

AL-GHAZALI AND SUHRAWARDI ON THE ONTOLOGY OF LIGHT (NŪR): A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The concept of light (*nūr*) occupies a central position in Islamic intellectual history, yet its epistemic function remains insufficiently examined in a systematic and comparative manner. Although Aminrazavi (1997) identified that a comprehensive study on al-Ghazali's influence on al-Suhrawardi remains limited, and despite the attention given by scholars such as Davidson (1992), Marcotte (2007), and Arnzen (2011) to the relationship between these two figures, existing studies do not focus specifically on a systematic comparison of the epistemological and ontological dimensions of light (*nūr*) between them. Most research is either too general in describing al-Ghazali's influence, or too rigidly separates the two figures into opposing traditions, as reflected in

Walbridge (2001). This gap necessitates a more detailed and nuanced comparative study, which serves as the primary objective of this article. The findings of this study reveal that the concept of light (*nūr*) in the Islamic intellectual tradition develops along two fundamentally distinct paradigms: an epistemological-theological model in the thought of al-Ghazali and an ontological-illuminationist system in the philosophy of al-Suhrawardi. Although both thinkers concur that light is "*manifest in itself and makes others manifest*" (*zāhir li dhātih wa muḥir li ḡayrih*) and ultimately derives from the *Nūr al-Anwār* (Light of Lights), their divergence lies in the structural relationship between epistemology and ontology. This study examines the concept of light through a comparative analysis of *Mishkāt al-Anwār* by al-Ghazali and *Hikmat al-Ishrāq* by al-Suhrawardi, with particular focus on their epistemological and ontological dimensions. It demonstrates that al-Ghazali approaches light within an epistemological-theological framework, wherein light operates as a symbolic language for spiritual cognition and unveiling. In contrast, al-Suhrawardi advances light as the primary ontological principle, effectively displacing the Peripatetic notion of *wujūd*, constructing a hierarchical metaphysics grounded in degrees of luminous intensity (*shiddat al-nūr*), from which both reality and knowledge are derived. The study concludes that the discourse on light in Islamic philosophy undergoes a significant transition from a symbolic-theological paradigm to an ontological-illuminationist one.

Keywords: *Nūr* (light); epistemology; ontology, al-Ghazali; al-Suhrawardi; Islamic philosophy.

Khulasah

Konsep cahaya (*nūr*) menempati kedudukan yang penting dalam sejarah intelektual Islam, namun dari sudut epistemologi, ia masih belum dikaji secara sistematis dan menyeluruh. Meskipun Aminrazavi

(1997) telah mengenal pasti bahawa terdapat kajian komprehensif mengenai pengaruh al-Ghazali terhadap al-Suhrawardi, namun kajian tersebut masih terbatas. Dan walaupun para sarjana seperti Davidson (1992), Marcotte (2007) dan Arnzen (2011) telah memberikan perhatian terhadap hubungan antara kedua-dua tokoh tersebut, kajian sedia ada masih belum memberikan tumpuan khusus kepada perbandingan sistematik antara dimensi epistemologi dan ontologi konsep cahaya (*nūr*) dalam pemikiran mereka. Kebanyakan kajian sama ada terlalu umum dalam menghuraikan pengaruh al-Ghazali atau terlalu kaku dalam memisahkan kedua-dua tokoh tersebut ke dalam tradisi pemikiran yang saling bertentangan, sebagaimana yang tergambar dalam kajian Walbridge (2001). Kelompangan ini memerlukan kajian yang lebih terperinci dan bercirikan perbandingan yang menjadi objektif utama artikel ini. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa konsep cahaya (*nūr*) dalam tradisi intelektual Islam berkembang melalui dua paradigma asas yang berbeza, iaitu model epistemologi-teologi dalam pemikiran al-Ghazali dan sistem ontologi-iluminasi dalam falsafah al-Suhrawardi. Walaupun kedua-dua tokoh tersebut sepakat bahawa cahaya ialah sesuatu yang "nyata pada dirinya dan menzahirkan selainnya" (*zāhir li dhātih wa muḥhir li ḡhayrih*) yang berasal daripada *Nūr al-Anwār* (Cahaya Segala Cahaya), perbezaan antara mereka terletak pada struktur hubungan antara epistemologi dan ontologi. Kajian ini meneliti konsep cahaya melalui analisis perbandingan antara *Mishkāt al-Anwār* karya al-Ghazali dan *Hikmat al-Ishrāq* karya al-Suhrawardi, dengan memberikan tumpuan khusus kepada dimensi epistemologi dan ontologi masing-masing. Kajian ini membuktikan bahawa al-Ghazali mendekati konsep cahaya dalam kerangka epistemologi-teologi, iaitu cahaya berfungsi sebagai bahasa simbolik bagi kognisi rohani dan penyingkatan spiritual. Sebaliknya, al-Suhrawardi

mengemukakan cahaya sebagai prinsip ontologi utama yang secara berkesan menggantikan konsep *wujūd* dalam falsafah Peripatetik, lalu membina suatu metafizik berhierarki yang berasaskan darjat intensiti cahaya (*shiddat al-nūr*), daripadanya realiti dan ilmu terbit. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa wacana tentang cahaya dalam falsafah Islam telah mengalami satu peralihan penting daripada paradigma simbolik-teologi kepada paradigma ontologi-iluminasi.

Kata kunci: *Nūr* (cahaya); epistemologi; ontologi; al-Ghazali; al-Suhrawardi; falsafah Islam.

Introduction

Light (*nūr*) denotes that which illuminates and makes things manifest. In philosophy, it plays a central role in epistemology, especially in *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* (*Illuminationist Philosophy*). Here, the "Oriental Light" does not refer to a geographical East but to a spiritual source of enlightenment that connects the human soul with Absolute Truth, reflecting the perennial wisdom of the ancient sages (*aqdamīn awwalīn*).

According to Corbin (1994), human orientation transcends horizontal directions such as East, West, North, and South, referring instead to a vertical ascent from the lower planes (*al-ṭabaqāt al-'ardī*) to the higher stations (*al-ṭabaqāt al-tūlī*). This movement signifies the relationship between humanity and the celestial realm, pointing to a "world" beyond geographical mapping and sensory perception. Consequently, the philosophical symbolism of light is rooted in pre-Islamic traditions.¹ The discourse on

¹ The employment of light motifs in early Iranian religions such as Mithraism, classical Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism, alongside Greek philosophy, forms the theoretical foundation for the doctrines of light and illumination within Islamic Philosophy. Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. Nancy Pearson (New Lebanon: Omega Publications, 1994), 1–3; John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawadi and Platonic Orientalism*

light developed systematically in the Islamic tradition prior to the full formulation of illuminationist philosophy by al-Shihab al-Din Yahya Ibn Habash al-Suhrawardi (d. 587/1191). An earlier foundation was established by Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111) in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. Building upon this, the present study undertakes a comparative analysis.

Literature Review

Al-Suhrawardi's ontological model is entirely distinct from conventional philosophical models. In this system, the relations among entities and the hierarchical ordering of existents are structured through luminous relations and the reciprocal radiations of luminous essences, a feature that provides explanatory capacities rarely found in other philosophical traditions.²

Following this perspective, earlier studies have examined al-Suhrawardi's introduction of the concept of light (*nūr*) in relation to al-Ghazali. According to Nicolai Sinai (2016), al-Suhrawardi's introduction of the concept of light (*nūr*) is fundamentally indebted to al-Ghazali, specifically the first chapter of *Mishkāt al-Anwār*. This perspective is supported by Mehdi Aminrazavi (1997), who notes that comprehensive studies of al-Ghazali's influence on al-Suhrawardi remain relatively limited, prompting further attention from scholars such as Herbert Davidson

(New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 27-35; Dimitri Gutas, "Essay-Review: Suhrawardi and Greek Philosophy," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 13(2003), 303-309.

² Maryam Atefi, "Analysis and Examination of the Origin and Expansion of the Universe in the Qur'an with Emphasis on Light of Lights (Nūr al-Anwār) Suhrawardi's Theory," *Islamic Heritage and Contemporary Challenges* 1(2) (2025), 124; J. M. Kholmuminov & D. R. Komilov, "The Philosophy of Light: Hermeneutic Interpretation," *IMRAS* 8(6) (2025), 178-194.

