

What Grounds What? Suhrawardī's Light (*Nūr*) vs. Husserl's Transcendental Ego in the (Meta)Metaphysics of Knowledge

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Abstract

I argue that Suhrawardī's concept of light, while placed in contemporary phenomeno-metaphysical contexts, advances metaphysical claims about the nature of reality by switching them from primacy of objects to primacy of relationships. To reach this conclusion, I analyze *Philosophy of Illumination* in the phenomenological key, and show that its logos is similar to the realistically vectored apophantic logic in Husserl's interrogations. Both Husserl and Suhrawardī find epistemic absolutes: *nūr* in Suhrawardī and the transcendental ego in Husserl. As per Husserl, in the ego intentional relationships are ontologically inseparable from their object and have no substrate or qualities other than aboutness/asymmetry. By contrast, Suhrawardī qualifies light as alive (*ḥayy*), grounds it on itself, treats it as its own substrate, and describes it as a universally present self-identical form of relationships which has its own regional ontology. Suhrawardī's maintaining that light, which is phenomenologically a special ("peculiar") form of relationships, is in itself the epistemic absolute, as opposed to a self-contradictory absolute inclusive of temporality and objects whose being doesn't belong to this absolute, gives his logic an advantage over the "zig-zags" of Husserl's interrogations. The incoherence of the logic of phenomenology supplied, e.g., Michel Henry with a reason for the "ontological destruction" of Kant's transcendental psychology and Husserl's reductions. By contrast with transcendental reduction, which ends in the irreality of being, Suhrawardī discovers being as relationships. Thus, if we were to develop a phenomenologically-grounded science of all being, for Husserl this science would grant the classical ontological primacy to individual objects, while if we were to follow Suhrawardī, ontological primacy would belong to relationships whose nature is living light. Since light (as opposed to the transcendental ego) doesn't carry a hidden dependence on the object, it is present as ground for all objects and, in this sense, transcends all opposites.

Keywords: Suhrawardi, Husserl, light, transcendental ego, metaphysics, epistemic absolute, phenomenological reduction, ground, substrate

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Introduction

The context for this study of Suhrawardī is the growing body of contemporary philosophical research on grounding. My plan is as follows. First, I will review what is meant by grounding, and explain how Suhrawardī's central category of *nūr* (light) complements the logic of grounding in the phenomenological (meta)metaphysics of the ego.¹ This would be Suhrawardī's innovative contribution to metaphysical meta-theory. By mentioning it upfront, we will have the most important claim already placed.

Second, I will step back from this claim, and explain that in order to support it, one needs to apply not a historical, but a phenomenological reading of *The Philosophy of Illumination* (hereafter *PI*). By accessing the sense of the whole, phenomenological reading of *PI* places Suhrawardī's ideas within the themes of contemporary philosophical discourse.

Third, I will discuss reductions used by Suhrawardī to uncover light as the epistemic absolute. I will compare them with reductions used by Husserl.

Finally, I will summarize the steps Suhrawardī makes in order to attain his relational concept of the epistemic absolute. Then, I show that by changing the (meta)metaphysics in this absolute from objects to relationships, Suhrawardī finds an *a priori* that can strengthen the epistemic absolute of phenomenology.

1. The Logic of Grounding and the Formulation of the Problem

Grounding ordinarily concerns the question "in-virtue-of-what?" something comes to be.² The logic of grounding is very common for phenomenology (Mulligan 2020):³ Husserl finds *a priori* conditions of possibility in virtue of which this or that aspect of consciousness is possible or necessary.⁴ This concerns, for example, the conditions of possibility for perception of the transcendently given world, the modalities of apophantic logic, or the eidetic laws of consciousness as such. Husserl also relies on the logic of grounding in all of his so called "reverse" or genetic analyses.⁵ A versatile tool for theory-building, the logic of grounding can be used, in our particular case, in searching for the *a priori*-s of consciousness, which is a question that Husserl kept returning to in his many publications. Thus, phenomenology separated itself from metaphysics, but not from (meta)metaphysics. In fact, phenomenology's main task is to find conditions of possibility for the knowledge of reality: "We could not do without the *a priori* belonging to consciousness," says Husserl (1998, 137).

