

'Ayn al-Quḍāt. *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism*. Mohammed Rustom (ed. and trans.). New York: New York University Press, 2022. xxx + 241 pages. ISBN: 9781479816590.

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Mohammed Rustom, professor of Islamic Thought and Global Philosophy at Carleton University, edited the Arabic work *Zubdat al-ḥaqā'iq* written by 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī (d. 525/1131), an important Sufi thinker and religious judge of his period, and translated it into English under the title of *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism*.<sup>1</sup> 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī was born in the city of Hamadān in Iran under the rule of the Great Seljuk State and spent his life as a religious scholar in this region. al-Hamadānī studied various disciplines of Islamic intellectual tradition, including Sufism, theology, philosophy, *fiqh*, and literature, and was esteemed as a brilliant scholar from a very young age. Unfortunately, his life ended at the age of 34 when he was publicly executed at the order of Sultan Maḥmūd II (d. 525/1131), the Seljuk ruler of the period. Even though he was initially claimed to have been executed for his unorthodox views, recent studies about his life reveal that al-Hamadānī's severe criticisms against the corruption conducted by the state are what led to his death.<sup>2</sup> *Zubdat*

- 1 *The Zubdat al-ḥaqā'iq* was first translated into English by Omar Jah: Omar Jah, *The Zubdat al-Ḥaqā'iq of 'Ayn al-Quḍāh al-Hamadānī* (International Institute of Islamic Thoughts and Civilizations, 2003). An unpublished translation of the book is also found by Salimeh Maghsoudlou. Mohammed Rustom notes that his own translation, *The Essence of Reality*, differs significantly from the two other works. *Zubdat al-ḥaqā'iq* has also been translated into Turkish, together with another book from al-Hamadānī, *Shakwā al-gharib*. Aynūlkudāt al-Hemedānī, *Hakikatlerin Özü ve Garibin Şikâyeti*, Ahmet Kamil Cihan, Salih Yalın, Mesut Sandıkçı, Arsan Taher (trans.) (Istanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2016).
- 2 Mohammed Rustom, " 'Ayn al-Quḍāt between Divine Jealousy and Political Intrigue," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 7 (2018): 47–73.

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*al-ḥaqā'iq* is an important book that deals with metaphysical issues and a work that was written in a very short time in 1120 when al-Hamadānī was 24, as he mentions in the book's introduction. The book is divided into a total of 100 chapters and is mainly devoted to discussing three subjects under various dimensions: God's essence and attributes, the truth of prophethood, and the nature of the hereafter.

In terms of the subject matter, concepts, and language used, *Zubdat al-ḥaqā'iq* is a multifaceted work that cannot be placed into any single category. al-Hamadānī successfully blends mystical, philosophical, and theological issues, employing the nomenclatures of these disciplines throughout the book, which also includes several Qur'ānic verses, hadiths, and occasionally sayings and poems from various scholars of the past. In order to be able to translate a work with these properties intelligibly, both sound philological skills and profound knowledge of the field are required. In this respect, *The Essence of Reality* is a clear and fluent translation that successfully transfers the literary power of the original text into English.

In addition to providing a meticulous and precise translation, Rustom facilitates the reader's adaptation to the book in various ways as a result of his expertise regarding 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī. For instance, *The Essence of Reality* contains a short introduction which portrays al-Hamadānī's life, works, and ideas, wherein the translator enlightens the reader about the place al-Hamadānī's work has in the history of Islamic thought and helps one gain a more holistic view of the Islamic intellectual tradition by connecting al-Hamadānī to his predecessors and successors in *kalām*, Sufism, and *falsafa*. Rustom's addition of short titles to the chapters corresponding to the content provides the reader with an initial impression of both the chapters and the book as a whole. In addition, the book also appeals to a wider audience unfamiliar with Sufi literature and Islamic philosophy, thanks to Rustom's informative footnotes to al-Hamadānī's concepts and ideas throughout the translation. At the same time, the translator references other books by al-Hamadānī and allows one to see through which stages of thought, texts, and scholars his teachings had developed. In this way, the position the Iranian scholar occupies in Islamic thought, and his original contributions to the tradition can be clearly acknowledged.

