

Analysis of the Role of Symbolism in the Relationship Between Humans and God from the Perspectives of Suhrawardi and Jaspers

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Abstract

In the thoughts of theologians and philosophers of religion, symbolism and cryptic language are used as a means to convey the immaterial world and express metaphysical truths. This functionality is also employed in certain philosophical texts to describe the relationship between humans and God. The aim of this article is to explore the general concept of symbolism from the perspectives of Suhrawardi and Jaspers. After explaining and analyzing the nature and reasoning behind symbolism, as well as its characteristics and specific use in elucidating the concept of its role in the relationship between humans and God, the article compares the views of these two philosophers, identifying similarities and differences. For instance, Suhrawardi uses cryptic language to conceal meanings, while Jaspers aims to clarify the truth as much as possible through symbolism. According to both philosophers, the main feature of symbolism is its representational nature, and what is intended is an inner meaning, which ultimately cannot be fully deciphered. Suhrawardi believes that the encounter with symbolism occurs in the world of imaginal forms, while for Jaspers, it takes place in this very world. From Suhrawardi's perspective, symbolic language is not the only way to connect with God; God is not the sole creator and source of symbols. However, according to Jaspers, the transcendent manifests solely through symbolism, and the purpose and origin of symbols are solely attributed to God.

Keywords: Suhrawardi, Jaspers, Symbolism, God, Existence.

Introduction

Symbolism is one of the most significant linguistic phenomena that has gained a new meaning and concept within the framework of modern linguistics (Stiver, 2005, 211-212). The symbolic language used in religious and mystical texts to convey spiritual truths is a material language. When this language is applied to spiritual realities, it transcends its material appearance through epistemological and ontological associations, thereby revealing those truths (Peterson, 1997, 254-255; Geisler, 2012, 331-332). Sheikh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi utilized symbolic language in his mystical stories and philosophical works. Similarly, Karl Jaspers, a prominent existentialist philosopher, views metaphysical matters, including the transcendent (God), as being knowable only through symbolism, as these matters are beyond human reach and connection (Kleinweg, Software, 16).



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Research Findings

In their respective philosophies, Suhrawardi and Jaspers discuss the concept of God, the relationship between humans and God, and human knowledge of God through symbolism, where words carry meanings that go beyond their literal sense. Symbols serve as a means to address the limitations of human knowledge of God. In Suhrawardi's philosophy, the focus is on words, stories, and symbolic language, whereas Jaspers considers anything that transports a person to the metaphysical realm as a symbol. For Suhrawardi, the purpose of using symbolism is to conceal, while for Jaspers, it is to make things clearer. Both philosophers agree that the true intent and essence of symbolism lie in its inner meaning or non-physical reality. Additionally, they believe that an individual must reach certain levels of understanding to interpret symbols, and since symbol interpretation is a personal endeavor, fully and definitively grasping the true meaning of a symbol is impossible for humans. A distinct feature of symbolism in the views of these two philosophers is that Suhrawardi sees symbolism as a graded concept both ontologically and epistemologically. In contrast, Jaspers only acknowledges that some symbols are more important than others, without attributing other differences in the human ability to comprehend symbols outside of the existential realm. For Sheikh al-Ishraq, the encounter with symbols occurs in the world of separate imagination, whereas for Jaspers, this encounter happens in this very world. One could say that Suhrawardi's symbolic language is human and is proposed in the arc of descent, created by the person who witnesses it to convey knowledge that is close to what has been witnessed to those who seek it. However, Jaspers' symbolic language is proposed in the arc of ascent because it is a tool that allows humans to access the unreachable metaphysical realm, with God as its creator. According to Jaspers, symbolic language has three levels, and accordingly, the truth can be revealed to humans in three ways. The second and third levels of symbolic language in Jaspers' thought approach Suhrawardi's symbolic language.

Conclusion

What Suhrawardi and Jaspers share in their views on symbolism and symbolic language is that symbolism is primarily associated with metaphysical matters, especially in relation to God, though with some differences. In Suhrawardi's philosophy, religious language is not limited to symbolic language alone, but symbolic expression is a tool crafted by human language due to the limitations in conveying what the mystic has witnessed. In contrast, in Jaspers' philosophy, a person cannot have any direct experience without the mediation of symbols. Since God is inaccessible to humans, He creates symbols through which He imparts knowledge of Himself to humans. The human's role is merely to decipher and interpret these symbols. Both philosophers agree that understanding and interpreting symbols is contingent upon reaching specific levels of human spiritual development.

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