(1992), Roxanne Marcotte (2007), and Rüdiger Arnzen (2011).³

While scholars like Walbridge (2001) have attempted to identify common ground between the two thinkers in their critiques of Peripatetic philosophy, he problematically concludes that al-Ghazali entirely rejected philosophy in favor of Ash‘arite theology, and that al-Suhrawardi’s system was unbound by divine revelation. In contrast to such extreme differentiations, this study observes a more nuanced methodological continuity. Supported by perspectives such as Griffel’s, this study maintains that both thinkers sought to reconstruct Islamic thought grounded firmly in *tawhīd*.⁴ Despite certain similarities, it is clear that al-Ghazali’s treatise, with its primary objective of opening a path to mystical knowledge and interpreting the “Light Verse” of the Qur’an, appears somewhat distinct from the philosophical ambitions of explaining a broader system of light as found in *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*. Al-Ghazali presents the concept of light in *Mishkāt al-Anwār* as a symbolic system of truth and spiritual consciousness, with

³ Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 135, 164, 170; Roxanne D. Marcotte, *Suhrawardī (d. 1191) and His Interpretation of Avicenna's (d.1037) Philosophical Anthropology* (PhD Thesis McGill University, 2000), 32–34; Nicolai Sinai, “Al-Suhrawardi’s Philosophy of Illumination and al-Ghazālī,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 98(3) (2016), 272–301. See also Mehdi Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), 31; Hossein Ziai, “The Illuminationist Tradition,” *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr & Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2003), 465–496.

⁴ See John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East*, 56; Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, “Al-Alwāh al-‘Imādiyyah,” in *Kalimat al-Tasawwuf: Three Treatises*, ed. Najaf-Gholi Habibi (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), 82; Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4-5.

God as the Absolute Light emanating *nūr* into the hearts of the believers. Moreover, al-Ghazali's interpretation remains firmly rooted within the framework of the *sharī'ah* and Sunni theology; specifically, his Sufism is heavily anchored in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology, a synthesis which Frank Griffel characterizes as "philosophical theology".⁵

Consequently, *Mishkāt al-Anwār* represents an expansion of an Islamic spiritual vision centered upon revelation (*wahy*), divine law (*sharī'ah*), and Sufi experience. In contrast, al-Suhrawardi, in *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, constructs a philosophical system that establishes light as the primary ontological and epistemological principle. For al-Suhrawardi, light is not perceived as a mere metaphor but as the ultimate reality underlying all existence. Every level of being is hierarchically organized based on the intensity of light, descending from the *Nūr al-Anwār* (*Light of Lights*) to the darkest shadows. Within this system, mystical experience and intuitive consciousness (*'ilm hudūrī* or knowledge by presence) serve as the most fundamental sources of knowledge in constructing an understanding of the emanations from the Supreme Source.

Accordingly, this article aims to critically compare and analyze the views of al-Ghazali and al-Suhrawardi regarding the concept of light. It examines their epistemological and ontological foundations and investigates how light serves as the central principle for understanding the realities of God, the cosmos, and humanity. This approach not only demonstrates the philosophical sophistication of classical Islamic thought but also opens up a discourse for understanding light as the foundation of *ḥaqīqat al-wujūd* (the reality of existence).

⁵ Frank Griffel, *al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 7.

Manifesting Existence: Al-Ghazali and Al-Suhrawardi on Divine Light

Generally, light (*nūr*) denotes the radiance that renders objects visible to sensory perception.⁶ However, within Islamic philosophy and mysticism, essential light transcends the physical realm; it refers to the Ultimate Truth (*al-Haqq*) and the "Light of Lights" (*nūr al-anwār*).⁷ Al-Raghib al-Isfahani classifies light into physical light perceived by the eye, and "intellectual light" (*al-nūr al-aqlī*) perceived through the "eye of the heart" (*'ayn al-baṣīrah*). Philosophically, the reality of light is defined by the "verifiers of truth" (*ahl al-tahqīq*) as that which is "manifest in itself and makes others manifest" (*al-zāhir li-nafsihi wa al-muḥhir li-ghayrihi*). It is an incorporeal, pure entity unmixed with darkness, serving as the ontological foundation of all existence and the source of divine guidance (*hidāyah*). In other words, light is unmixed with darkness and remains free from any elements that might obscure its essence. Thus, true light is not only self-subsistent in its essence but also illuminates everything external to itself. Within this framework, light serves as the foundation of all existence (*wujūd*) and is categorized within the domains of metaphysical and ontological discourse.⁸

⁶ Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Tahānawī, *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn wa'l-'Ulūm al-Islāmiyya*, ed. 'Alī Daḥrūj (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān Nāshirūn, 1996), 2:1731.

⁷ 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Jurjānī, *al-Ta'rīfāt: Risāla Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah* (Cairo: n.p., 1306 AH), 108.

⁸ Muḥammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1414 AH), 14: 321 & 5: 240 (This definition is also found in Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī, *Majmū'at Muṣannaḥāt Shaykh al-Ishrāq*, ed. Henry Corbin (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-'Āmmaḥ li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfah, 2000), 2:106; Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 527; Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Tūsī, *al-Tibyān al-Jāmi' li 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Ahmad Qaṣīr al-

Within this context, essential light (*nūr*) is understood as the independent manifestation (*tajallī*) of the Absolute, serving as the very foundation of existence without requiring any similitude (*mithāl*). Transcending sensory perception, this light is a self-subsisting reality rather than a mere accidental property (*‘araḍ*).⁹ The ultimate source of this illumination (*nūr al-anwār*) is Allah the Almighty. Emphasizing this primary truth, al-Ghazali notes regarding the "Light Verse" (Surah al-Nur: 35) in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*: "This should not be hidden from you after you have known that the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) is that He is the light, and there is no light but He, and He is all lights, and He is the Universal Light."¹⁰

In this regard, al-Suhrawardi and al-Ghazali appear to concur with the general principle asserting that the reality of light is not merely metaphorical, but is the very essence that renders all things manifest (*zāhir*). In other words, a thing becomes real or intelligible precisely because it is "luminous" or is made manifest by light. This confirms that light is both real and self-evident; its existence is primordial (*ḥaqīqī*). Conversely, darkness (*zulmah*) is the absence of light. While non-existence (*‘adam*) is not an attribute of light, the contrary of light is darkness (*zulmah*). In this framework, the obscurity of darkness is deemed more profound than absolute non-existence. Just as "Existence" (*al-Wujūd*) stands in opposition to non-existence, so too is

‘Āmilī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.) 429-233, who tends to interpret the content of the "Light Verse" as the act of providing guidance (*yahdī*) to the hearts of the believers.

⁹ Shihāb al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Mūsā Buzshallu’ī Kumjānī, *Nūr al-Fu’ād: A 19th Century Persian Text in Illuminationist Philosophy*, ed. & trans. Hossein Ziai and Mohammad Karimi Zanjani Asl (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2012), 142, 149, 153, 156.

¹⁰ Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār wa Miṣfāt al-Asrār*, ed. al-Lajnah al-‘Ilmiyyah bi Markaz Dār al-Minhāj li al-Dirāsāt wa al-Taḥqīq al-‘Ilmī (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2020), 72.

it "Light." For as long as a thing is not manifest in its own essence, it cannot possibly be manifest to others (*wa fī muqābalatih al-wujūd, fahuwa al-nūr; fa'inna al-shay'a mā lam yazhar fī dhātih... lā yazhar li ghayrih*). On the contrary, light is manifest both to itself and to others (*anna al-nūra yarji'u ilā al-zuhūr wa al-izhār... fa'lām: annahu lā zulmat ashadd min kathm al-'adam*).¹¹

Consequently, if light were to depend on something other than its own essence, its nature would be considered non-pure (*mujarrad*). Al-Ghazali (2021) likens such a state to a borrowed item, where the attribute is merely relative because it depends on an external source, much as wearing fine clothes does not necessarily mean one is wealthy (*wa-innamā huwa mawjūdun min haythu nisbatuhu ilā ghayrihi, wa dhālika laysa bi wujūdin haqīqiyyin; kamā 'arafa fī mithāli isti'ārati al-thawbi min al-ghaniyyi al-mu'iri*).¹² This view is echoed by al-Suhrawardī, who maintains that light is not symbolic but is the manifestation of the very essence itself (*in kāna fī al-wujūdi mā lā yahtāju ilā ta'rīfihi wa sharhihi fa huwa al-zāhir, wa lā shay'a azharu min al-nūr, fa lā shay'a aghnā minhu 'an al-ta'rīf*).¹³ Thus, all reality is a manifestation of the self-disclosure of light. This argument demonstrates that the reality of light possesses neither genus (*jins*) nor differentia (*faṣl*), as such divisions only occur within existents that possess a genus. If the reality of light lacks both *jins* and *faṣl*, it follows that it is without limit (*ḥadd*). This indicates that light is self-evident in its own right, independent of all else, The Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) (*Fa al-mawjūdu al-ḥaqqu huwa Allāhu subḥānahu; kamā anna al-nūra al-ḥaqqu huwa Allāhu Ta'ālā*).¹⁴

¹¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 68.

