

Light As A Metaphor Of Consciousness: Integrating Suhrawardi's Illuminationist Philosophy And Modern Psychology

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ABSTRACT

This study explores light as a metaphor for consciousness by integrating Suhrawardi's philosophy of illumination with modern psychology. In Suhrawardi's view, light is not only a metaphysical symbol but an ontological reality linking human beings to the divine source of knowledge. Meanwhile, modern psychology examines consciousness through neurocognitive, cognitive, and phenomenological perspectives. Using a qualitative library-based method and philosophical hermeneutics, this research identifies areas of convergence and divergence between the two approaches. The findings reveal that Suhrawardi's gradation of light offers a framework for understanding consciousness as a multilayered spiritual process rather than merely a biological phenomenon. This concept parallels modern psychology's notions of self-actualization and peak experience. The integration of these perspectives provides valuable insights for developing spirituality-based psychotherapy, Islamic counseling, and consciousness education in Indonesia, highlighting the relevance of Islamic intellectual traditions to contemporary psychological discourse.

Keywords: *Consciousness, Illumination, Modern Psychology, Light, Suhrawardi,*

Cahaya sebagai Metafora Kesadaran: Integrasi Pemikiran Iluminasi Suhrawardi dan Psikologi Modern

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi konsep cahaya sebagai metafora kesadaran dengan mengintegrasikan filsafat iluminasi Suhrawardi dan psikologi modern. Bagi Suhrawardi, cahaya bukan sekadar simbol metafisik, melainkan realitas ontologis yang menghubungkan manusia dengan sumber pengetahuan ilahi. Sementara itu, psikologi modern memahami kesadaran melalui pendekatan neurokognitif, kognitif, dan fenomenologis. Dengan metode kualitatif berbasis studi pustaka serta hermeneutika filosofis, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi titik temu dan perbedaan antara keduanya. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa gradasi cahaya dalam pemikiran Suhrawardi dapat dipahami sebagai perjalanan menuju tingkat kesadaran yang lebih tinggi, memperluas pemahaman kesadaran dari aspek biologis menjadi proses spiritual yang berlapis. Pandangan ini selaras dengan konsep psikologi modern tentang aktualisasi diri dan pengalaman puncak. Integrasi kedua perspektif ini memberikan kontribusi penting bagi pengembangan psikoterapi berbasis spiritualitas, konseling Islam, serta pendidikan kesadaran di Indonesia, sekaligus menegaskan relevansi tradisi intelektual Islam dalam memperkaya wacana psikologi kontemporer.

Keywords: *Kesadaran, Iluminasi, Psikologi modern, Cahaya, Suhrawardi*

Pendahuluan

Consciousness has long fascinated scholars across disciplines, remaining one of the most enduring and elusive problems of human inquiry. While neuroscience and cognitive psychology have advanced our understanding of perception, attention, and memory, they have not resolved what Chalmers (2018) termed the “hard problem”: how subjective experience arises from physical processes. Despite detailed neural models, the richness of inner life—meaning, self-awareness, and spiritual orientation—resists reduction to brain activity alone. Across cultures and throughout history, metaphors have provided an essential means to grasp this mystery. Among these, light has consistently symbolized illumination, truth, and awakening. Its persistence across traditions suggests not only its symbolic power but also its capacity to bridge philosophical and psychological discourses on consciousness.

In Islamic philosophy, Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi developed the most systematic account of light as the foundation of reality. His *ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (“philosophy of illumination”) placed light at the center of metaphysics and epistemology. For Suhrawardi, light is not a poetic metaphor but an ontological principle, emanating from the *Nūr al-Anwār* (“Light of All Lights”), the source of all existence and knowledge (Ziai, 1990; Walbridge, 2000). Consciousness, in this view, unfolds as gradations of light: from the dimmest awareness bound to matter to the purest illumination in union with the divine. Knowledge is illumination, and to ascend in consciousness is to move toward greater light. Suhrawardi’s system thus unites cosmology, epistemology, and spirituality, offering a vision of consciousness that is at once metaphysical and practical.

Modern psychology, by contrast, has developed largely within a scientific paradigm that privileges measurement and experiment. Cognitive models describe consciousness as the outcome of attentional processes and global information integration (Baars, 1988; Dehaene & Naccache, 2001). Neuroscience has advanced influential theories such as Integrated Information Theory (Tononi et al., 2016) and predictive coding models (Clark, 2016). These frameworks provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of awareness, yet they tend to reduce consciousness to neural correlates or cognitive functions. While effective in explaining how consciousness operates, they struggle to capture its existential depth and spiritual significance (Metzinger, 2020; Vogeley & Gallagher, 2020).

