as the lower reality domain reflecting the higher domain by means of symbols (Nasr, 1993, p. 97). Therefore it can be said that traditional sciences are symbolic in the sense that they employ symbols to decipher the realities and are based on symbolic metaphysics.

Traditional sciences, Nasr argues, are never anthropocentric in perspective. They are not used to try to separate the human being from Divine Order and other creatures which share grace with him. Traditional sciences are much more concerned with the esoteric rather than the exoteric aspect of a tradition. The nature, form and pattern of traditional science necessitate its basis being related to the ultimate knowledge and esoteric dimension of the tradition (Nasr, 1993, 83-96).



As far as Nasr is concerned, traditional sciences are never separated from their metaphysical principles even these sciences serve as applications of and ladders to those principles (Nasr, 1984, p. 522). Ontologically, there is a relationship between metaphysics and traditional science. Metaphysics lies at the very heart of traditional sciences. Its principles and doctrines are to be preserved and applied in traditional sciences. Furthermore, when we sift through Nasr's writings, we begin to realize the visionary nature of his ontology all the more when he discusses the ontological aspects of *scientia sacra*.

At the epistemological level, traditional science is founded on revelation, intellect, and reason (Aslam, 1998, p. 85). There should be cooperation and dialectics between these epistemological sources. At this point, we become aware that traditional science is different from modern science in the sense that the former is not based merely on reason. The existence of revelation and intellect implies that the process of knowing within traditional civilizations is not estranged from the sacred, and human creativity is rooted in—and therefore should not be separated from—the Divine Nature.

Nasr is convinced that axiologically the uppermost function of traditional science is to assist the intellect and the perceptive instruments to behold the universe not as fact or object but as a symbol, as a mirror reflecting the face of God. The universe, then, has its sacred qualities and spiritual meaning. Furthermore, Nasr explicates that it is the chore of traditional sciences to sustain the relationship and harmony between particularities and wholeness. Perception of wholeness, in the eyes of Nasr, links up to the sense of the sacred. The sacred, for traditional civilizations, is the centre, and it is the task of traditional sciences to uphold the harmonious relationship with the centre. In traditional sciences the profane is always marginal and the sacred is central. However, it should be noted that from traditional perspective, there is no realm which is entirely profane. The cosmos is a manifestation of the Divine Principle, and not a domain of reality which can be alienated fully from that Principle (Nasr, 1993, p. 96-101).

In traditional civilizations, Nasr argues, knowledge is connected to spiritual advancement. The process of knowing implies spiritual transformation by the means of that process (Nasr, 1981, p. vii). The transformative role of science then is inherent in traditional sciences.

These sciences, according to Nasr, are important keys to understanding the cosmos and assist human beings in their journey beyond and within the cosmos (Nasr, 1993, p. 10-11). In traditional civilization, science is built on traditional values (Stenberg, 1996, p. 127). It necessitates tradition as a set of values which should be followed in the discovery and application of sciences. Therefore, in the eyes of Nasr, in traditional civilizations there is never the idea “science for science” which has flourished in Western academia. This is to the core perspective within traditional civilizations which perceives science as meeting the need of the totality of human beings (Nasr, 1984, 525).

Traditional cosmological doctrines, for instance, have only a symbolic meaning. Cosmological sciences study different domains of cosmic reality from the perspective of metaphysical principles. They perceive the cosmos as speaking to human beings (Nasr, 1981, p. 190).

Cosmology, in the eyes of Nasr, beholds the cosmos as a theophany and the manifestation of the variegated aspects of the Divine Qualities. It reveals the harmony of the cosmos. It is worth remarking that Nasr’s viewpoints pertaining to cosmology are in line with the Muslim metaphysicians who adhere to the school of Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240). For Nasr, the harmony of various parts of the cosmos can be matched to the harmony within a human being. Such harmony, metaphysically speaking, ultimately originates from the harmony within the Perfect Man, who is deemed to be the prototype of the universe (Nasr, 1981, p. 191-194). Hence, in traditional civilization, cosmology is considered an intermediary between *scientia sacra* and the remaining sciences (Bakar, 1999, p. 73).

Nasr points out that traditional Mathematics is a language which speaks about inner harmony. Furthermore, he elucidates in symbolic language that extrinsically, traditional Mathematics deals with quantity but intrinsically it is a ladder to the inconceivable world (Nasr, 1993, p. 21). Numbers, in traditional Mathematics, always contain a spiritual significance as keys to divine cosmos.