Mohammed Rustom takes the copy in the Marāgha Codex as the source manuscript for his Arabic edition of *Zubdat al-ḥaqā'iq*. This source was dated to 1119 or 1120 and is the oldest surviving manuscript, coming some 80-odd years after *Zubdat al-ḥaqā'iq* had first been written. In addition, Rustom also had recourse to two other manuscripts and the printed edition of the book when reading

difficulties appeared regarding the Marāgha manuscript on which his edition is based. These other manuscripts are two copies, one from the collection of Cārullah Efendi (dated 1270) and the other (dated 1637) from the collection of *Majlis* Library, while the printed edition of *Zubdat al-ḥaqā'iq* is the one prepared by 'Afif 'Usayrān. Unlike 'Usayrān, who considered the Marāgha manuscript as a weak copy among the four manuscripts upon which his edition of *Zubdat al-ḥaqā'iq* was based (i.e., the copies in the Marāgha Codex and Cārullah Efendi's Library and the two other copies in Berlin and Istanbul), Rustom regards the Marāgha manuscript –despite some transcription errors– as clearer compared to the reading and understanding difficulties found in the other copies.

The 12<sup>th</sup> century constitutes an important point both in terms of the emergence of philosophical Sufism as well as in the formation of post-classical philosophy in Islamic intellectual history. 'Ayn al-Qudāt is no doubt one of the key figures who occupied a prominent place in this period as a scholar whose writings intertwine mystical, theological, and philosophical concepts and perspectives. At this juncture, a closer look at the content of *The Essence of Reality* will help one understand the importance of al-Hamadānī as a *sui generis* mystic and philosopher.

As al-Hamadānī states, *The Essence of Reality* had been written to elaborate on three main subject matters: God's essence and attributes, prophecy, and the nature of the hereafter. One significant point is found that unites these three theological issues. This point, which underlines the entire book at the same time, is the assumption that one can obtain knowledge of these issues only through a supra-rational understanding. For this very reason, al-Hamadānī describes throughout his work a state of being and a higher kind of knowledge that can be attained by taste (*dhawq*), and thus lies beyond the limits and possibilities of reason. As Rustom states in the introduction to *The Essence of Reality*, taste (*dhawq*), in contrast to knowing through reason, removes the sharp line and distinction the intellect draws between subject and object and unites the two. In this respect, something one knows by experiencing is, in fact, much more real, closer, and more comprehensible than what one attempts to describe and explain rationally and therein distancing oneself from it mentally.

Similar to knowing and experiencing the divine reality, the station of prophethood and the nature of prophecy belong to the realm of knowledge that is beyond the bounds of reason (Chapters 22-24). al-Hamadānī explicates knowledge pertaining to the states of prophethood and *walayā'* (friendship with God/sainthood) and the belief in their authenticity using various examples. Just as a

person who is born blind and thinks they can perceive the existence of colour by touching it is far from reality, so does the situation of a person who believes they have discerned the truth of prophecy through rational premises become no different from that of a blind person. In other words, just like poetry shaped by metaphors, polysemy, ambiguity, imagination, and language games that push the boundaries of rationality, experiencing the divine reality –as in the case of prophets and saints– means entering a realm beyond rationality. Just as expecting people who have not yet developed a taste for poetry and whose souls are not refined enough to feel all these to penetrate the meaning expressed by poetry would be useless, so would expecting people who have not yet experienced the upper dimensions of reality to understand the nature of this experience (Chapter 24).

Furthermore, another motive that led al-Hamadānī to write this book was to warn the aspirants against the difficulties they might encounter in this process and to guide them as they seek to attain the knowledge of the divine reality. For this reason, *The Essence of Reality* contains autobiographical information in which ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī describes his spiritual crises, intellectual transformations, and own religious experiences throughout his studies of Islamic disciplines, more specifically when he was engaged in the science of *kalām*. al-Hamadānī mentions two names that freed him from the confines of rational theology and helped him gain a deeper internal understanding: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and his younger brother, Sufi Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 520/1126). While the first had guided al-Hamadānī through his writings, al-Hamadānī himself would become a student of the latter (13, 139). This acquaintance constituted a significant point in al-Hamadānī’s spiritual advancement. Hence, in *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq*, al-Hamadānī frequently emphasizes the necessity for proceeding on the spiritual path under the guidance of a master. From his perspective, the way to experience the divine reality and gain a higher and fuller knowledge of God is impossible by just studying books, using reflection, or inferential reasoning. The method of taste that leads to wisdom is only possible with the accompaniment of connoisseurs who have personally experienced this path (Chapters 66–71).