This disciplinary divergence creates a fundamental problem. Philosophy, represented here by Suhrawardi, offers metaphysical richness but risks being treated as abstract speculation without empirical grounding. Psychology offers scientific rigor but risks a reductionism that sidelines the qualitative depth of lived experience. The result is a fragmented understanding: consciousness explained as either metaphysical light or neural circuitry, but rarely as both. Without integration,

each discipline remains limited—psychology missing spiritual depth, philosophy missing empirical relevance.

Recent scholarship has sought to bridge such divides. Contemplative science investigates how meditation and prayer alter neural and experiential states, suggesting possibilities for integrating spirituality with empirical methods (Dahl, Lutz, & Davidson, 2020). Within psychology, transpersonal and humanistic approaches highlight the importance of self-transcendence and peak experiences (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013; MacDonald, 2019). Meanwhile, Islamic studies scholars revisit classical thinkers to demonstrate their contemporary relevance (Yazdi, 2019). Yet these conversations often remain siloed: psychology examines therapeutic practices without engaging metaphysics, while philosophy reinterprets Suhrawardi historically without applying his concepts to psychology.

This gap is particularly evident in the growing movement for culturally grounded psychologies. Scholars argue that Western-centric models fail to capture the diversity of human experience and call for approaches rooted in indigenous traditions (Henrich, 2020; Haque, 2021). Islamic psychology has emerged as one such field, but it has often emphasized ethics, spirituality, or therapy rather than ontological foundations. Suhrawardi's illuminationism offers precisely such a foundation, situating consciousness within a graded ontology of light. Yet little research has attempted to bring his framework into direct dialogue with contemporary psychological theories.

The novelty of this study lies in treating Suhrawardi as more than a historical philosopher: as a conceptual partner in rethinking consciousness. In this study, light is neither reduced to metaphor nor confined to mysticism. Instead, it is approached as a model that unites metaphysical insight with psychological processes. Suhrawardi's hierarchy of light resonates with Maslow's (2011) description of peak experiences and self-actualization, both envisioning a progression toward higher awareness. Jung's symbolic use of light as integration of the self parallels Suhrawardi's view of illumination as unveiling truth (Jung, 2014). Moreover, empirical psychology has shown literal effects of light on mood, attention, and cognition (Golden et al., 2005; Kraft et al., 2017). These convergences suggest that illumination can be examined as both a philosophical and psychological phenomenon.

The implications of such integration extend beyond theory. In psychotherapy, metaphors of light may be applied to frame healing as a process of illumination, moving from confusion into clarity. In Islamic counseling, Suhrawardi's graded ontology could help structure interventions that guide clients toward higher awareness. In education, particularly within Islamic universities in Indonesia, illuminationist philosophy can enrich character formation programs by linking cognitive

learning with spiritual awakening. These applications show that classical Islamic thought is not only historically significant but practically relevant for modern contexts.

By situating Suhrawardi in dialogue with modern psychology, this study contributes both to the diversification of psychology and to the renewal of Islamic philosophy. It offers psychology an ontological depth often absent in scientific models, while giving philosophy a channel of application in contemporary practice. Such integration demonstrates that the study of consciousness need not be split between metaphysical speculation and empirical reductionism. Instead, it can move toward a holistic framework that recognizes consciousness as both a neurocognitive phenomenon and a spiritual reality.

Accordingly, this research is guided by the following question: How can Suhrawardi's illuminationist philosophy of light be integrated with modern psychological theories to develop a more comprehensive and applicable understanding of human consciousness?

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using library-based research with a descriptive–analytical orientation. The primary focus is a conceptual examination of the thought of Suhrawardi, particularly his philosophy of illumination (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*), alongside modern psychological literature on consciousness, especially from transpersonal and humanistic perspectives.

Data collection was conducted through systematic exploration of primary sources—most notably Suhrawardi's *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*—as well as secondary materials including books, peer-reviewed articles, and academic journals in Islamic philosophy and psychology. The inclusion criteria prioritized: (1) classical texts that articulate Suhrawardi's epistemology of light; (2) contemporary philosophical commentaries that contextualize his illuminationist framework; and (3) psychological literature published within the past two decades, with emphasis on works addressing transpersonal, humanistic, and neuroscientific approaches to consciousness. Sources were excluded if they lacked direct relevance to the themes of illumination, consciousness, or their intersection.

