WHY CONSCIOUSNESS DOESN'T NEED COMBINING

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Philosophy of Mind's Combination Problem fails to explain how many micro-experiences can form a unified subject. Instead, the paper proposes Suhrawardī's illuminationist metaphysics as a solution, which consists of a graded monism in which reality is one substance–Light–that just varies in intensity. This reframes consciousness as intensification rather than combination. The conclusion holds that unity is fundamental, not constructed, and that this framework offers a simpler, more coherent alternative to combinatorial panpsychist models.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Panpsychism is the philosophical view that consciousness is a fundamental feature of reality. According to this view, even the smallest components of the world possess extremely simple forms of experience. It continues to draw interest in the philosophy of mind because it avoids the sharp explanatory jump required by standard physicalism. Physicalism is the dominant view in contemporary philosophy of mind, which holds that everything that exists is ultimately physical. On this account, consciousness arises from physical processes in complex systems such as the brain.

Rather than claiming that consciousness somehow appears when matter becomes complex enough, panpsychism holds that very simple forms of experience are built into the fundamental constituents of the world. Yet the view faces a central obstacle: the Combination Problem. The Combination Problem refers to the challenge of explaining how many simple forms of consciousness could combine to produce the unified and complex consciousness experienced by human beings. Even if the smallest parts of reality possess minimal forms of experience, it remains unclear how these countless micro-experiences could cause the rich and unified consciousness characteristic of human life.

This paper argues that a powerful way around these difficulties emerges from an unexpected source: the illuminationist metaphysics of the twelfth-century Persian philosopher Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī. Suhrawardī does not attempt to solve the Combination Problem by supplying a better mechanism for fusing micro-subjects. Instead, he challenges the starting assumption that reality is fundamentally many. His illuminationist metaphysics is built around a single, graded substance—Light (nūr)—which he describes as intrinsically self-revealing.[1] Everything that exists is a manifestation of this one luminous field, differing only in degree of intensity. Here, the idea that consciousness must be combined is already a misunderstanding; unity is built into the structure of reality from the outset.

The aim of this paper is not to offer a historical interpretation of Suhrawardī, but to draw on his metaphysics as a conceptual resource for contemporary debates about consciousness. The discussion begins by examining the structure of the Combination Problem and explaining why existing panpsychist approaches struggle to account for sub-

1 Muhammad Umar Riaz Abbasi, "Philosophy of Illuminationism: Comparative Study of Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra," *Migration Letters* 21, no. S10 (2024), 4.

jecthood and phenomenal unity. It then turns to Suhrawardī's account of graded Light, showing how his monistic ontology replaces the assumption of many independent subjects with a single, unified reality. The paper next explains how the distinction between dependent and self-subsisting degrees of Light yields an account of subjecthood that avoids any appeal to aggregation. Finally, it addresses a series of objections and argues that Suhrawardī's position can respond to each in a coherent and principled way.

By reframing the entire picture of reality rather than working within it, Suhrawardī offers a way around the Combination Problem. The puzzle disappears once we surrender the idea that consciousness must be built from independent parts.

II. DIAGNOSING THE COMBINATION PROBLEM

A clear understanding of the Combination Problem is essential for seeing why current versions of panpsychism struggle and why a different starting point may be required. The problem is not a single puzzle but a cluster of connected difficulties about how subjects and experiences could ever fit together. No matter how we picture the relationship between the simplest forms of consciousness and the complex consciousness of a human being—whether as a literal sum of parts or as a higher-level pattern—the same binding problem remains.

We can break the Combination Problem into three main challenges:

1. THE SUBJECT-SUMMING PROBLEM

If the basic units of the world are subjects of experience, then anything made of many such units—from a rock to a brain—would contain many subjects. The human brain, for instance, is built from trillions of particles. If each of those particles is a subject, why does a person experience themselves as exactly one subject rather than a vast crowd? Simply arranging many subjects together does not explain how one unified subject could emerge.

2. THE PHENOMENAL UNITY PROBLEM

Even if we set subjects aside and focus only on experiences, difficulty remains. Human consciousness feels like a single, seamless field. We see, hear, and think within one interconnected awareness. But if micro-experiences are tiny, self-contained points of experience belonging to different micro-entities, why should they ever form a unified whole? The situation is like trying to imagine how isolated

pixels, each with no knowledge of the others, could somehow produce a coherent image.