¹² Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 68.

¹³ Al-Suhrawadī, *Majmū'at Muṣannaḥāt Shaykh al-Ishrāq*, 2:106.

¹⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 68.

Before entering into the analytical discussion of their arguments, we may conclude that, in principle, both figures agree that the essence of light symbolizes clarity, existence, and the connection between the manifest and the hidden mysteries (*asrar*). Both al-Ghazali and al-Suhrawardi concur that true light is ultimately attributed only to the Divine Light (*nūr al-anwār*). Thus, the Supreme Light emanates luminosity to the realms below, bridging the terrestrial world with the highest reality. Consequently, this light is not detected by the senses and is non-corporeal in nature; rather, it is a purely incorporeal (*mujarrad*) reality that transcends physical form. However, despite these commonalities in understanding the essence of light, the two thinkers specifically diverge in their discourses regarding methodology, epistemology, and ontology. This article seeks to examine these differences in their epistemological and ontological arguments concerning the concept of light (*nūr*).

The Discourse of Light According to al-Ghazali in *Mishkāt al-Anwār*

In *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, al-Ghazali asserts that true light is attributed solely to Allah, whereas any light other than His is merely metaphorical (*majāzī*). He maintains that applying the name light to anything other than the First Light (Allah) is pure metaphor (*majāz maḥḍ*) (*inna isma al-nūri 'alā ghayri al-nūri al-awwali majāzun maḥḍ*).¹⁵ This is because everything other than Him, when considered in relation to its own essence, possesses no light of its own. Rather, its luminosity is borrowed from another; such borrowed light cannot subsist by itself but only through the assistance of another. To attribute a borrowed quality to the borrower is purely metaphorical. In contrast, He is the Primordial (*al-Azalī*), without beginning, the Manifest

¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 66.

Light and the True Light. He is the Most High Light.¹⁶ It is stated that He is the "utmost and highest light, above which there is no light, and from whom light descends upon all others" (*nūr al-aqṣā al-a'lā, alladhī lā nūru fawqahu, wa minhu yanzilu al-nūru ilā ghayrihi*).¹⁷ He is the Alpha and the Omega of light, the source of all luminosity. Therefore, anything other than Him is neither the reality of light nor the truth (*inna isma al-nūr 'alā ghayri al-nūr al-awwali majāzun maḥḍun*).¹⁸ Anything besides the First Light is merely metaphorical (not essential), acting as a borrowed light dependent on another. Thus, the Truth is the Illuminating Light.

In al-Ghazali's accounts, although some have attained proximity (*al-muqarrabūn*) to God, there are also others who possess a form of light yet remain unable to attain the reality of beholding the Divine Light, as their perception remains an imperfect shadow. This lack of perfection pertains to their understanding of cosmology, the universe, the movement of existence, and causality. Al-Ghazali characterizes this group as philosophers, such as Aristotle, in their comprehension of the Divine.¹⁹

Furthermore, there is a more advanced group who believes that God is not merely the "Prime Mover" (as

¹⁶ Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 1:381; al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 67; Taneli Kukkonen, "Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī," in *Key Classical Works on Islamic Ethics*, ed. Mutaz al-Khatib (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 206–228.

¹⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 67.

¹⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 67.

¹⁹ Aristotle, "Physics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (United States: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2:428–33 (256a–259a); Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984), 1: 1692–93 (1071b–1073a). Frank Griffel, *al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 245.

Aristotle maintained) but the Bestower of existence (*Wāhib al-Wujūd*) to all beings that depend upon Him. To them, God is the "Necessary Being" (*Wājib al-Wujūd*). This group includes Islamic philosophers such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. They maintain that God is the source of existence rather than merely the mover of the spheres, as Aristotle believed.²⁰

For this group, the "mover" is interpreted as a being that is obedient (*al-muṭā`*) to God. There are also those who believe that God governs the universe through His command (*al-amr*) rather than through physical motion. This may refer to the existential command such as "*Kun*"²¹ (Be!). Furthermore, there is the ontological command, referring to the order of the universe without Divine contact, as well as the intellectual command, which relates to the concept of emanation from the First Intellect (*'aql al-awwal*) through subsequent intellects. According to al-Ghazali, these possibilities suggest that philosophical discourse is incapable of attaining the true reality of God, as it stops at a brilliance that merely dazzles rather than one that truly illuminates.²²

Ultimately, al-Ghazali arrives at the definition of the group considered to have attained pure monotheism (*tawhīd*), namely the Divine Light. According to him, God cannot be equated with cosmic entities as interpreted by the philosophers. This is because, in the presence of Allah, nothing holds a status of "co-existence" (*rutbat al-*

²⁰ Abū 'Alī al-Husayn ibn 'Abd Allāh Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1960), 146 & 15–17.

²¹ Surah al-An'am 6:73

²² Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 44–50; Hamdan Maghribi & Alfina Hidayah, "Reason, Revelation, and Sufism: The Epistemic Paradigm of Al-Ghazali and Ibnu Taimiyyah," *Journal of Islamic and Occidental Studies* 3(2) (2025), 171–188.

ma'iyah); rather, there is only a status of "dependency" (*rutbat al-tabā'iyah*). Indeed, there is no existence among all existents except that which originates from Him. Thus, there is no existence except the existence of Allah and His primordial and eternal Face (*Wajh*) (*hāshā lillāh, idh laysa fī al-wujūd ma'ahu ghayruhu ḥattā yakūna akbara minhu, bal laysa li ghayrihi rutbat al-ma'iyah, bal rutbat al-tabā'iyah, bal laysa li ghayrihi wujūdun illā min al-wajhi alladhī yalīhi, fa al-mawjūdu wajhuhu faqat, wa muḥālun 'an yuqāla, innahu akbaru min wajhihi*).²³

Although the aforementioned group is veiled by light (*al-ṣinf al-thālith*), they remain confused in distinguishing between metaphorical light and true light. They mistakenly perceive not the essential light but a symbolic one, in which this metaphorical light is, in fact, a created entity. Furthermore, al-Ghazali's critique of philosophers such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina regarding the system of emanation persists; the validity of interpreting God as the "One who is obeyed" (*al-muṭā'*) by the mover of the spheres through a "command" (*al-amr*) remains an unresolved issue within the philosophical tradition.²⁴ Thus, interpretations such as "Command" are viewed as ambiguous (*fa za'amū, anna al-Rabba huwa al-Muṭā'u min jihati hādhā al-muḥarrik, wa yakūnu al-Rabbu Ta'ālā muḥarrikan li al-kulli bi ṭarīq al-amr, lā bi ṭarīq al-mubāsharah*).²⁵

Within the context of Islamic philosophical discourse, al-Farabi also understood *al-amr* as a principle of emanation that radiates existence, much as Ibn Sina characterized God as the *mūjjid* (Giver of Being), the bestower of existence without physical motion. However,

²³ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 67.

²⁴ For further discussion, see Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Ḥallāj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, trans. Herbert Mason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 754 & 791.

²⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 120.

for al-Ghazali, this concept still falls short of attaining the reality of perfect monotheism (*tawhīd*). Consequently, al-Ghazali's critique of interpretations such as the concept of emanation, which radiates light (existence), posits that such a principle is itself a created entity, even if it resides in the closest proximity to the Divine Reality.