Traditional sciences are the rational and intellectual aspects of the tradition. A tradition which does not pay attention to the rational and intellectual aspects will become dogmatic and superstitious. At this point, we become aware that Nasr is trying to expound and restore the sacred foundation of science. Bakar (1999, p. 61) makes a point of the

fact that Nasr tries to show the interrelationship between science and spiritual knowledge.

### **The meaning and function of scientia sacra**

Nasr is convinced that *scientia sacra*<sup>4</sup> –which is the knowledge of Reality-- lies in the heart of every integral tradition and traditional science. This knowledge, Nasr argues, can be identified with metaphysics as understood traditionally –namely as the ultimate science of the Real- or *ma'rifa* (Gnostic knowledge) in Islamic terminology (Nasr, 1993, p.1). This metaphysical knowledge<sup>5</sup> stands in contrast to discursive or rational knowledge (Aslam, 1998, p. 83-84). Therefore it can be said that *scientia sacra* is an immediate and intuitive form of knowledge of the Real. It can also become the tool to distinguish between the Real and unreal,<sup>6</sup> between various levels of being, and to know and understand a thing as it is, or in other words, to know it in *divinis* (Nasr, 1981, p. 133-138). To know a thing is as it is means to know the archetype of this thing; and ontologically it necessitates the existence of the imaginal world wherein the archetypes reside.

*Scientia sacra*, for Nasr, can be characterized as sapiential and symbolic knowledge. It is a kind of given knowledge attracting and insinuating into the heart of the knower. In other words, it is only attainable by those who activate their intellect with the aid of revelation. *Scientia sacra*, then, can speak of Reality as it is, using a symbolic language. It is meant to reflect what is beyond the physical world as a way of nourishing those qualified to absorb the symbols of such language. It emulates the Absolute via esoteric teachings of tradition (Aslam, 1998, p. 168-169). Regarding the supremacy of *scientia sacra* over other sciences, Nasr accentuates that “knowledge of the Substance is the substance of knowledge...and knowledge of the Origin and the Source is the Origin and Source of Knowledge” (1981, 131).

In order to give an adequate picture of what Nasr means by metaphysics —which for him is identical with *scientia sacra*-- I allude to his explanation of the meaning of this very term. Nasr conceives metaphysics as:

the science of the Real, of the origin and end of things, of the Absolute and, in its light, the relative. It is a science as strict and exact as mathematics and with same clarity and certitude, but one which can only be attained through intellectual

intuition...it is a *theoria* of reality whose realization means sanctity and spiritual perfection...it is only in its light that man can distinguish between levels of reality and states of being and be able to see each thing in its place in the total scheme of things” (Nasr, 1968, p. 81).

Engrossingly, Nasr elucidates that metaphysics can be the parameter and the centre of all intellectual endeavors within traditional civilization (Nasr, 1968, p. 114). In other words, metaphysics provides the ontological and axiological basis of intellectual activities within a particular tradition. Nasr is convinced that knowledge of the universe in its totality falls within the competence of metaphysics, and not of science. Metaphysics, with its unique position, can serve as the meeting ground between religion and science (Nasr, 1968, 35-36).

Nasr renders metaphysics the highest position; therefore, for him, intellectual doctrines and theses grounded in metaphysics have certitude. Authenticating these theses and doctrines is beyond the competence of scientific research. (Nasr, 1968, p. 49). When we scrutinize Nasr’s writings, we can find that the same position is also given to *philosophia perennis*, because basically there is interrelationship between the two. Nasr states that metaphysics relates to the *philosophia perennis*; in fact metaphysics lies at its heart (Nasr, 1968, p. 82-83). It is imperative to know that Nasr sees *philosophia perennis* as identical with tradition in its limited sense; therefore he sometimes states that metaphysics lies at the heart of tradition.