3. THE GRAIN AND PALETTE PROBLEM

Finally, there is the issue of qualitative richness. The experiences attributed to fundamental entities are supposed to be extremely simple, perhaps nothing more than vague, primitive sensations. How could combining a large number of such simple experiences produce complex ones, like the taste of wine or the feeling of nostalgia? Adding simple things together does not automatically generate something more sophisticated.

A common response to these challenges is to propose a special bonding relation, which is meant to fuse the micro-level experiences or subjects into a single unified one.[2] However, this has problems of its own. The relation is usually presented as a primitive feature of reality, introduced solely to do work that the theory cannot explain on its own. This adds additional complexity to the ontology—now we have micro-subjects and an unexplained bonding mechanism—and still leaves us without a clear understanding of how the combination really works.

Together, these difficulties suggest that the Combination Problem may not arise from consciousness itself but from a particular metaphysical picture that assumes reality is fundamentally made of many subjects. Suhrawardī's illuminationist framework challenges this assumption directly. By rejecting this inherited picture at its root, his ontology offers a way to dissolve the Combination Problem rather than attempting to solve it piecemeal.

III. SUHRAWARDĪ'S ONTOLOGICAL BYPASS

Shihib al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154–1191), the founder of the Illuminationist (Ishrāqī) school of philosophy, developed his metaphysics within the rich intellectual environment of the medieval Islamic world. Earlier philosophers in this tradition, particularly those influenced by Aristotle, had emphasized logical reasoning and abstract metaphysical analysis.[3] Suhrawardī sought to complement this approach by grounding philosophy in the concept of Light (nūr), which he un-

2 Philip Goff, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 8.

3 Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 33.

derstood as the fundamental principle of reality.[4] For him, Light represents pure presence—to exist is to be present or luminous in some degree. Although his philosophy has implications for many areas, including epistemology and cosmology, this paper focuses specifically on how his account of graded Light can contribute to contemporary debates about consciousness.

Rather than solving the Combination Problem on its own terms, Suhrawardī's philosophy offers an ontological bypass that dissolves its foundational premises. His framework does not explain how many subjects combine because it denies that reality is, at its base, a plurality. Suhrawardī saw himself as a reviver of a perennial wisdom who combined the rationalistic philosophy of the Peripatetics, the practical wisdom of the Sufis, and the intellectual intuition of the Ishrāqī tradition.[5] It is from this ambitious synthesis that a new ontological starting point emerges.

The core of Suhrawardī's metaphysics is that all existence is a single, self-evident substance he calls Light (nūr).[6] This is not physical light but a metaphysical concept for pure, self-aware presence. For Suhrawardī, to be real is to be luminous, and to be luminous is to be present to oneself. This foundational substance—this principle of self-evidentiality—is precisely what contemporary panpsychists are seeking, which is a non-physical experiential ground of reality.

Monism is the view that reality is ultimately composed of a single underlying substance or principle rather than many independent entities. From this monistic premise, Suhrawardī introduces his doctrine of *tashkīk al-nūr*, or the gradation of Light.[7] In this model, differences between beings are not differences of substance but of *intensity* or *degree of luminosity*. A rock, a plant, and a human are not different kinds of things but are all manifestations of the one Light, distinguished only by the intensity of their reality. A brighter light and a dimmer light are not two entities, but the same reality at different scalar values. This doctrine of graded light proved so powerful that later thinkers, such as the 15th-century philosopher Ibn Turka, would extend it into a comprehensive "lettrist metaphysics" to explain the structure of language itself as a manifestation of divine luminosity.[8]

4 Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* (Dār al-Maʿārif al-Ḥikmah, 2010), 9.
5 John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism* (State University of New York Press, 1992), 121.
6 Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, 24.
7 Al-Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, 90.
8 Leonard Lewisohn, "Ibn Turka and the Illuminationist Roots of Hurufi Lettrism," in *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. 3, ed. Leonard Lewisohn and David Morgan (Oneworld, 1999), 23–45.

This framework reassesses the discussion entirely. The Combination Problem begins by assuming that reality is made up of many separate micro-subjects whose experiences must somehow be brought together. Suhrawardī's graded monism rejects this assumption from the outset. In his view, there is not a collection of independent subjects but a single luminous reality that appears in different degrees. The central question, therefore, shifts from "How do many subjects combine into one?" to "How does one underlying field of Light present itself in varied intensities?" Once the premise of fundamental plurality is abandoned, the demand for a special binding mechanism no longer arises. This reframing has important consequences for how we understand subjecthood. The task is not to explain how individual units are fused, but how different levels of intensity within one continuous reality give rise to different forms of awareness.