Specifically, the question of *a-priori* concerns the so-called dependency thesis of phenomenology, whereby the existence of things depends upon the presence of the knowing subject.⁶ In Husserl, this thesis is emphatically not solipsistic: as in Suhrawardī, it presupposes the community of independent selves which con-

tributes essentially to the constitution of the knowing subject.⁷ While the absolute subjectivity becomes a condition of possibility for existences, i.e., their ground, Husserl stresses that the dependency thesis does not have an idealistic but a transcendental sense. However, if we accept the transcendental subject as a ground of all existence and all knowledge, there arises the question: what grounds the existence of the transcendental subject itself? Husserl grounds the transcendental subject either on the objects of the world, or, constitutively on itself.⁸ But even though judgements are grounded, truth-wise, on objects, and even though the upward processes of constitution of meaning can be grounded on the processes of lower order, it still doesn't explain how it happens that subjectivity becomes what it is, i.e., its subjectivity. What creates conditions of possibility for it to serve as the sense-making ground for all essences and all existences? Following Henry,⁹ I argue that there is an insufficiency of the conditions of possibility in the phenomenological account, and then build a case that Suhrawardī's Illuminism provides supplemental concepts which can close this insufficiency. The missing condition of possibility for transcendental subjectivity is salvaged by the phenomenological reading of *PI*.

If this is so, Suhrawardī's ideas concern not just the philosophy of religion or history of thought, but the perennial tradition of knowledge which Husserl called the "first philosophy."¹⁰ In distinction to classical Aristotelian sense of the term, Husserl calls "the first philosophy" the succession of philosophies which relate to placing subjectivity at the core of any knowledge and any metaphysics. This first philosophy overcomes the Cartesian aporia between the subject and its objects. By contrast with the metaphysics of dual substances, this tradition leads to recognition of their transcendental unity, and justifies not only our epistemic access to the real world but the very existence of this world. And Suhrawardī's *Philosophy of Illumination* fits right in with this tradition. Suhrawardī's phenomenological ontology of light closes the gap between the subject and the objects of knowledge by working across all ontological regions and switching the ground of subjectivity from the primacy of objects to the primacy of the relationships of illumination.

Why is this Suhrawardīan gift to phenomenology important? Phenomenology is the only science which not only posits but *proves* that one cannot exclude subjectivity from the picture of reality. Phenomenology shows that subjectivity is necessary, that it is irreducible. Other sciences or philosophies do not have means to carry through such a proof. However, metaphysics stops short of categorizing subjectivity, because subjectivity is not a "thing": even though the ego can objectify itself, primarily, it is not an object. In order to access the being of consciousness, phenomenology suspends metaphysics altogether. However, one trace of traditional metaphysical reasoning remains in phenomenology: the logic of grounding relationships on objects. Thus, when phenomenology accesses

the essence of consciousness in the transcendental ego, it cannot find either the substrate of this ego or the conditions of possibility for the ego other than those provided by the objects. The peculiar intentional relationships, which characterize the transcendental ego, are the relationships of “aboutness,” i.e., the ego being about objects. But what makes the ego capable of these “peculiar” relationships, as Husserl calls them? The traditional metaphysical approach of grounding relationships on objects provides no answer to this question: there is no primary object that can relate to another object in an intentional way.

Now, we can finally show the distinctions Suhrawardī makes in this matter. By contrast with Husserl, Suhrawardī is not grounding his theory of knowledge on objects. Thus, he opens the venue of thinking about the substrate of knowledge as illumination, i.e., as relationships founded on light. Suhrawardī’s unique reduction, which I call hylomorphic, takes the objects out of the equation. Then, Suhrawardī can access the pure essence of the appearance of these objects (dusky substances). In phenomenology, the ground is always in the essence. In his analysis of the essence of appearances, that is, of light, Suhrawardī reverses the classical metaphysical order of relationships in which beings are objects, and instead, thinks of the objects as conditioned on their illumination by light. The reason this essence fits, as an a priori, into the transcendental absolute of phenomenology is that Suhrawardī discovers the relationships of illumination not to be limited to mental states, but co-extensive with the world, i.e., present in the visible universe. However, such an interpretation contradicts some of non-phenomenological research of *PI*.¹¹ Thus, I must make a brief detour and explain the reading of Suhrawardī in the phenomenological key.

2. The Phenomenological Sense of the Whole in the *Philosophy of Illumination*

We can count Suhrawardī as a proto-phenomenologist. Just as phenomenologists do, he assigns the ground of knowledge to intuition: “Just as by beholding sensible things we attain certain knowledge about some of their states and are thereby able to construct valid sciences like astronomy, likewise we observe certain spiritual things and subsequently base divine sciences on them” (Suhrawardī 1999, 4). What has to be stressed in this quotation is implicit, not explicit. Explicit meaning here concerns religious experience. However, Suhrawardī, like Husserl, implicitly underscores the ground of knowledge in the originary givenness of things. It is the valuation of sensory and spiritual, that is, non-sensory, intuition. Suhrawardī insists that a person of knowledge should repetitively recognize such “luminous inspirations”. These direct intuitions are attained by “climbing the ladder of the soul” (Suhrawardī 1999, 4), thus presupposing a form of reduction that makes the being of the soul available for re-

search. Another point of similarity with phenomenology is Suhrawardī's reflective logic. This logic, first, justifies his intuitions, and second, has a realistic, apophantic vector, just like the apophantic logic of phenomenology.