Al-Ghazali classifies the group that has attained the perfection of monotheism (*tawhīd*) as those who realize (*tajallā lahum: anna hādhā al-Muṭā' aydan mawṣūfun bi-ṣifah tunāfi al-wahdāniyyah al-mahḍah*),²⁶ that the "Obeyed One" (*al-Muṭā'*) is not God, but rather a mediator acting as the channel through which emanation functions. These individuals (*al-wāṣilūn*) constitute the fourth group, for whom it has been unveiled (*tajallī*): that this "Obeyed One" is in fact characterized by an attribute that negates (or is incompatible with) pure, absolute unity. Al-Ghazali notes that the profundity of this realization is difficult to fully explicate within the scope of the text.

According to al-Ghazali, true *tawhīd* can only be apprehended through *kashf* (intuitive unveiling) rather than philosophical analysis. Thus, for al-Ghazali, God is not merely the "Mover," nor the "Bestower of Existence" within a system of emanation, nor the *al-muṭā'*, nor does He reside within a hierarchy of being as understood by the philosophers. On the contrary, God is the Creator of all existence; He is the One who created the heavens and all created beings. The error of the philosophers stems not from a deficiency of intellect, but from being too close to the light. They failed to reach the pinnacle and did not achieve the absolute transcendence (*tanzīh*) of God. Therefore, the reality of light (*nūr*) encompasses the lights of the heavens and the earth. Ultimately, the light in question is not a physical light perceptible to the naked eye, but the essential light (*nūr*) that radiates from the inner eye

²⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 120.

(*al-baṣīrah*). This demonstrates that true knowledge does not rely on sensory faculties or mere analysis; rather, it requires light and the capacity to illuminate human spiritual perception.

According to Sinai (2016), al-Ghazali defines light as pointing toward manifestation (*zuhūr*).²⁷ In establishing the epistemic and phenomenal definition of light, he initially identifies the "perceiving light" (*al-nūr al-bāṣir*), namely the eye. He argues that this is more deserving of the name "light" than the "perceived light" (*al-nūr al-mubṣar*), for without a perceiving subject, no resulting understanding can exist. Furthermore, al-Ghazali highlights the inherent deficiencies of sensory vision, asserting that the intellect (*'aql*) fulfills the concept of light more perfectly than the eye. The intellect (as light) functions to abstract sensory data and grasp the hidden mysteries (*asrar*) lying behind such empirical knowledge. Thus, light illuminates the heart, enabling it to attain the gnosis of God (*ma'rifah*). It is the source through which Divine knowledge flows into the fulfillment of religious obligations.

Indeed, the reality of light is attainable only by the elite. Al-Ghazali refers to this group as the *khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ* (the elite of the elite), those who have received the

²⁷ Objects of vision, he states, can be divided into three classes: (1) "that which is not visible in itself and is dark" (*mā lā yubṣaru bi-naḥsihi ka al-aḥsāmī al-muzlimah*); (2) "that which is visible in itself but through which others cannot be seen" (*mā yubṣaru bi naḥsihi wa lā yubṣaru bihi ḡhayruhu*), such as stars or glowing coals; and (3) "that which is visible in itself, and through which others are also made visible" (*mā yubṣaru bi naḥsihi wa yubṣaru bihi aydan ḡhayruhu*). According to al-Ghazali, it is this third category that is commonly called light. Nicolai Sinai, "Al-Suhrawadi's Philosophy of Illumination and al-Ghazālī," 272–301; Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 1:381; Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 50-53; Domenico Ingenito, "Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) on Visionary Experiences and the Internal and External Senses," In *Islamic Sensory History*, ed. Christian Lange and Adam Bursi (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 364–381.

emanation of the Divine Intellectual Light, thereby having the veils removed. This group attains the highest illumination through their inner sight, termed *baṣīrah* (*wa anna al-muqarraba huwa al-aqrabu ilā al-nūr*); he who is brought near (*al-muqarrab*) is the one closest to the Most High Light.²⁸ Consequently, al-Ghazali distinguishes between those endowed with inner vision, attaining gnosis through *baṣīrah* or *shuhūd* (witnessing), and those who attain gnosis through *istidlāl* (discursive reasoning).

These are the gnostics (*‘arīfūn*) who ascend from the depths of metaphor to the summit of reality, perfecting their journey until they perceive through direct ocular witnessing of the heart (*al-mushāhadah al-‘iyāniyyah*) that there is nothing in existence save Allah (*min hāhunā taraqqā al-‘arīfūna min ḥadīd al-majāz ilā yafā‘ al-ḥaqīqah, wastakmalū ma‘arījahum, fa ra’aw bi al-mushāhadah al-‘iyāniyyah an laysa fī al-wujūd illā Allāh Ta‘ālā, wa anna kulla shay‘in hālikun illā wajhah*).²⁹ They undergo an ascent (*al-‘arīfūna ba‘da al-‘urūji ilā samā‘i al-ḥaqīqah*)³⁰ to the realm of reality where only the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) is witnessed. Among them are those who witness through gnosis and knowledge (*‘irfānan ‘ilmīyyan*), while others do so through “tasting” (*ḥālan dhawqīyan*) and spiritual state (*al-ḥāl*). In that moment, they are submerged in pure oneness (*al-fardāniyyat al-maḥḍah*), losing self-awareness to the extent that they no longer possess the capacity to perceive themselves or anything other than Him.

Upon returning to sobriety, they realize that such expressions should not be uttered during the state of passing away (*fanā‘*). They come to understand that the witnessing they experienced was not a literal union (*ittiḥād ḥaqīqī*), but rather an intensity of longing. Al-Ghazali characterizes this

²⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 66.

²⁹ For further details, see al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 69.

³⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 70.

merely as a "resemblance" resulting from the overwhelming power of love and witnessing (*mushāhadah*). When the state of union reaches its zenith, the "annihilation of annihilation" (*fanā' al-fanā'*) occurs. In this state, the seeker no longer feels his own self; for if he were still conscious of his own annihilation, he would remain in a state of self-awareness. Thus, this state of annihilation is termed "*Tawḥīd*" (Unification) in the language of reality. Beyond these truths lie further mysteries that would require extensive elaboration.³¹

This affirms that the "sensory eye," or the external faculties, are incapable of attaining the ultimate reality of truth. Instead, the unveiling of Divine mysteries (*asrar*) is expressed through the light of the intellect. Thus, knowledge emanating from the reflection of the Essential Light produces a capacity for understanding that has been activated by the light of Divine Guidance. Such knowledge cannot exist without the outpouring of His Guiding Light. Conversely, His Light does not emanate upon a darkened heart (*zulumāt*). The significance of this emanation indicates the existence of a relationship between the supreme height and the realms below.

This is further reinforced by al-Ghazali's citation of the Hadith concerning the seventy thousand veils of light and darkness that conceal the Divine Essence from the human soul: "*Indeed, Allah has seventy thousand veils of light and darkness; were He to reveal them, the glories of His Face would incinerate everything perceived by His (creatures') sight.*"³² Verily, Allah is perpetually in a state of *tajallī* (self-manifestation of His majesty) in His Essence for His own Essence. This interpretation tends to be associated with Neoplatonic theosophical views. In this

³¹ A-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 72.

³² In some narrations: "seven hundred," and in others: "seventy thousand."

interpretation, the soul (*rūḥ*) ascends through seven layers of the path toward union with God, where each layer unveils ten thousand of these veils. He attempts to systematize the ladder and levels of light toward their pinnacle. This strengthens Averroes' (d. 1198) observation that al-Ghazali's concept of light functions as a method of outpouring or emanation (*fayḍ*). Although al-Ghazali's explicit acceptance or use of such terminology remains ambiguous, the thematic resemblance is clearly evident across several of his works.³³

For instance, al-Ghazali states that there exists a cosmic hierarchy of light that involves ascending to the First Source, from which all lights shine (*tushriqū*) in their respective orders. This indicates that the lights below receive their illumination from those above. Consequently, the light of the intellect brings life to the hearts (*tuḥyī al-qulūb*) in the practice of religion, whereas darkness (*zulumat*) causes the heart to wither. Therefore, the sensory eye is incapable of perceiving or disclosing His manifestation.

According to al-Ghazali, the highest light is only attained by the heart that is most pure and chosen by Him (*bi dhikrillāh taṭma'inn al-qulūb*).³⁴ This group consists of those who have attained the Divine Reality. While al-Ghazali does not entirely reject the philosophers' conceptual framework, he offers a specific understanding of Monotheism as a way of perceiving reality (*bi'ayn al-tawḥīd*). This is experienced by those who have attained the state of union (*al-wāṣilūn*) and the stage of annihilation

³³ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 66-72; Regarding Ibn Rushd's statement, see W. H. T. Gairdner, "Al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and the Ghazālī Problem," *Der Islam* 5 (1914), 133. See also Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Ibn Rushd, *al-Kashf 'an Manāḥij al-Adillah fī 'Aqā'id al-Millah*, ed. Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, 1998), 11.