However, it should be noted that what Nasr means by metaphysics in its original sense is not identical with metaphysics as currently understood in Western philosophy. For Nasr, metaphysics, which is essentially ultimate knowledge of the Real, has been curtailed to just a branch of philosophy (Nasr, 1968, p. 82), whereas basically there is a fundamental difference between the two. Metaphysics is based on illumination of the mind by the Divine Intellect, while philosophy is founded on the powers of reason to investigate and work out our questions pertaining to reality (Nasr, 1975, p. 35). This reveals that Nasr often criticizes the current usage of particular terms. He, for instance, criticizes the current usage of the term metaphysics and suggests the term be understood in its original meaning, namely, the knowledge of the Real. He also criticizes the current usage of the term *theoria* and prefers

to use its original meaning, namely, vision. And these significations of terms are central to his philosophical system.

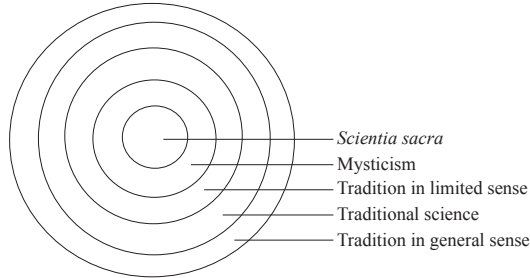
It also should be noticed that what Nasr means by Gnosis as being identical to *scientia sacra*, is Gnosis in its authentic sense, namely as “unitive and illuminative knowledge”, because he sees that there is the phenomenon of the castration of the meaning of gnosis. Gnosis is reduced by some scholars to “sentimental mysticism”, so the contemplative aspects of gnosis are relegated to its passionate aspects. Nasr points out that the spirituality separated from the living tradition poses a threat to humankind (Nasr, 1968, p. 37-38) because it has no strong ontological basis.

Nasr points out that *scientia sacra* is not empty of intellectual and metaphysical content; were it so, *scientia sacra* would become occultism which can be equated to “a body without soul” (Nasr, 1981, p. 33-34). At this point, we become aware that Nasr is endeavoring to defend the postulation that metaphysics or *scientia sacra* is both knowledge and a science, even a real and essential science. When we situate theology, *scientia sacra*, and science within the framework of a particular tradition, we see that *scientia sacra* stands for the intellectual, sapiential and metaphysical aspect of tradition. Theology represents the aspect of faith in a tradition, while science is its intellectual and rational aspect.

Nasr also demonstrates the very relationship between tradition and *scientia sacra*. *Scientia sacra* is cultivated from tradition, therefore its fruits of realization are in conformity with the values within that tradition. In this regard *scientia sacra* is dissimilar from the phenomenon of esotericism which is cut off from tradition (Nasr, 1981, p. 318). *Scientia sacra* is never detached from tradition. In the case of Islam, *scientia sacra* can be found in Sufism --an esoteric dimension within Islam (Nasr, 1975, p. 85). Therefore one cannot achieve Gnosis in Islam by, for instance, separating Sufism from Islam.

Nasr seems to assure his readers that mysticism cannot be blamed for backwardness; in fact it even has its intellectual aspects. Gnosis, the very doctrine within mysticism, is the highest form of knowledge. And there is an interrelationship between this highest form of knowledge and the remaining knowledge.

It is of interest to discover the place of *scientia sacra* within the framework of tradition (in its general sense). Having examined Nasr's works, I have come to a conclusion which I have outlined in the scheme below.



*Scheme 2: Scientia Sacra within the framework of Tradition*

*Scientia sacra* is not an entirely new concept, and indeed Nasr never claims it to be his original concept. His concept of *scientia sacra* has been established on the treasury and tradition of thought developed before him. This concept can trace the roots of its influence to Suhrawardī's conception of *al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī* (knowledge by presence). Suhrawardī conceives of *al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī* as knowledge which is self-evident, self-present, and self-objective –which means the consciousness and the cognizable reality are the same (Yazdi, 1996, p. 51). Such knowledge is attainable through intellection, which according to Suhrawardī is a kind of vision which enables men to see the archetypes in the imaginal world (Razavi, 1997, p. 90-91) (*ʿālam al-mithāl* or *mundus imaginalis* in Henry Corbin's term). The process of intellection, ontologically, imposes the existence of the imaginal world (Razavi, 1997, p. 89-90).

We can also track the root of the influence of the concept of *scientia sacra* to ʿArabī's concept of intuitive science, which he saw as knowledge of the Truth, of realities of all things as such. Such knowledge is often identified by Ibn ʿArabī as *maʿrifa*, which he equates with divine knowledge (Affifi, 1995, p. 146-149).