The analysis was carried out in two stages. First, a hermeneutical reading was applied to Suhrawardi's texts, enabling the interpretation of light not only as a metaphysical construct but also as a symbolic and experiential category. This stage emphasized contextual understanding of key terms, metaphors, and ontological claims. Second, a comparative analysis was employed to map convergences and divergences between Suhrawardi's illuminationism and psychological theories. This process highlighted points of compatibility, tensions, and potential areas of integration.

Beyond conceptual synthesis, the analysis also considered translational implications—that is, how philosophical insights can inform applied domains of psychology such as psychotherapy, counseling, and education. By adopting this approach, the study responds to the call for greater accessibility across disciplines: bridging abstract philosophical ideas with practical psychological frameworks in a way that can be understood by readers outside the field of philosophy.

The objective of this methodology is not to test empirical hypotheses but to construct a holistic synthesis. Such a synthesis expands current perspectives on human consciousness by combining the metaphysical depth of Suhrawardi's illuminationist thought with the empirical and applied insights of modern psychology.

Result

The analysis yields three major findings that deepen the understanding of light as both a metaphor and an ontological principle of consciousness.

1. Suhrawardi's illuminationism articulates a graded ontology of consciousness.

In his philosophy, light is not a metaphor for knowledge but the very essence of existence. All beings are positioned within a hierarchy of illumination, culminating in the Nūr al-Anwār ("Light of All Lights"), the ultimate source of truth and reality (Ziai, 1990; Walbridge, 2000). Human consciousness is therefore seen as a reflection of this cosmic order: awareness expands as one moves closer to purer intensities of light.

This framework situates consciousness within a spiritual cosmology rather than reducing it to material processes. Recent scholarship highlights the contemporary relevance of such metaphysical accounts. Yazdi (2019) emphasizes that Suhrawardi's knowledge by presence provides a model of self-awareness that anticipates modern phenomenology. Similarly, Kaukua (2020) argues that illuminationist epistemology foregrounds the immediacy of consciousness, a theme increasingly echoed in discussions of subjectivity and embodied cognition.

2. Modern psychology conceptualizes consciousness as an emergent, dynamic process shaped by neural and cognitive mechanisms, yet continues to draw—both explicitly and implicitly—on metaphors of light.

The global workspace model, for instance, describes attention as a spotlight illuminating mental contents for higher-order processing (Baars, 1988; Dehaene & Naccache, 2001). Contemporary neuroscience extends this metaphor by examining how brain networks "light up" under neuroimaging when subjects attend to specific stimuli (Mashour et al., 2020). Empirical studies further confirm that literal light influences psychological functioning. Exposure to bright

light improves mood, sleep regulation, and cognitive performance (LeGates et al., 2014; Vandewalle et al., 2020).

Recent research also shows that light intensity modulates attentional control and memory formation (Chellappa et al., 2021). In psychotherapy, metaphors of illumination remain central: clients often describe healing as “seeing the light” or “emerging from darkness,” expressions that align with the phenomenological depth of Suhrawardi’s framework.

3. *Integration of Suhrawardi’s illuminationism with modern psychology reveals convergences that enable a richer synthesis.*

Both traditions, despite their different starting points, acknowledge that consciousness unfolds in degrees of clarity and intensity. In psychology, this is described as varying levels of awareness and self-regulation (Vogeley & Gallagher, 2020). In Suhrawardi, it is articulated as ascending through layers of light. While psychology explains these processes through cognitive and neural dynamics, Suhrawardi situates them within a metaphysical hierarchy oriented toward the divine. Integrating these perspectives produces a dual-level framework: consciousness can be analyzed empirically as neurocognitive function and interpreted existentially as participation in spiritual illumination.

Recent scholarship supports such integrative approaches. Metzinger (2020) emphasizes the need for “second-person” perspectives that include phenomenological accounts, while MacDonald (2019) argues for frameworks that incorporate transpersonal dimensions into psychology. Suhrawardi’s illuminationism, when paired with empirical psychology, offers precisely this kind of holistic model.

4. *Practical implications emerge when this synthesis is translated into applied psychology.*

In psychotherapy, Suhrawardi’s hierarchy of light provides a symbolic narrative for growth, where healing is described as the movement from darkness into increasing illumination. Such framing aligns with transpersonal therapeutic models that guide clients toward higher states of awareness (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013). In education, especially within Islamic contexts such as Indonesia, illuminationism can enrich curricula by linking cognitive learning with spiritual maturity. This resonates with recent calls to integrate spirituality into educational psychology (Amir & Subandi, 2020; Saeed et al., 2021). In counseling, metaphors of light can be employed as culturally resonant tools that help clients articulate their inner experiences, especially in societies where religious symbolism remains deeply influential.