³⁴ Surah al-Ra'd, 28.

(*fanā'*), wherein they realize that there is nothing in existence besides Him (*laysa fī al-wujūd ghayruhu*) and that created beings possess no true, independent existence. Thus, all that exists is but the effect of Divine action, which the human soul perceives and reflects as a manifestation of the Divine Presence (*al-ḥaḍrah al-ilāhiyyah*) within the religious life.

The Discourse of Light According to Al-Suhrawardi in *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*

Al-Suhrawardi initiates a comprehensive discussion on light (*nūr*) in the second part of his work, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*. Within this text, he establishes several axioms regarding the structure of light. According to al-Suhrawardi, light is the most fundamental reality. Light possesses neither a genus (*jins*) nor a specific difference (*faṣl*).³⁵ Al-Suhrawardi systematically organizes several basic principles regarding the structure of light, beginning with the question of definition. The first axiom posits that light requires no definition because it is the most manifest (*al-zuhūr*) of all realities. He establishes the core principle that light is "manifest in itself and makes others manifest" (*al-zāhir li nafsīhi wa al-muḥzir li ghayrihi*).³⁶ Consequently, light is evident in its own reality and causes other objects to appear by virtue of its own incorporeal (*mujarrad*) essence, without requiring external accidental forms or dependencies. Because it is the pinnacle of manifestation,

³⁵ Mulla Sadra, *On the Hermeneutics of the Light Verse of the Qur'an*, trans. Latimah-Parvin Peerwani (London: ICAS Press, 2004), 34; Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawādī, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, ed. & trans. John Walbridge & Hossein Ziai (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 162-16; Bilal Kuspinar, *Isma'īl Ankaravi on the Illuminative Philosophy* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996), 208.

³⁶ Al-Suhrawādī, *Majmū'at Muṣannafāt Shaykh al-Ishrāq*, 2:106.

it defies definition and intricately unifies existence and knowledge.³⁷

Furthermore, the second axiom³⁸ asserts that light is non-contingent and self-sufficient (*al-ghanī*). The essence of light does not depend on anything else; rather, it is the source of life and emanation for all other existents. Al-Suhrawardi emphasizes that the essence of light is "Rich" (*al-ghanī*) and free from any dependency. Thus, the second axiom; *al-ghanīyyu huwa mā lā yatawaqqafu dhātuhū wa lā kamālun lahū 'alā ghayrihi; wa al-faqīru mā yatawaqqafu minhu 'alā ghayrihi dhātuhu aw kamālun lahū*, refers to light's independence from the "other".³⁹ In the context of the Illuminationist system, this text discusses the meanings of "wealth" (*al-ghanī*) and "poverty" (*al-faqr*) through the lens of ontological or metaphysical dependency. True light possesses a self-evident perfection because it is intrinsic to its own essence. This essence refers to *Nūr al-Anwār*, the Light of Lights, the Absolutely Self-Sufficient (*al-ghanī*). Conversely, from Him radiate all other lights. His perfection is not contingent upon the other,

³⁷ For discussions on the primacy of definition and light's self-manifestation, see Suhrawadī, *Hikmat al-Isḥrāq*, 107, (*in kāna fī al-wujūdi mā lā yahtāju ilā ta'rīfihī wa sharhihī fa huwa al-zāhir, wa lā shay'a aẓharu min al-nūr, fa-lā shay'a aghnā minhu 'an al-ta'rīf*; Muḥammad 'Alī Abū Rayyān, *Uṣūl al-Falsafah al-Isḥrāqīyyah 'inda Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawadī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjū al-Miṣriyyah, 1959), 113; Majid Fakhry, "Al-Suhrawadī's Critique of the Muslim Peripatetics (*al-Mashshā'ūn*)," in *Philosophies of Existence, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Parviz Morewedge, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 279–284; Nicolai Sinai, "Al-Suhrawadī's Philosophy, 272–30.

³⁸ Al-Suhrawadī, *Hikmat al-Isḥrāq*, 108

³⁹ The Self-Sufficient (*al-ghanī*) is that whose essence and perfection do not depend on another; whereas the 'Poor' (*al-faqīr*) is that whose essence or perfection depends on an essence other than itself. Al-Suhrawadī, *Hikmat al-Isḥrāq*, 108.

affirming His independence from any additional accidental attributes.

According to Shahrazuri, there are no additional accidental attributes that enable a light to subsist independently. On the contrary, His Light is absolute, devoid of any dependency on the other. Conversely, the opposite of this self-sufficiency is the quality of *al-faqr* (poverty), which refers to the inability to be independent. It is contingent upon another. This poverty implies that such an existence is inherently weak, requiring the other for its own presence or the manifestation of its being. Such a state is impossible for the Essence of the Light of Lights (*nūr al-anwār*), for His attribute is *al-ghanī* (The Absolutely Self-Sufficient), who subsists by Himself and is free from any form of dependency. This assertion establishes an absolute distinction between the Creator and His creation, while simultaneously laying the foundation for His Oneness through His Reality (*al-Haqq*) and His Omnipotence (including His Knowledge), which serves as the source (*al-mabda'*) of all existents beneath Him.

Al-Suhrawardi emphasizes the concept of the dependency of the weak upon the powerful as a manifestation of the Self-Sufficient (*al-ghanī*), who requires no other existence to prove the perfection of His Essence. Instead, the Light of Lights is the primary center and the source of dependency for all lights. The reality of perfection requires no supplementary forms to achieve its completeness. Thus, the meaning of poverty serves to distinguish between "the dependent" and "the independent", between "that which requires the other to exist" and "that which is the cause of the existence of others." Regarding light in the context of contingencies (*mumkināt*), a greater degree of wealth in its attributes signifies a higher spiritual rank. Conversely, the more faint and dim a light becomes, the more it serves as evidence of the poverty (*al-faqr*) of its nature.

Consequently, the nature of light possesses varying degrees of intensity (*shiddah*) within the hierarchy of existence (*al-nūru kulluhu fī naḥsihi lā yakhtalḥu ḥaḥīqatuhu illā bi-al-kamāli wa-al-nuḥṣāni wa-bi-umūrin khārijatin*).⁴⁰ This system is dynamic rather than static. This approach differs from the standard Peripatetic division of being, which classifies existence into the categories of the Necessary (*wājib*), the Contingent (*mumkināt*), and the Impossible (*mustahīl*). Al-Suhrawardi critiques such static approaches, arguing they are inadequate for comprehending the true essence of reality.

According to al-Suhrawardi, reality is understood through the concept of light, which reflects the spectrum of existence based on the degrees of intensity (*shiddah*) in its proximity to the Light of Lights (*nūr al-anwār*).⁴¹ This demonstrates that existence is no longer confined to fixed categories; rather, it reflects a continuum of existential levels. This continuum depends entirely on the degree of luminous intensity (*shiddah*). Light (*nūr*) is not merely the foundation of existence but also the element that connects humanity to the supreme reality, which is God. Through the incorporeal light (*nūr al-mujarrad*), which is free from all material constraints, human beings are able to apprehend true reality and realize their direct relationship with the ultimate source, the Light of Lights (*nūr al-anwār*).

The concept of the incorporeal (*mujarrad*) engenders self-awareness and shapes the existence of others. Every existent requires a cause, and every cause requires another cause in a continuous sequence. This indicates a process that cannot be infinite unless it arrives at a singular point that serves as its ultimate source (*al-wāḥid*). Without such a point, the system would succumb to the problem of infinite regress (*tasalsul*), which offers no definitive

⁴⁰ Al-Suhrawadī, *Majmū'at Muṣannafāt Shaykh al-Ishrāq*, 2:119.

⁴¹ Al-Suhrawadī, *Majmū'at Muṣannafāt Shaykh al-Ishrāq*, 2:121.

resolution. Consequently, al-Suhrawardi maintains that an endless chain of causes is impossible. There must exist a final First Principle (*al-mabda'*) whose existence is necessary and which exists without requiring an external cause.