The interest in *PI* for a phenomenological philosopher is different from the interest of a historian. A historian maintains focus primarily on situated nuclear concepts of separate sciences, such as logic, semantics, natural philosophy etc. Instead, the phenomenological focus is on the temporally extended sense of the whole. This sense of the whole is instructed by the logic of Suhrawardī's philosophical narrative, and consists of the analytic treatment of apodictic evidence in different sciences. This treatment culminates in the formulation of the epistemic absolute. It is this absolute, the most evident *nūr* (light), that Suhrawardī further examines in all of its ontological expressions. This is this absolute that a phenomenologist would juxtapose with the transcendental ego. Thus, there is a parallelism between the logos (the reason in unfolding argument) in Husserl, and logos in Suhrawardī. This parallelism is not psychological. It concerns idealities of reason which are instructed by the apophantic predicative logic of judgment, i.e., by the relationship of argument to the logic of things themselves. Consequently, the presence of separate sciences in *PI* is warranted by the logic of evidence which connects these sciences into a unified whole of sense. This is in contrast to the ideas that hold Part 1 of *PI* as a registry of separate sciences or expression of some preconceived theoretical arrangement. Phenomenological interrogations, whether in Husserl or in Suhrawardī, go from the preceding steps to the following steps by the innate logos of the inquiry. In this sense, *PI* is not a compilation of separate sciences but a unified philosophical interrogation, even though separate sciences are definitely present in the book.

Husserl and Suhrawardī are parallel in the unfolding of their arguments. Both begin with sciences, which are systemized, rigorous, yet concrete compendiums of knowledge. Both phenomenology and Suhrawardī's Illuminism ascend from knowledge of the concrete to more abstract, universal, and absolute principles of all knowledge. Suhrawardī developed his universal science of apodictic intuition of Part 2 of *PI* not on an empty place, but out of the analysis of relevant epistemic issues in the particular sciences in Part 1. In bringing in the category of unity at the very end of Part 1, he gives us a hint of the transcendental direction of his thought in Part 2, whose ideas belong to a nontemporal treasure-trove of humankind.

3. Reductions in Husserl and Suhrawardī: Accessing the Epistemic Absolute

In Husserl, the transcendental subjectivity serves as the epistemic absolute. The main instrument by which he comes to such a conclusion is reduction, which is

the suspension of, or, parenthesizing of one stratum of experience in order to gain access to another, previously hidden, stratum of experience.¹² Phenomenological reductions work in the first-person perspective: albeit there is a considerable theory that goes into executing reductions, they are live-through acts. The first reduction, phenomenological one, suspends the natural concept of reality and discloses the field of consciousness. This field retains the structure of the natural *cogito*, i.e., the sense of knowing subject aware of things to be known. The second reduction takes place in the phenomenological being of consciousness, in which it discloses the structure which spans the knower and the known. This is the transcendental ego. Husserl proves that this ego is present in any knowledge, and is invariable to knowledge as such: the already mentioned dependency thesis, according to which the ego plays the role of the epistemic absolute. As the essence in the being of subjectivity, this ego is absolutely irreducible: it operates it in every act of cognition. However, ontologically, this absolute is quite exotic. It consists of ontologically diverse elements, including the ego-pole which has no being, the directional, intentional relationships proceeding from the non-existent ego-pole, and the object towards which these relationships are directed. Real objects, which participate in these relationships, are deemed intentional for the sake of proof. Thus, there remains a metaphysical embarrassment as to objects being real and being a part of consciousness at the same time.¹³ Formalizing the objects would not be a problem, for example, in a pure mathematical proof, but with regard to the first-person perspective, where one is analyzing the being of sense, it matters that the ontology of this central structure of knowledge be coherent. If we do not treat the transcendental ego as formal, but as immanent being which is also transcendental, there emerges a question of the conditions of possibility (that is, the ground) for such an ego. Similarly, one may ask, what are the means by which such an ontologically peculiar, unreal ego closes the realistically experienced gap between the subject and the world? How is it that one *experiences* sense, subjectively? In this context, Henry (1973, 28-29), for example, believed that if we are to accept the transcendental ego as the absolute, the ground for such an ego requires additional *a-priori*.