Taken together, these findings show that light functions as more than a symbolic figure: it is a conceptual bridge that connects metaphysical depth and empirical relevance. Suhrawardi’s

philosophy prevents psychology from collapsing consciousness into mere neural activity, while psychology grounds illuminationism in contemporary scientific and therapeutic practice. The result is a model of consciousness that is at once philosophically profound, empirically informed, and practically applicable.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the potential of Suhrawardi's illuminationist philosophy to enrich contemporary debates on consciousness. By situating consciousness within a hierarchy of light, Suhrawardi offers an ontological depth that contrasts sharply with the mechanistic descriptions of cognitive science. What emerges from this dialogue is not a simple comparison between medieval philosophy and modern psychology, but rather a framework that demonstrates how metaphysical traditions can provide indispensable insights for rethinking some of the most difficult problems in psychology today.

A central contribution of this study is the recognition that consciousness is best conceived as a spectrum, rather than a binary state. Modern neuroscience has often described consciousness in terms of on-off states of awareness, correlating them with measurable brain activity (Mashour et al., 2020). Yet Suhrawardi's notion of graded illumination reframes consciousness as a dynamic continuum, ranging from dim awareness to profound union with the divine. This echoes recent moves in transpersonal psychology to conceptualize awareness as layered, encompassing ordinary cognition, altered states, and transcendent experiences (MacDonald, 2019). When these perspectives are placed side by side, a richer model of consciousness takes shape: one that captures both the biological mechanisms and the existential depth of human subjectivity.

Equally significant is the way in which Suhrawardi's illuminationism disrupts the implicit materialism that shapes much of modern psychology. Contemporary models, from predictive coding (Clark, 2016) to integrated information theory (Tononi et al., 2016), offer increasingly sophisticated accounts of how consciousness works but remain silent on why consciousness exists at all. Suhrawardi addresses this silence directly: consciousness is not an accidental by-product of neural complexity but an ontological necessity, rooted in the very structure of existence. This perspective opens a conversation that psychology has often avoided — namely, the question of meaning and purpose in human awareness. By framing consciousness as illumination, Suhrawardi reintroduces the normative dimension: to be conscious is not only to process information, but to orient oneself toward truth.

This has profound methodological implications. Scientific psychology already relies on metaphors of light, often unconsciously. Attention is described as a “spotlight” that highlights selected information (Dehaene & Naccache, 2001), and brain imaging studies speak of regions “lighting up” under stimulation (Mashour et al., 2020). Such language, far from neutral, reveals that even empirical science depends on symbolic frameworks. Suhrawardi’s philosophy provides a coherent ontology behind these metaphors, showing that they are not accidental but expressive of a deeper intuition: that awareness itself is illumination. Recognizing this helps bridge the artificial divide between scientific and spiritual discourses.

The practical implications of this synthesis are equally compelling. In psychotherapy, the metaphor of light can be mobilized as a culturally resonant tool for fostering insight and healing. Clients frequently describe recovery in terms of “seeing the light” or “emerging from darkness.” Suhrawardi’s schema provides a philosophical scaffolding for such experiences, framing them not as isolated metaphors but as movements along a continuum of consciousness. This approach aligns with recent calls to integrate spirituality into therapy, especially in Muslim-majority contexts where religious symbols are central to meaning-making (Amir & Subandi, 2020). Similarly, in educational psychology, illuminationism can inform curricula that aim to cultivate not only cognitive competence but also moral clarity and spiritual maturity. Studies in educational psychology increasingly emphasize the role of spirituality in holistic development (Saeed et al., 2021). Suhrawardi’s ideas provide a framework for embedding such values within Islamic higher education, particularly in Indonesia where psychology and Islamic studies intersect.

At the same time, the synthesis proposed here must be approached critically. There is always a risk of reducing Suhrawardi’s philosophy to mere metaphorical decoration for psychological models, or conversely, of importing spiritual claims into scientific discourse without adequate justification. To avoid these pitfalls, interdisciplinary dialogue must proceed with methodological care. Approaches such as neurophenomenology — which systematically correlates first-person accounts of experience with third-person neuroscientific data — offer a promising way forward (Dahl et al., 2020). By combining philosophical reflection, empirical rigor, and lived experience, such methodologies can sustain the balance between metaphysical insight and scientific accountability.