This principle is known as the One. In this context, al-Suhrawardi refers to the Neoplatonic axiom; "*al-wāḥid lā yaṣḍuru 'anhu illā al-wāḥid*" (from the One, only one can proceed).⁴² This is elaborated by al-Suhrawardi in Section 129. This statement affirms that His Light is perfect, self-subsistent, and self-existent, serving as the source of dependency for all existents. This indicates that God is the singular Source (*al-wāḥid*). This principle is known as the Rule of the One (*qā'idat al-wāḥid*), which posits that from "the One, only one can proceed" (*al-wāḥid lā yaṣḍuru 'anhu illā al-wāḥid*). In *al-Alwāḥ al-'Imādiyyah*,⁴³ it is noted that the First is the primary Creator of the universe. The First Intellect, or the First Light created by God, acts as the intermediary for the subsequent processes of creation. From this First Intellect or First Light, a hierarchy of intellects (lights) and celestial bodies is generated, forming a chain of creation. This concept aims to elucidate how the universe's multiplicity can originate from the One God, thereby connecting the concept of Divinity to the reality of the cosmos. Al-Suhrawardi distinguishes this approach from the Peripatetic model by utilizing a system of light as a continuous source that is not limited merely to the ten intellects.

This concept demonstrates that the First Light, upon receiving from the Supreme Source, radiates numerous subsequent lights. At that moment, every radiation of light originates from the One (*nūr al-anwār*). This signifies that

⁴² Al-Suhrawardi, *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, 129.

⁴³ Al-Suhrawardi, "al-Alwāḥ al-'Imādiyyah", 36.

the Illuminationist system differs from the emanationist systems of the Neoplatonists and the Peripatetics. This method serves as the foundation for explaining the stages of luminous existence and the process of illumination itself. Illumination occurs as a descending process from the more perfect to the less perfect. Conversely, there is an ascending process wherein the less perfect existent or light seeks to comprehend or behold the more perfect. This method establishes a spiritual relationship between the lower and higher realms through radiations based on the levels of witnessing the Light of Lights (*nūr al-anwār*).

Consequently, the Light of Lights (*nūr al-anwār*) is the principle of the One, from which the Nearest Light (*nūr al-aqrab*) emerges, followed by a cascading flow of manifold luminous chains (*wa lammā lam yaşdur min nūri al-anwāri ghayru al-nūri al-aqrabi, wa-laysa fī al-nūri al-aqrabi aydan jihātun kathīratun*).⁴⁴ The Nearest Light witnesses the outpouring of radiance from the Light of Lights, which contains both power (*qahr*) and love. Al-Suhrawardi asserts that when a light longs (*ishq*) for its own being, it does not long for darkness, for darkness is incapable of fulfilling that desire.

Therefore, light possesses a dominating or victorious quality (*nūr al-qahr*) over the lights beneath it. The more intense the brilliance of a light, the greater its love (*ḥubb*) and longing (*ishq*) for the supreme source, the Light of Lights. This characterizes the relationship between the body and the soul; the dark body likewise longs for light, while the soul seeks to return to its original abode. This relationship of love serves as the measure of spiritual perfection. Thus, whoever is dominated by the highest love

⁴⁴ Suhrawadī, *Majmū'at Muşannaḡāt*, 2:128; Ahmet Bozyiğit, "Sühreverdî'ye Göre Âlemin Kıdemi Meselesi," *İslâmî Araştırmalar* 36(3) (2025), 513–525. (on the eternity of emanation and the continuity of the universe).

finds their light dominating over other lights. Through this, al-Suhrawardi demonstrates that existence in this world does not subsist independently but is mutually dependent and connected to God within a single luminous chain.

According to Kaukua (2022), levels of luminous perfection are not added attributes but are understood conceptually (*i'tibārī*), representing a manifest reality based on their proximity to the Supreme Source. To preserve His absolute unity and prevent conflation with multiplicity, the Light of Lights emanates only a single first entity (*nūr al-aqrab*). This nearest light subsequently becomes the intermediary for the entire hierarchy of existence, ensuring the Supreme Source's perfection remains uncompromised.⁴⁵

Comparative Analysis of the Concept of Light (Nūr) in the Thought of Al-Ghazali and Al-Suhrawardi

Based on the preceding discussion of the arguments presented by al-Suhrawardi and al-Ghazali regarding light, it is evident that both thinkers concur in defining light as that which is manifest in itself and makes others manifest. Light is the pinnacle of self-manifestation (*al-zuhūr*). In principle, light refers to that which is essentially luminous or radiant by its own nature. It is manifest in itself and illuminates others (*al-zāhir li nafsihi wa al-muzhir li ghayrihi*).⁴⁶ This definition bears a fundamental resemblance to the concept of light in al-Ghazali's thought. In *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, al-Ghazali defines that which is truly considered light (*nūr*) as "*mā yubšaru bi nafsihi wa yubšaru bihi aydan ghayruhu*,"⁴⁷ that which is visible in itself and through which others are also made visible. Broadly

⁴⁵ Jari Kaukua, *Suhrawadi's Illuminationism: A Philosophical Study, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies 118* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 63–82.

⁴⁶ Al-Suhrawadi, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, 107 & 110.

⁴⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 51.

speaking, both al-Ghazali and al-Suhrawardi employ the same foundational premise regarding "visibility" or "manifestation": light is an entity that is manifest in its own essence and provides manifestation to others, signifying an independence from anything external for its own appearance.

However, while they share this general premise of manifestation, a more detailed examination reveals that the specific conceptualizations of light developed by al-Ghazali and al-Suhrawardi possess unique characteristics and diverge in their respective philosophical approaches. Notably, al-Ghazali's discourse on light in the *Mishkāt* has been linked by several scholars to the concept of outpouring (*ḥayḍ*) or emanation.⁴⁸

Furthermore, al-Ghazali in the *Mishkāt* and al-Suhrawardi in *Hikmat al-Ishrāq* both subscribe to the concept of the soul's ascent from the lower realms toward the pinnacle, the Light of Lights (*nūr al-anwār*). Both figures assert that the cosmic hierarchy contains elements of darkness and possesses distinct levels of light. To illustrate this, al-Ghazali cites the Hadith of the "seventy thousand veils of light and darkness," which he discusses in the third chapter of the *Mishkāt*. However, al-Ghazali discusses the ontological experience through "symbolic language" rather than a formal ontology of luminous existence. In contrast, al-Suhrawardi explicates ontology within the subject to facilitate an understanding of epistemology; this relationship then forms the soul's ascent, ultimately synthesizing a cohesive framework of Ontology-Epistemology-Ontology (O+E+O).

While both thinkers conclude that the universal hierarchy consists of elements of darkness and specific

⁴⁸ For further reference, see Abū Hāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār: The Niche for Lights*, trans. W. H. T. Gairdner (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1952).

stages of light, their discursive approaches differ significantly. Al-Ghazali's treatment of the seventy thousand veils is perceived as being related to the discourse of emanation (*faḡḡ*). Nevertheless, a fine line exists indicating nuanced differences in the approaches of al-Ghazali and al-Suhrawardi. There are several key points to consider:

The Discourse on the One and Emanation

a. Al-Ghazali: The Primacy of Will and Occasionalism

Al-Ghazali's engagement with emanation is not a mere replication of the earlier philosophers' interpretations. His subtle critique lies in the ontology underlying the emanation itself. For al-Ghazali, emanation is not merely a flow of being or light, but a reinforcement of *tawḡḡ*: the belief that only God truly exists and that He creates everything through His Will (*irādah*). He is not a necessitated cause (*'illah*). This gives rise to the discussion of the "Obeyed One" (*al-muḡā'*), referring to a created entity that does not function as an independent cause but depends entirely on God's radiance. Al-Ghazali accepts the cosmic chain but rejects its ontological necessity, grounding it instead in Divine Volition. Thus, the *al-muḡā'* is not a necessary cause, even if existence flows through it. Light emanates as a manifestation of His Will as He decrees. His approach is rooted in tasting (*dhawḡ*) rather than purely rational metaphysics.