IV. REFRAMING SUBJECTHOOD AND INTRINSIC UNITY

Within a monism of Light, a "subject" cannot be something possessed by separate, fundamental units of reality. Subjecthood must instead be understood dynamically, as a function of the varying degrees of luminosity that make up all existence. Suhrawardī's system gives us a clear way to frame this, and he distinguishes between two kinds of manifestation:

SELF-SUBSISTING LIGHTS (NŪR JAWHARĪ)

These are points within the luminous field where Light reaches a high enough intensity to become self-aware. A subject is not a basic building block of reality, but it is the result of Light achieving a certain threshold of clarity and presence. Subjecthood is an accomplishment of intensity, not a property of independent parts.[9]

DEPENDENT LIGHTS (NŪR ʿARAḌĪ)

These are lower degrees of luminosity. Still forms of phenomenal presence, but not strong enough to sustain self-awareness on their own. They appear, but they do not appear to themselves. They are experiential in nature but not subjects.[10]

This distinction allows Suhrawardī's framework to avoid the Subject-Summing Problem altogether. If only high-intensity lights are true subjects, the world is not populated by trillions of micro-subjects that must somehow merge. Subjecthood emerges only where

9 Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, trans. John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 79.
10 Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 45.

the one luminous substance reaches the appropriate intensity. Below that point, there is experience, but there are no separate subjects to combine.

The same structure also dissolves the Phenomenal Unity Problem. This problem assumes that experience begins as many discrete pieces, which must then be stitched into a unified whole. For Suhrawardī, all phenomenal reality is already a modulation of a single, continuous field of Light. Unity is not something that needs to be achieved, as it is the default condition. What look like scattered micro-experiences are simply lower-intensity expressions of the same underlying presence. The need for a binding mechanism disappears because the experiences were never metaphysically separate in the first place.

V. CONSCIOUSNESS WITHOUT ASSEMBLY

The Combination Problem rests on a metaphysics of assembly, where a conscious subject is understood as something built by adding together many smaller conscious parts. In this view, macro-consciousness is the result of quantitative aggregation. Suhrawardī's system points toward a fundamentally different model: one that treats consciousness not as something assembled, but something realized through qualitative intensification.

The contrast can be made clear with a simple analogy. Screwing additional lightbulbs into a room increases brightness by adding more separate sources—this is quantitative aggregation. Turning up a dimmer switch, by contrast, increases brightness by intensifying a single source. Suhrawardī's model follows the latter. Macro-consciousness is not a room filled with countless tiny lights, but a single light brought to a high degree of clarity and determination.

In this view, human consciousness is not the sum of billions of micro-consciousnesses. It is the single substance of Light manifesting at a locally maximal degree of intensity within a suitably organized system, such as the human brain. The brain does not combine many independent subjects; rather, its structure allows the underlying phenomenal reality to appear with greater determinacy, yielding a complex field of experience.

Understanding consciousness in terms of qualitative intensification dissolves the remaining combination worries without appealing to mysterious bonding relations. The Unity Problem disappears because unity is already present in the single luminous substance

itself, rather than something that must be constructed. Likewise, the Grain and Palette Problem is resolved because experiential richness is not built from simple components but rather increases with intensity—a stronger manifestation of Light is, by its nature, a more fully articulated one.

Although this Suhrawardian picture is elegant and parsimonious, its adequacy cannot simply be assumed. The next step is to test it against a series of objections that challenge whether intensification can really replace combination as an account of subjecthood and phenomenal structure.

VI. OBJECTIONS AND ILLUMINATIONIST REPLIES

This section serves as a crucial test of the coherence of the Suhrawardian model. A framework that dissolves one problem only to create others is no real advance. Here, we address three potent objections and provide replies grounded in the illuminationist framework.

OBJECTION 1

One might object that Suhrawardī merely relocates the problem of emergence rather than eliminating it. The transition from a non-subjective dependent light to a self-subsisting light that qualifies as a subject can appear to involve a sharp and unexplained leap. If dependent lights lack subjecthood altogether, then the appearance of a genuine subject seems to reintroduce the very kind of brute emergence that panpsychism seeks to avoid.