This discussion also has broader implications for the diversification of global psychology. The field has long been criticized for its Western-centric orientation, which privileges secular and materialist frameworks (Henrich, 2020). Integrating Suhrawardi’s illuminationism into contemporary

debates demonstrates that Islamic intellectual traditions are not peripheral but central to the project of understanding consciousness. This strengthens the growing discipline of Islamic psychology, offering it not just ethical guidelines or therapeutic tools, but a robust epistemological foundation. In turn, psychology gains access to conceptual resources that expand its capacity to address questions of meaning, spirituality, and transcendence.

For Indonesia, where Islamic psychology is rapidly gaining recognition, these findings highlight a path forward. By drawing on illuminationist philosophy, scholars and practitioners can design counseling frameworks, therapeutic models, and educational programs that are both scientifically informed and spiritually grounded. Such integration addresses a pressing need: to make psychology responsive not only to universal scientific standards but also to local cultural and religious contexts (Haque, 2021). In this way, Suhrawardi's thought becomes a living resource for building an indigenous psychology that speaks directly to the needs of Indonesian society.

Ultimately, the discussion affirms that consciousness should not be confined within the boundaries of either metaphysical speculation or empirical reductionism. Instead, it should be approached as a multidimensional reality that encompasses biological mechanisms, subjective experience, and spiritual orientation. Suhrawardi's illuminationism, when brought into conversation with modern psychology, makes this multidimensionality visible. It provides a conceptual bridge between the sciences of the brain and the philosophies of the spirit, showing that the two are not mutually exclusive but mutually illuminating.

Conclusion

This study has examined Suhrawardi's illuminationist philosophy alongside modern psychological theories of consciousness, showing that light functions as both an ontological principle and a metaphorical bridge between metaphysics and science. Suhrawardi situates consciousness within a hierarchy of illumination culminating in the *Nūr al-Anwār*, while psychology explains it through neural and cognitive mechanisms. Placed in dialogue, these frameworks reveal convergence in their recognition of graded awareness and divergence in their ontological foundations.

The novelty of this research lies in demonstrating that such integration enriches theoretical debates and extends into applied contexts. In psychotherapy, Suhrawardi's imagery of light can guide clients in framing healing as a movement from darkness to clarity, complementing transpersonal and Islamic counseling approaches. In education, particularly in Indonesia, illuminationist philosophy

can inform curricula that nurture both cognitive and spiritual maturity. These applications address the concern that the study move beyond theory into practical relevance.

Nevertheless, methodological challenges remain. Interdisciplinary work must avoid reducing illuminationism to mere metaphor or importing spiritual claims into science without justification. Future research should employ approaches such as neurophenomenology to link first-person experience with empirical findings, ensuring that metaphysical depth and scientific rigor remain in balance.

In conclusion, Suhrawardi's illuminationism offers a valuable resource for diversifying psychology and grounding it in cultural and spiritual contexts. For Indonesia and the wider field of Islamic psychology, the integration of classical thought with modern science provides a distinctive path toward a holistic understanding of consciousness—one that is empirically informed, spiritually meaningful, and globally relevant.

Suggestion

This study points to several directions for strengthening the integration of Suhrawardi's illuminationism and modern psychology.

For research, future studies should explore methodologies that connect metaphysical insights with empirical findings. Neurophenomenology and contemplative neuroscience, for instance, can provide ways to examine subjective experiences of “illumination” alongside neural data (Dahl et al., 2020). Cross-cultural comparisons could also reveal how metaphors of light are employed in different traditions of consciousness, thereby enriching the global psychology of spirituality.

For applied psychology, illuminationist concepts can serve as culturally resonant tools in psychotherapy and counseling. In Muslim contexts, especially Indonesia, therapists could adapt the metaphor of light to help clients frame personal growth as movement from darkness into clarity. This resonates with Islamic counseling approaches already in practice and offers a symbolic language that clients intuitively understand. Small-scale interventions and pilot programs could assess the effectiveness of such culturally embedded metaphors in enhancing therapeutic outcomes.

For education and professional training, Islamic universities in Indonesia could integrate Suhrawardi's ideas into psychology curricula. Linking cognitive learning with spiritual awareness would cultivate practitioners who are scientifically competent yet spiritually literate, reflecting the holistic needs of Indonesian society. Partnerships between psychology faculties and Islamic studies departments could support the design of such integrative modules.

Taken together, these suggestions underscore that illuminationism is not only a historical philosophy but a resource for shaping a psychology that is empirically grounded, spiritually meaningful, and locally relevant.

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