Al-Ghazali's focus is not tethered to ontology in the way the *falāsifah* were. He remained dissatisfied with their arguments even though they, too, anchored their systems in the "Rule of the One" (*qā'idat al-wāḡid*). While the First Intellect (*al-'aql al-awwal*) exists because of God, al-Ghazali's subtle critique shifts from process (*ḡudūr*) to efficacy (*ta'tḡūr*), the actual power that bestows existence upon specific events. This pertains to the discourse on Divine Acts (*aḡ'āl*) and the True Agent (*fā'il*), closely

linked to occasionalism.⁴⁹ Ultimately, every action and event returns to God's power; there is nothing in existence save Him (*laysa fī al-wujūd ghayruhu*).⁵⁰ Reality is grounded in the Divine Command (*al-amr*) and Will. This is the perfection of monotheism (*bi-‘ayn al-tawhīd*), where the seeker's consciousness reaches the state of annihilation (*fanā' al-nafs*).

b. Al-Suhrawardi: Light and the Primacy of Essence (Asālat al-Māhiyyah)

For al-Suhrawardi, the essence of reality shifts toward the reality of Light, which is distinct from both the "Being" of the philosophers and the "Will" of al-Ghazali. According to al-Suhrawardi, light is manifest in its own essence (*zāhir bi dhātih*) and makes others manifest without requiring a standard causal link. Light does not cause like an 'illah, nor does it wait for a command (*al-amr*) as posited in *Kalām* theology. Al-Suhrawardi preserves the hierarchy of existence by transmuting Avicenna's ontological foundation from Being (*wujūd*) to Light (*nūr*). This shift allows him to resolve various philosophical problems, particularly the relationship between essence (*māhiyyah*) and existence (*wujūd*).⁵¹ For al-Suhrawardi, to know the reality of a thing is to know its essence through the intensity

⁴⁹ ‘Abd al-Mālik ibn Yūsuf al-Juwaynī, *al-Irshād ilā Qawāṭi‘ al-Adillah fī Uṣūl al-I‘tiqād*, ed. Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā & ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Mun‘im ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1950), 110; Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1966), 240; S. N. Mousavian, "Avicenna, Meaning, and Causation," *The Monist* 108(3) (2025), 259–277; Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, ed. Farid Jabre (Beirut: Commission Libanaise pour la Traduction des Chefs-d'Œuvre, 1959), 23: 11–13; S. al-Daghistani, "On Creation, Nature, and the Ethical Self: A Comparative Analysis of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī." *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 9(1–2) (2025), 113–134.

⁵⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 4:107.

⁵¹ Mehdi Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School*, 32.

of its light (*shiddah*), not its existence. Al-Suhrawardi argues that existence is merely a mental concept (*dhihn*) with no external reality. Thus, he upholds the Primacy of Essence (*asālat al-māhiyyah*).⁵² To him, being is a universal concept.⁵³ However, this invites a critique: if the reality of an existent is light, and light is what manifests existence, then light must logically precede essence. This would imply Primacy of Being (*asālat al-wujūd*). Yet, al-Suhrawardi maintains that what is primarily created is an essence (*māhiyyah*) that receives an outpouring of light from the Light of Lights (*nūr al-anwār*). This contingent essence (*māhiyyah*) depends on a cause that tips the scales for it to become manifest. Thus, the reality of being in his system is fundamentally derived from light, reinforcing his stance on the primacy of essence.⁵⁴

Metaphysical Logic: Light as the Foundation of Existence

For al-Ghazali, Allah is the only True Light; all other lights are merely metaphorical (*majāzī*). All existence essentially

⁵² The debate between *asālat al-māhiyya* and *asālat al-wujūd* is long-standing. Scholars like Aminrazavi, Nasr, and Corbin maintain the traditional view of Suhrawardī as an essentialist, while more recent scholars like Jari Kaukua (2022) and Tianyi Zhang attempt to reconstruct his arguments toward a primacy of being. See Tianyi Zhang, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Nature of Suhrawardī's Illuminism: Light in the Cave* (Boston: Brill, 2023), 83–96; Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1971), 156; S. Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardī, Ibn 'Arabī* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 52–82; Ghulām Ḥusayn Ibrāhīmī al-Dīnānī, *Ishrāq al-Fikr wa al-Shuhūd fī Falsafat al-Suhrawardī* (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 2005), 521.

⁵³ Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawadī, *Opera Metaphysica et Mystica*, ed. Henry Corbin (Istanbul: Ma'ārif Maṭba'ah, 1945), 1: 22; Fazlur Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā (Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī)* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1975), 27–28.

⁵⁴ Al-Suhrawadī, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, 193.

traces back to the Reality of the One, Allah, who created all that exists. However, from another vantage point, while al-Suhrawardi shares the same foundational faith as al-Ghazali, believing that all existence ultimately traces back to the Reality of the One, he does not negate the existential properties of other lights in the context of created beings (*mumkināt*). Instead, al-Suhrawardi emphasizes the structural foundation of light by distinguishing between that which is essential (*ḥaqīqah*) and that which is accidental (*‘araḍī*). This distinction is not a focus for al-Ghazali, as his attention is fixed primarily on the True Light, Allah. Through the lens of metaphysical logic, al-Suhrawardi constructs the axiom that the Light of Lights is Absolutely Self-Sufficient (*al-ghanī*) to differentiate its structure from all other lights. In this framework, Self-Sufficiency (*al-ghinā*) refers to an essence and perfection that is independent of the other.

This pertains to ontological dependency, or metaphysical dependency. Al-Suhrawardi argues that while light exists truly, its manifestation is due to the Source that preponderates (*murājijih*) the essence (*māhiyyah*) into existence. In this view, the essence (*māhiyyah*) is conceptually prior, yet it is light that transcends and ultimately drives the process of manifestation. Thus, an existent object is distinct from the reality of existence itself. The concept of existence does not stand alone; it is understood only when there is an actual existent being. A thing is considered truly existent when it possesses light, the reality that constitutes its "what-ness" (*quidditas*).

Consequently, existence (*wujūd*) alone is insufficient to recognize the totality of a reality without the presence of Light (*nūr*). Al-Suhrawardi concludes that all existence begins with the essence (*māhiyyah*); then, a thing becomes an existent, and only after that do we form the mental concept of existence. Therefore, the concept of existence depends on a prior state that makes it existent, and the

existent thing, in turn, depends on its essence (*māhiyyah*). In this system, the reality lies in the essence, while existence is merely a mental concept (*i'tibārī*). This ontological argument is crucial as it resolves the problem of infinite regress (*ad infinitum*), which he deems impossible. There must be a primary Source that is independent of all else, the Supreme Light, the Necessary Being (*Wājib al-Wujūd*). For al-Suhrawardi, this is the Light of Lights (*Nūr al-Anwār*), the ultimate cause of all existence.

Furthermore, while lights consist of a continuous chain of contingencies (*mumkināt*) depending on the Source (*al-mabda'*) above them, their level of being differs according to the quality of intensity (*shiddah*) they possess.⁵⁵ Light, therefore, does not require a definition; rather, it is the basis for all other definitions. It requires no external explanation because it is the foundation of all recognition, knowledge, and existence.

Al-Suhrawardi focuses on metaphysical questions, asserting that to reach the highest epistemology, one must incorporate logic to ensure a comprehensive understanding of reality. This metaphysical logic is prioritized over an immediate leap into the ocean of gnosis (*ma'rifah*) without first mastering the tools required to dive into the reality of light. Thus, epistemology is inseparable from ontology. There must be an "ontology" of the essence present first. This forms the Ontology-Epistemology-Ontology (O-E-O) cycle. This differs from al-Ghazali's framework, which follows an Epistemology-Ontology (E-O) trajectory.

Manifestation (*Zuhūr*): Light Beyond Definition

This affirms that the axiom of light serves as the foundation of all existence, proving it to be the most manifest (*zāhir*) reality, such that it requires no further definitional proof.

⁵⁵ Al-Suhrawadī, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, 125.