This kind of existential knowledge based on taste and experience led al-Hamadānī to express a metaphysical teaching that is often encountered in the later representatives of the tradition known as philosophical Sufism,<sup>3</sup> of which he

3 Toshihiko Izutsu regards ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī as one of the pioneers of philosophical Sufism, which had a long tradition, especially in Iran, alongside Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240) and Suhrawardī (d. 1191). Toshihiko Izutsu, “Mysticism and the Linguistic Problem of Equivocation in the Thought of

was a significant predecessor: God is the only reality in the whole universe and all of existence (Chapters 36, 41–46). The core of the teaching conceptualized in the commentators of Ibn al-‘Arabī as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (oneness of being) is found in this respect in the mystical and philosophical ideas of al-Hamadānī. That further overlaps occur between al-Hamadānī and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s (ö. 638/1240) conception of God is no surprise to see. For instance, as Rustom also points out in the book’s introduction, al-Hamadānī assumed the attributes of God to not add to His essence but only to represent a relation to the essence, similar to Ibn al-‘Arabī (Chapter 35). For al-Hamadānī, God recreates the universe every moment in an uninterrupted and constantly renewed creation (Chapters 56 and 59). The continuous creation in the world forms the backbone of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teaching of the divine self-disclosure. God manifests Himself in each moment, and a perpetual becoming occurs in existence, one where every moment is unlike any other. Moreover, the divine manifestation in question is an unmediated source from which people derive knowledge of the divine reality, according to both al-Hamadānī and Ibn al-‘Arabī (Chapter 81). Because the Real manifests and makes Itself known, the seeker can immediately attain Its knowledge. Therefore, in the view of both scholars, the divine self-manifestation, which is primarily a metaphysical teaching, has a strong epistemological dimension.

The distinction between rational knowledge and a way of knowing beyond the limits and abilities of reason appears in many classical Sufi texts. al-Hamadānī treats the process of attaining wisdom through different aspects in several chapters of *The Essence of Reality*. However, as Rustom notes, *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq* also includes some philosophical and theological issues that are not commonly seen in classical Sufi literature. For instance, al-Hamadānī discusses various philosophical and theological themes, including the question of the nature of God’s knowledge and whether He knows the particulars (Chapters 2, 11–15); the necessary, contingent, and impossible being (Chapters 8, 48, and 49); the theory of emanation (Chapter 39); causality (Chapters 38–41); and God’s beginninglessness and time (Chapter 54). The intertwining of concepts and questions from different disciplines of Islamic thought in al-Hamadānī’s writings marks the beginning of the school that would later come to be called philosophical mysticism.

‘Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī,” *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things* (Lahore: Suhail Academy 2005), 98–99. For an article investigating philosophical Sufism with a focus on the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī, see Mohammed Rustom, “Philosophical Sufism,” *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Richard C. Taylor and Luis Xavier López-Farjeat (New York: Routledge 2016), 399–411.



Mohammed Rustom has explored the mystical and philosophical views of al-Hamadānī in numerous articles<sup>4</sup> and offers with his translation of *The Essence of Reality* the opportunity to read al-Hamadānī's ideas through his own work to readers learning the Islamic intellectual tradition from English literature. That the original Arabic text has been published together with the English translation allows readers to look at al-Hamadānī's own phrases if desired. In addition to this successful translation, Rustom's book *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of 'Ayn Al-Quḍāt* provides a comprehensive and systematic analysis of al-Hamadānī's thought and will soon be available to readers.<sup>5</sup>

- 4 Some of Rustom's other works on 'Ayn Al-Quḍāt are "Everything Muhammad: The Image of the Prophet in the Writings of 'Ayn al-Qudat," *Sacred Web* 39 (2017): 33-40; " 'Ayn al-Quḍāt between Divine Jealousy and Political Intrigue," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 7 (2018): 47-73; "Devil's Advocate: 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's Defence of Iblis in Context," *Studia Islamica* 115, no. 1 (2020): 65-100; " 'Ayn al-Quḍāt on Chivalry," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4 (2020): 25-37; " 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's Qur'anic Vision: From Black Words to White Parchment," *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Routledge, 2020), 75-88; " 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's Journey of the Heart," *Journal of the Institute for Sufi Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 149-52.
- 5 Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023).