Thus it is clear that the concept of *scientia sacra* can be traced to its root of influence in the living Islamic philosophical tradition, or in a broader sense, traditional thought and civilization. Hence it is not astonishing that Frithjof Schuon, a foremost perennialist and traditionalist, also generates the concept of *scientia sacra*, which he conceives as knowledge transcending human consciousness and *Deo*

*Juvante* which is gained through the pursuance of human intellect (Schuon, 1994, p. 207).

For Nasr, *scientia sacra*, as a perspective, conceives the world not as a separate creation but as manifestation and theophany of the Divine Essence. It shares with Plato the idea that immaterial world is concrete reality. From the metaphysical point of view, God is considered to be concrete Reality while other realities are its abstractions (Nasr, 1981, p. 137, 261). In the case of religion, *scientia sacra* sees the variegated sacred forms implying the different expressions and ramifications of the Truths which should not be understood as paradoxes but as harmonies. It demonstrates the universality and the perpetuity of the Truth (Nasr, 1981, p. 281). In this sense, we become aware that *scientia sacra* provides men with an inclusive religiosity, trying to pay attention to the perennial aspects of religions.

*Scientia sacra*, according to Nasr, finds its articulation through symbolic language like the medium of paintings, music, poetry and other forms of artistic expression which contain meaning. This symbolic language should be apprehended in the framework of living spirituality; otherwise it becomes an unintelligible puzzle (Nasr, 1981, p. 153-154). This shows the relationship between *scientia sacra* and (sacred) art.

Nasr is convinced that *scientia sacra* is not merely theoretical knowledge of Reality. It also has practical significance, namely to assist man in attaining the sacred. Therefore its explanations can work as a medium to open the human mind to the higher order of reality. Nasr said that metaphorically “*scientia sacra* contains both the seed and the fruit of the tree of knowledge”. Engrossingly, Nasr explains that its seed is theoretical knowledge and its fruit is realized gnosis (Nasr, 1981, p. 154). Axiologically, *scientia sacra* has transformative function, namely, transforming the human being in attaining the sacred.

Nasr believes that *scientia sacra* can be the means of man’s liberation from all limitation since he lives in and is imbued by the Sacred, while the Sacred, the ultimate aim of *scientia sacra*, is, by definition, infinite. However there is a prerequisite for this deliverance. Man should accomplish this knowledge with the whole of his being. He should involve his will, his psyche, and his intelligence (Nasr, 1981, p. 309-311). This shows that *scientia sacra* has the axiological function of deliverance and union. At this point *scientia sacra* can be called a

liberative and unitive science. This axiological function necessitates such ontological premises as:

- a. There is such a domain within man's being which is similar to God. Once this premise is accepted there is a possibility to unify with Him.
- b. God is the Pure Being who is by nature Infinite. Therefore the union with such an Infinite Being means to be delivered from all corporeal limitations.
- c. The essence of man's being is spirit which is by nature spaceless and time-less. The physical body is conceived as limiting his freedom. Therefore man should not pay attention to the desires of physical body in order to deliver him and to return to his original state as limitless.

For Nasr, *scientia sacra* addresses the whole being of man and is not based on presumption, therefore it can lead to certainty. In this case Nasr refers to the doctrine within Islamic tradition, namely *'ilm al-yaqīn* (the knowledge of certitude), *'ayn al-yaqīn* (the vision of certitude), and *haqq al-yaqīn* (the truth of certitude) (Nasr, 1981, p. 325). *Haqq al-yaqīn* is certitude which has resulted from realized knowledge (Bakar, 1999, p. 58). We realize that for Nasr, *scientia sacra* is the only knowledge which leads to certitude in its highest form.

The ultimate aim of *scientia sacra* is to grasp the Real, the very essence of which lies beyond the cosmos. However, according to Nasr, it is also concerned with man's passage within the cosmos. Nasr argues that the understanding of the cosmos which is comprised of forms is considered an aspect of man's journey toward the Real, which is, by nature, formless (Nasr, 1981, p. 189, 321).