However, this objection rests on a categorical misreading of Suhrawardī's ontology. Dependent and self-subsisting lights are not different kinds of entities. They are different degrees of the same luminous substance. Subjecthood is not a new property but emerges when this single substance reaches a sufficient level of intensity and self-presence. The transition is therefore continuous rather than abrupt, avoiding any jump from the non-experiential to the experiential.

OBJECTION 2

A second concern is that the idea of intensification itself may appear as though an unexplained rule of the theory. If subjecthood appears whenever Light reaches a certain level of intensity, this might seem no better than the panpsychist's move of simply postulating a

special "bonding relation" to connect micro-experiences.[11] In both cases, critics might say, an unexplained principle is doing important work.

However, the two views are not on equal footing. Combinatorial panpsychism starts with many separate micro-subjects and then adds an extra relation to bind them together. This increases the number of basic assumptions the theory must make. Suhrawardī's framework, by contrast, begins with just one underlying reality and one internal principle that explains how it varies. The same principle that accounts for different degrees of existence also accounts for different degrees of awareness. Even if intensification is taken as basic, it offers a more viable explanation because it avoids adding a separate mechanism solely to solve the combination problem.

OBJECTION 3

A final objection concerns the status of the physical world. If reality is fundamentally a single substance of Light, it may be unclear how solid, spatially structured objects arise at all. Pure phenomenal presence seems insufficient to ground the features studied by physics such as spatial extension, dimensional structure, resistance, and causal interaction.[12]

However, Suhrawardī's ontology includes an essential dimension. Alongside Light, Suhrawardī recognizes barzakh, often translated as "dusky barriers."[13] These are not a second substance added to Light, rather, they refer to regions where the expression of Light is limited or dimmed. In Suhrawardī's metaphysics, barzakh functions as a boundary that constrains the expression of Light. When luminosity is limited, it gives rise to the features we associate with the physical world, such as spatial extension, resistance, and material structure. Matter, therefore, is not a separate substance opposed to consciousness but arises where Light is partially dimmed.

This concept also plays a broader role within Suhrawardī's philosophy. By explaining physical reality as a limitation of luminosity rather than a separate material domain, barzakh helps maintain the unity of his metaphysical system. All levels of reality, from pure Light to physical bodies, remain part of the same underlying ontological framework, differing only in the degree to which luminosity is present or constrained.

11 Philip Goff, "Why Panpsychism Doesn't Help Us Explain Consciousness," *Dialectica* 63, no. 3 (2009): 289–311, 291.

12 James Ladyman and Don Ross, Every Thing Must Go: *Metaphysics Naturalized* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 19.

13 Al-Suhrawardī, Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq, 9.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Combination Problem stands as arguably the most significant obstacle to the acceptance of panpsychism. This paper has argued that the 12th-century illuminationist metaphysics of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī offers a powerful framework for bypassing this problem entirely. By replacing the premise of ontological plurality with a graded monism of a single phenomenal substance—Light (al-nūr)—Suhrawardī's system dissolves the very questions upon which the problem is built.

The main strength of this model is its simplicity. It explains subjecthood and the unity of experience without adding special bonding relations by starting from a single, unified reality. In this framework, subjecthood arises through degrees of intensity, and unity is the default rather than something that must be built. Seen this way, problems like subject-summing, lack of unity, and limited experiential richness are not deep puzzles about consciousness itself, but consequences of starting from a more complicated metaphysical picture.

Adopting this view does require strong metaphysical commitment. Accepting a form of idealist monism in which phenomenal presence is fundamental. This is not a flaw of the position, but a trade-off. In return, it offers a simpler and more coherent alternative to the ongoing difficulties faced by combinatorial versions of panpsychism. If this illuminationist framework proves promising, several avenues for further inquiry remain open. One important question concerns how the idea of graded luminosity might relate to the organization of complex biological systems such as the brain. While this paper has argued that consciousness should be understood as an intensification of a single luminous reality rather than a combination of many subjects, further work would be needed to clarify how particular structures enable higher degrees of such intensity. More broadly, engaging with Suhrawardī's philosophy suggests that historical and non-Western metaphysical traditions may contain concepts that can contribute greatly to contemporary debates about the nature of mind and reality.

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