On this basis, al-Suhrawardi's epistemology does not merely focus on the mechanics of knowledge production or the causal chains and logical dependencies characteristic of the Peripatetic tradition.⁵⁶ Instead, it is built upon the foundation of presence (*ḥudūr*) and irradiation (*ishrāq*), which facilitate the birth of true knowledge regarding reality. The discourse within the philosophy of illumination (*ishrāq*) is essentially centered on metaphysical questions, particularly ontological aspects. For al-Suhrawardi, authentic knowledge is not achieved through definitions, but through a direct encounter with light, known as *ma'rifah ishrāqiyyah*. Here, the Light of Lights in al-Suhrawardi's system serves as a powerful affirmation of God as the source of manifestation, truth, and Absolute Being. This is a rigorous declaration of *tawḥīd* (Divine Oneness) concerning the Ultimate Reality. Only one Necessary Being (*Wājib al-Wujūd*) is logically possible and existent; He is *al-Ḥaqq* (The Truth), and His existence is derived from His own essence.⁵⁷

Consequently, al-Suhrawardi introduces the concept of *al-iḍāfah al-ishrāqiyyah* (the illuminative relation). Such a relationship, which forms the foundation of Suhrawardi's theory, is referred to as an illuminationist relation (*al-iḍāfah al-ishrāqiyyah*) and must be distinguished from relations that fall under the category of relatives, such as brother, father/son, or knowledge/knowables.⁵⁸ This relation is neither a causal efficacy (*ta'thīr*) nor a mere attachment (*ta'alluq*) of the will; it is presence (*ḥudūr*). The hierarchy of being does not exist because it must be born

⁵⁶ Al-Suhrawādī, *Majmū'at Muṣannaḡāt Shaykh al-Ishrāq*, 2:106.

⁵⁷ Al-Suhrawādī, "al-Alwāḡ al-'Imādiyyah", 134–153.

⁵⁸ Hanif Amin Beidokhti, "Suhrawardi (d. 587/1191) on Eyesight and Vision," in *Islamic Sensory History*, ed. Christian Lange & Adam Bursi (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 2:259–272.

(as in necessitated emanation), but due to differences in degrees of intensity (*shiddah*) and manifestation (*zuhūr*). Thus, the *Nūr al-Anwār* does not emanate out of necessity (as in Ibn Sīnā) nor create solely through a command (as in al-Ghazali). He is the source of absolute presence, and all other lights exist only insofar as they are present to Him and receive presence from Him.

It is clear that while al-Suhrawardi was influenced by the philosophers and al-Ghazali's *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, he did not fully adhere to their approaches. Al-Suhrawardi developed a unique epistemological method to understand reality. Consequently, he emerged as a more systematic and detailed thinker regarding logic and truth. Although he establishes Light as the supreme principle, just as al-Ghazali does, his vision does not lead toward a strictly monistic or theo-centric conclusion. Rather, al-Suhrawardi's discourse transcends that of al-Ghazali. In al-Suhrawardi's interpretation, light does not stop at the division between the True Light and the metaphorical (*majāzī*); he goes into finer detail, discussing categories such as accidental light (*nūr 'araḍī*).

This asserts that in al-Suhrawardi's view, the reality of light does not negate the existence of contingent lights (*mumkināt*). These remain real (though they might be considered "metaphorical" relative to the Divine Light) and are distinguished by their intensity (*shiddah*). For al-Suhrawardi, what al-Ghazali calls symbolic or metaphorical light remains an ontological category categorized by its level of intensity in the apprehension of reality. In conclusion, there are both profound similarities and subtle differences between the arguments for light presented by these two masters.

Conclusion

The absolute truth of light, as examined in both works, cannot be arrived at through any definitive consensus, a limitation acknowledged by al-Ghazali from the outset, when he observed that the intellect is incapable of fully grasping the depths of such a reality. Al-Suhrawardi, however, while equally acknowledging this mystery, directs his inquiry through the rigour of metaphysical logic (ontology), treating it as inseparable from any genuine understanding of reality.

It is this methodological difference that distinguishes the two thinkers. Al-Ghazali approaches light through an Epistemology-Ontology (E+O) framework, employing the symbolic language of religion, a position termed "Epistemological-Theology." Al-Suhrawardi, by contrast, operates through an Ontology-Epistemology-Ontology (O+E+O) framework, undergirded by the language of metaphysics, designated here as "Ontological-Philosophy."

Despite their divergences, both thinkers converge at a fundamental axiom: that light is "manifest in itself and makes others manifest" (*zāhir li-nafsihi wa li ghayrihi*), the most self-evident reality (*al-zuhūr*). The point of departure lies in how this principle is developed. For al-Suhrawardi, manifestation (*zuhūr*) operates simultaneously on both epistemological and metaphysical-ontological planes across every instance of existence. For al-Ghazali, it is bound to the manifestation of the True Light (God), functioning within epistemological experience as a pathway toward ontological realization, rather than as a self-standing structural category.

Upon closer examination of al-Ghazali's approach, it becomes evident that his ontological discourse remains submerged within the domain of epistemology, expressed through theological language. This raises the question of whether the ascent of the soul he describes refers to the

essential being of light itself, or merely to a spiritual practice that shapes the successive stages of an individual's illumination. His emphasis accordingly centres on light within the framework of the Tawḥīd of Divine Will (*irāda ilāhiyya*), wherein all events and manifestations occur not through necessary causes, but through the absolute decree and omnipotence of God. His rejection of true causality and his affirmation of Divine efficacy (*ta'thīr*) render light a medium of divine manifestation, experienced through spiritual (*dhawq*) rather than as an independent ontological structure. Al-Ghazali's primary concern is not the construction of a detailed metaphysical cosmology, but the purification of monotheism (*tawḥīd*) leading to annihilation (*fanā'*) and the vision of absolute oneness (*bi-'ayn al-tawḥīd*).

This results in the language of light in al-Ghazali's thought becoming enclosed within an epistemological register, ultimately exposing an internal tension within his own framework: between light as spiritual experience and light as a reality that transcends the boundaries of ontology. Al-Suhrawardi's orientation differs in a systematic manner. He establishes his methodological foundation from the outset with the axiom: "*If there exists anything that requires no definition or explanation, it is the manifestation of light itself. Nothing is clearer than light*" (HI-107). From this premise, he maps the divisions and categories of light, demonstrating that the most perfect illumination is realised through the self-aware subject. Most crucially, the highest ontology does not arise from spiritual experience; rather, it is attained as a metaphysical conclusion derived from epistemic analysis. Light is not merely a condition for knowledge, it is the most fundamental ontological reality. The entirety of existence is organised as a hierarchy of light and darkness, descending from the Light of Lights (*nūr al-anwār*) through various levels of dominant and governing lights, down to material darkness. Although al-Suhrawardī

acknowledges that everything other than the Absolute Light is, in a certain sense, metaphorical, his focus remains on the structure and gradation of light itself. Even metaphorical light, though not manifest in the same way as the Source, nonetheless possesses an ontological standing that constitutes the harmony and hierarchy of creation, distinguished by degrees of intensity (*shiddah*). What al-Ghazali regards as spiritual symbols, al-Suhrawardī reinterprets as genuine ontological stages of light through which reality is apprehended.

Within this ontological framework, epistemology does not construct the foundation of ontology; rather, epistemology becomes possible precisely because of the ontological structure of light itself. Through the concept of knowledge by presence (*al-ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*) and the illuminative relation (*al-idāfa al-ishrāqiyya*), knowledge is understood as an ontological event, the presence and encounter of light with light, unmediated by concepts or definitions. To know is not a process of mental imaging, but an experience of the presence of the essence itself. This subtle distinction is what ultimately differentiates al-Suhrawardī from al-Ghazali.

In conclusion, both thinkers share the same supreme objective: the attainment of the highest reality. Both affirm that the summit of all light returns to the Light of Lights, God as Absolute Being. Al-Ghazali situates light within the experience of Tawḥīd and Divine Will, while al-Suhrawardī develops a systematic metaphysics of light, integrating ontology, epistemology, and cosmology within a single luminous trajectory. This is not an absolute contradiction, but a productive divergence, one that reveals the methodological evolution of al-Suhrawardī, building upon the influence of al-Ghazali to attain the truth of Tawḥīd through the perfection of both demonstration (*burhān*) and spirituality (*ta'alluh*).

Ultimately, this conceptualization of *nūr* within al-Ghazali's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and al-Suhrawardi's *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* underscores not merely a divergence in philosophical method, but an essential problem dynamic within the core of the Islamic intellectual tradition: namely, whether absolute reality is best approached through the purification of the soul or through the rigour of metaphysical demonstration. This tension, far from being a weakness, constitutes the very vitality of Islamic philosophy itself; it represents a tradition broad enough to be expanded through deeper investigation, and it is precisely this space that this study endeavors to open.

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