For Nasr, *scientia sacra* is attained by one consecrated to know the Divine through the Divine (*al-ʿarīf bi-llāh* in the terminology of Islam). To become so, he has to purify his soul (Nasr, 1981, p. 17, 322) by upholding principal virtues such as humility, charity and truthfulness<sup>7</sup> in order to be able to return to his very being. Furthermore, Nasr explains that eight stages must be complied with in order to attain *scientia sacra*, namely: earthly body, vital motion, sense perception, reason, soul, knowledge, wisdom, and purified soul. Such a person, in the eyes of Nasr, is considered to be indivisible from knowledge or Gnosis, because



in such state there is an identity between the self and of what the self is aware (Nasr, 1981, p. 17-29). Such a person, who is often referred to by Nasr as a sage, is regarded as a figure *par excellence* of the embodiment of *scientia sacra*. The very process of identity between the consciousness and the cognizable necessitates some ontological premises:

- a. There is an ontological relationship between knowledge and being
- b. There was such primordial knowledge before man's life in the world
- c. The accidental things within man's being obstruct this knowledge, and it is through cleansing these accidental things that man can attain the primordial knowledge
- d. There is such a domain within man's being in which there is a spark of the Divine Essence. It is through this very domain –if it has maintained its purity-- that man can know God. Therefore there is a reciprocity and identity between this divine domain and the Divine.

Such a person, according to Nasr, feels a stranger in this world, or in other words, feels like he is in exile (Nasr, 1981, 323). Therefore in Islamic tradition, for example, we come across literature illustrating this condition like *Qiṣṣat al-ghurbaṭ al-gharbiyya* (The Story of the Occidental Exile) by Suhrawardī, and *Hayy ibn Yaqzān* (Living Son of the Awake) by Ibn Tufayl (1105-1185). Nasr (1981, 318) reveals that it is through the oral transmission and teaching of spiritual figures that *scientia sacra* can subsist over a long period.

### **Epistemological apparatus of scientia sacra**

According to Nasr, the epistemological sources of *scientia sacra* are revelation, intellectual intuition, and reason. Engrossingly, Nasr underscores that *scientia sacra* is a knowledge acquired mainly through intellectual intuition (intellection) –which issues from the heart and is divinely guided-- in which human speculation plays little part, or in other words human speculation functions not as a main source but as a participant (Aslam, 1998, p. 85). That is why *scientia sacra* is called unmediated metaphysical knowledge.

Intellect, for Nasr, is the very substance within man's being which is concerned with revealing the archetypal realities. And reason is a reflection of the intellect on the human plane. Intellection, in the eye of Nasr, is the process of the participating of our individual consciousness in the Divine Consciousness. It goes beyond reasoning and grabs hold of reality without disrupting its harmony. It reaches the truth through an *a priori* direct intuition of the truth (Nasr, 1981, p. 148). This shows the Platonic nuance in Nasr's conception in the sense that it holds the conviction of the existence of primordial knowledge and truth inherent within man's being. And the very act of intellection is none other than the process of evocation and activation of this primordial knowledge which lies at the centre of his intellect. Furthermore, Nasr (1981, p. 235) asserts that intellection implies the superiority of consciousness over matter.

Intellection or intellectual intuition then, according to Muḥammad Husayn Tabāṭabā'ī, is identical to mystical unveiling (Tabāṭabā'ī, 1975, ix) or *kashf al-mahjūb* in the vocabulary of Sufis while intellect can be considered a ladder by which to reach Divine Unity (Tabāṭabā'ī, 1975, p. 15). Revelation, Nasr (1981, p. 148) argues, is the aid from God enabling human beings to use and activate the intellect.

Nasr conceives (Divine) Intellect as the source of all sapience and of all principal knowledge. He goes on to explain that (human) intellect is the root and the centre of the soul. The soul is none other than the *anima* or psyche, while intellect is none other than the *spiritus* or *nous* (Nasr, 1981, p. 31, 147). It is noteworthy that Nasr distinguishes between the intellect which lies within the human being (human intellect) and the Intellect outside the human being (Divine Intellect). The latter Intellect (i.e. Divine Intellect), for Nasr (1981, p. 147), is the source of knowledge and being, and the source of revelation. It is important to understand these terms carefully because in another place Nasr says that revelation is divine aid for the (human) intellect. In this regard, Nasr argues, one should see the distinction between Active Intellect and potential intellect. The Active Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*) is the origin and the source of knowledge; while the potential intellect (*al-'aql bi al-quwwa*) is the recipient of knowledge (Nasr, 1981, 154-155). In other words it can be said that the Active or Divine Intellect is the source of human intellect.

We can grasp what Nasr means by intellect more readily when we trace the doctrine of (human) intellect within the tradition of Islamic philosophy. For Avicenna (980-1037) and al-Fārābī (872-950), the human soul has two faculties: practical and theoretical. There are four layers of theoretical faculty within the intellect: the *intellectus materialis* or *intellectus potentialis* (*al-‘aql bi al-quwwa* or *al-‘aql al- hayūlānī*), the lowest, is the potentiality inherent in all human being enabling them to attain knowledge. The next level, *intellectus in habitu* (*al-‘aql bi al-mālaka*), is attained when man learns to think correctly and understands the basic principles of knowledge. The next state, *intellectus in actu* (*al-‘aql bi al-fi‘l*), is achieved when he can produce his own intellectual and knowing activity. The *intellectus adeptus* or *intellectus aquisitus* (*al-‘aql al-mustafad*), the next level, is attained when there is a process of realization of the Universe of being, and man becomes a shadow of the archetypal world (Nasr, 1964, p. 39-40)

Above all there is the so-called Universal Intellect or Active Intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa‘‘āl*), the very agency which illuminates human intellect. The Active Intellect, through the very process of illumination, activates and prepares human soul for the reception of ideas issuing from the spiritual world. The Active Intellect, according to Avicenna, is identified with Jibrīl (Gabriel). This angel is the guide and illuminator of human intellect in the process of knowing. For Suhrawardī, the angel has an ontological function as the supporter of the world<sup>8</sup> and the instrument of knowledge (Nasr, 1964, p. 40-45, 70). Nasr does his best to expound that man’s creative ideas are rooted in the Divine Origin (Bakar, 1999, 28-29). Such creative ideas can be considered spiritual or intellectual genius in contrast to rational genius.

Human intellect, Nasr argues, is the eye of the heart (*‘ayn al-qalb* in the terminology of the Sufis) (Nasr, 1981, p. 148). At this point we can grasp the relationship between Divine Intellect and human intellect more readily when we also examine the Sufi tradition. Divine Intellect is God’s very agency, and it pierces into man’s very being, namely the heart, or more specifically the eye of the heart. The heart can be illuminated by the Divine Intellect because it is a particle of the Divine Essence. Therefore, in Sufism we come across the doctrine stating that “the heart is the throne of God” (*al-qalb ‘arsh al-Raḥmān*).

The term “human intellect” can then be equated to *‘ayn al-qalb* or *baṣīra*<sup>9</sup> in Islamic terminology. However, Nasr often use the word *‘aql* to designate human intellect. This is understandable when we situate it within the context of the Islamic intellectual tradition. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, as explicated by Bakar (1997, p. 98), the word *‘aql* refers to both human intellect and reason. Al-Fārābī, for instance, sometimes uses the word *‘aql* to designate human intellect and sometimes to designate reason. Some thinkers after al-Fārābī use the term *al-‘aql al-kullī* (universal *‘aql*) to designate human intellect and the term *al-‘aql al-juz’ī* (partial *‘aql*) to designate reason. At this point we can see that intellect is called *al-‘aql al-kullī* inasmuch as it is concerned with knowing the holistic or synthetic mode of knowing, while reason is *al-‘aql al-juz’ī* since it is concerned with the parts or the analytical mode of knowing.

We should also be attentive to the meaning of the term “intelligence”, which is also often used by Nasr. Nasr conceives of intelligence as “a divine gift which pierces through the veil of *maya* and is able to know reality as such. It is a ray of light which pierces through the veils of cosmic existence to the Origin and connects the periphery of existence, upon which fallen man lives, to the Center wherein resides the Self” (Nasr, 1981, p. 146).

This brief quotation allows us to conclude that intelligence is none other than (human) intellect. However, it should be noted that intelligence here is not identical with cleverness as some scholars have concluded because for Nasr the latter, which can be called “minor-intelligence”, is a disjointed and curtailed faculty, cut off from its root. Nasr argues that the locus of real intelligence is not in the head but in the heart. It is the intelligence, the very instrument within man, which has the capability to apprehend the Truth (Nasr, 1981, p. 149-150). Intelligence then is a God-given faculty, and its ultimate object is God himself (Nasr, 1994, p. 22).

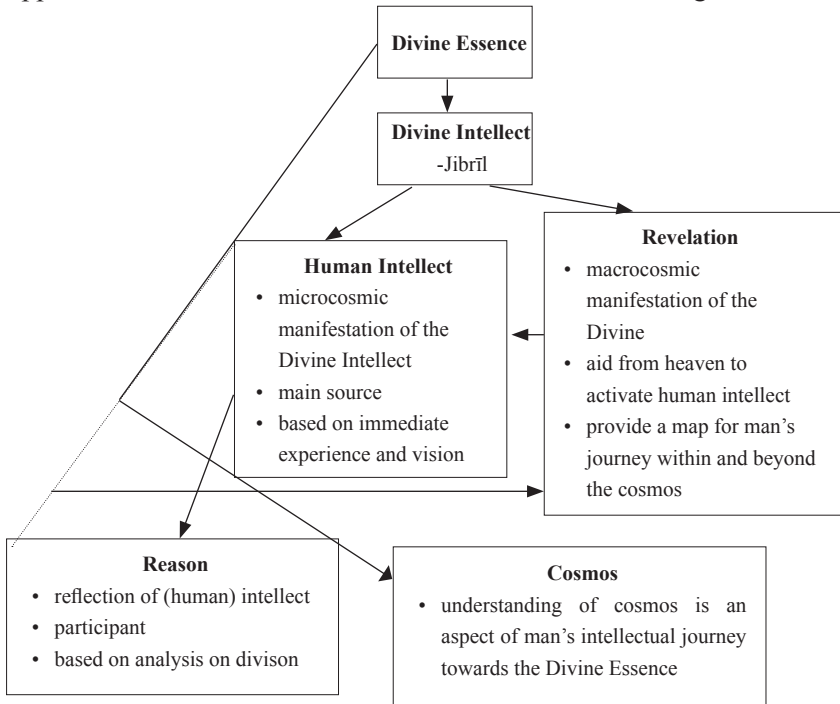
Nevertheless, Nasr distinguishes between intelligence of the heart and intelligence of the mind, and argues there should be dialectics between the two functions. He makes a point of the fact that intelligence of the mind (reason) cut off from intelligence of the heart (intellect) is blind, especially when the first feigns to play the role of the second in attaining knowledge (Nasr, 1981, 150-152).

We also should be aware of another term used by Nasr namely “consciousness”. Nasr conceives of consciousness as direct reflection of the Divine Intellect. He also asserts that human consciousness is a reflection and reverberation of Divine Consciousness (Nasr, 1981, p. 115). Both consciousness and outer reality are, for Nasr, realities. The former is considered absolute reality (for it is a spark of the Absolute), while the latter is secondary reality (Nasr, 1975, p. 31) This allows us to conclude that what Nasr means by consciousness is none other than intellect.

For Nasr, the physical body, the psyche and the (human) intellect are the main components of the human being. (Human) intellect is very vital and becomes the centre of his being. Reason is reflection of the (human) intellect upon human psyche and mind (Nasr, 1975, p. 9-10). The function of reason is secondary compared to that of the (human) intellect. According to Nasr, there is a different mode of knowing between intellect and reason. The former is based on immediate experience or vision, while the latter is based on analysis and division. There should be collaboration between the two in the process of reception, formulation, and communication of the knowledge and the truth (Nasr, 1975, p. 29). Nevertheless it is imperative to know that a random glance of his works shows that in the case of *scientia sacra*, the role of (human) intellect is much more dominant than that of reason since it is concerned with the Pure Being whose existence is beyond the reach of reason.

Nasr takes great pains to show the relationship between human intellect and revelation. Human intellect, for him, is the microcosmic projection of the Divine Intellect. Therefore by definition, it can be the source of inner illumination or inner revelation. Human intellect can be called “microcosmic intellect”, while revelation can be considered “macrocosmic intellect” (Nasr, 1981, p. 6, 150). In other words, it can be said that human intellect is *al-wahy al-juz’i* (partial revelation), while the holy book is *al-wahy al-kullī* (universal revelation) (Bakar, 1999, p. 26). Nasr asserts that man can know through intuition and revelation, not because of his capacity for thought but because knowledge is being (Nasr, 1981, p. 131-132). This shows the unique process of pursuing *scientia sacra*, which is based on traditional perspective that views the relationship between knowledge and being.

I believe that the relationship between those epistemological apparatus can be somewhat summarized as in the following scheme:



Scheme 2: epistemological apparatus of scientia sacra

### Concluding Remarks

Nasr is considered as one of the remarkable thinkers who has a grounding in both traditional and modern scholarship. His philosophy can be understood better if we place it in the framework of living Islamic philosophical tradition. When we examine the history and development of Islamic philosophy, we become conscious that Nasr’s structure of thought resembles those in the framework of Suhrawardī’s tradition of thought. Therefore I think it is of pertinence to regard Nasr as Neo-Suhrawardian, the heir to Suhrawardī’s tradition of thought in the contemporary world.

Nasr criticizes modern science on ontological, epistemological, and axiological aspects to pave the way for his notions of traditional science and *scientia sacra*. As an antithesis to modern science, he offers the paradigm of traditional science which is rooted in the Sacred.

We may perceive Nasr's elaboration of traditional science from its ontological, epistemological and axiological bases. At the ontological level, traditional science acknowledges the intense relationship between hierarchical degrees of being and hierarchical degrees of knowing. Besides, traditional science is never separated from its metaphysical principles. At the epistemological level, traditional science is grounded on the dialectics between revelation, intellect and reason. Axiologically, the highest function of traditional science is to assist the intellect and the perceptive instruments to behold the universe as a symbol reflecting the face of God. Or, in other words, traditional science serves spiritual transformation.

At the heart of traditional sciences, stands *scientia sacra* which Nasr regards as the highest form of knowledge since it deals with the Real. *Scientia sacra* is conceived as an immediate and intuitive form of knowledge of the Real, which stands in contrast to discursive and rational knowledge. The epistemological apparatus of this very knowledge are revelation, human intellect and reason. They are inextricable elements in apprehending the Real. Human intellect -Nasr's focal notion- is conceived as the very substance within man's being which is concerned with revealing the archetypal realities. Hence we can see that Nasr's conception of *scientia sacra* can trace its origin to the living Islamic philosophical tradition, including notions propounded by Suhrawardī.

## Endnotes

1. Persian philosopher and historian Ibn Miskawayh (932-1030) introduces the term *al-ḥikmat al-khālida* as the title of his book *Javidan Khirad (al-Hikmat al-Khālida)*. Any random glance at the structure of this book and that of Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) would show the similarities between the two
2. Aristotelianism is a philosophical tradition which draws its inspiration from the works of Aristotle (384-322 BC), whilst Averroism is based on the teachings and the works of Averroes (1126-1198), who was known as the last great Arab- speaking commentator of Aristotle (Mahoney and South, 1998, p. 514-522; Ebbesen, 1998, p. 732-735).
3. "Empiriological" deals with the structure of empirical reality rather than the empirical reality *per se*.

4. Nasr uses the terms as “*scientia sacra*”, “sacred science” and “sacred knowledge” interchangeably. However, Nasr often uses the term “*scientia sacra*” rather than the other terms inasmuch as he is aware that the word “science”, in current English usage, is sometimes misleading.

5. This metaphysical knowledge can be called the knowledge of the *noumenon* in Kantian terminology. It is also of interest to see that Henry Corbin characterizes his phenomenology as *kashf al-mahjūb*, (unveiling the hidden) (Nasr, 1987, p. 280) in the sense that he wants to catch the inner meaning of realities rather than their outer appearance.

6. Nasr stresses that this discrimination ends when one achieves the highest awareness, namely the awareness of the non-dual nature of the Real, which lies at the heart of *scientia sacra* (Nasr, 1981, p. 132-134).

7. These virtues, according to Nasr, are a *conditio sine qua non* for the preparation of the human being in attaining *scientia sacra* (Nasr, 1981: 312). However, it should be noted that they are not simply moral but spiritual stages of perfection. Furthermore, Nasr explains that in Islamic tradition, it is Sufism that provides teachings on practical aspects of attaining *scientia sacra* (Nasr, 1981, p. 38).

8. Suhrawardī regards angels as the sustainers of the world because, in his conception, angels participate in the creation and movement of the universe (through the process of emanation).

9. The word *baṣīra* is used, among other places, in Sūrat al-Qiyāma, 75: 14-15. According to some exegetes, the term *baṣīra* is identical to ‘*ayn al-qalb* (For further explanation see: Mubarak, 2000, p. 132).

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