Coming from a different tradition of thought and having neither Descartes not Kant as his predecessors, Suhrawardī takes a different approach. His demonstrative proofs in logic, semantics, and natural science provide enough instances of apodicticity for him to establish the essence of apodicticity as “the most evident”, *nūr* (light) (Suhrawardī 1999, 76). It is in the real world that he finds the ground for such an essence. His first reduction goes along the lines of Aristotelian hylomorphism, and, in this sense, is more radically phenomenological than in phenomenology: Suhrawardī gets rid of objects, i.e., dusky substanc-

es with their magnitudes and barriers, yet retains the essence of their appearances. Thus, the mind-independent, real world is the first ontological domain which Suhrawardī engages in analysis. Light in the real objects in this world exists, but not as an object or property. Light consists of the relationships by which something becomes evident.

The second reduction, *tajrīd*, differentiates the pure light from everything in the objects. This light is not in the world but in the self. It renders the essence of evidence, *nūr mujarrad* (denuded light or light made bare) (Louchakova-Schwartz 2015), in subjectivity, as opposed to the essence of evidence in the real world, and objects from which this essence is abstracted. So, there is accidental light in the world, and pure light in the self, but, by its status of always being the most evident, it is the same light. This logic continues into other spheres of being: analysis of the other selves, the Light of Lights, the hierarchy of apodictic essences (in phenomenological terms, eidetic reduction), and finally, of imagination. Each ontological sphere has its own specific expression of this essence, "the most evident," as it manifests in this particular sphere. This creates a natural display of unity, including the unity of extra-mental and mental spheres via the presence of the epistemic absolute which is ontologically unified, and which reverses the logic of ground from objects to relationships.

Finally, we can examine the relationships between the two absolutes.

4. That from Which Knowledge Flows: The (Meta)Metaphysics of *Nūr* 'Light'

In distinction to Husserl, who discovers the role of apodictic evidence through the analysis of logic, Suhrawardī from the start embraces the principal role of apodicticity in logic, religious experience, or natural observation. This view was handed to him by the preceding tradition as well as by his own introspective practice. When he goes through demonstrations in Part 1, reducing each set of proofs to the evidence of insight, each time he arrives at primitive truth and shows his intuitional emphasis. His argument in this matter is not explicitly stated, but in terms of the implicit logical premises and consequences of his argument, it is quite probable that he came to conclude there is a unity of all such instances in the most evident. Thus, evidence becomes his limit-concept. His phenomenology then follows this essence of evidence, and not the content of knowledge. When he reduces all spatio-temporal objects out of appearing, he liberates the principle of appearing itself: from the accidental light in objects to pure light. Then he examines the appearing of appearing via continuous demonstrations in consciousness in Part 2. Since light is the principle by which things become evident, in contrast to the focus on objects in the phenomenological account, Suhrawardī subordinates objects to the relationships by which they are

known, i.e., becoming evident by light. From Suhrawardī's "would be" standpoint, Husserl's commitment to the ontology of objects suffers from an insufficient differentiation of the conditions of knowledge and makes him miss the foundational truth-maker.

This foundational truth-maker, in Suhrawardī, is a specific type of relationship which he terms *nūr* (light). The reduction to *nūr* (light) develops from the visual aspect of natural demonstration.¹⁴

Visual light is not an object – it is what makes objects appear to the subject of knowledge. Suhrawardī shows that *nūr* is "the most evident" condition of possibility for objects "being there" for us in the natural world. Thus, ontologically, light grounds objects. How does the natural phenomenon turn into such a ground? Suhrawardī goes through the following steps. First, he defines light as the "most evident", without explaining its nature. Then he abstracts visible light from the objects that appear by it. Light, of course, is a synthetic phenomenon which involves participation of both the embodied subject and the world. Hence, Suhrawardī undertakes reduction, *tajrīd*, which discloses light in the pure form devoid of objects, space etc. All through these examinations, Suhrawardī retains ontological intuitions. This allows him to characterize the outcome of reduction, *nūr mujarrad* (pure or denuded light) that is found in the purified subjectivity, as alive. Light thus emerges as a unity of the cognitive capacity in the ego, the capacity of the world to be known, and the intertwining of the two in a type of relationship in the ground of knowledge. This conceptual "intertwining" is presented but is not an object; we can objectify it only via reflection on it, as we do, e.g., with secondary qualities. But it is not a quality or property either. It is a specific type of relationship, symmetrical between the real world and the mind. The idea of such a unitive ground of knowledge in relationships strengthens both Husserl's transcendental thesis of correlation, yet, at the same time, ontologically fixes his dependency thesis.

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Notes

1. For more on the (meta)metaphysics of the transcendental ego; see Beyer (2021).
2. For possible "in-virtue-of" questions; see Raven (2020).
3. Mulligan (2020).
4. For more on phenomenology as theory of presentations; see Carr (2022). For more on conditions of possibility in transcendental phenomenology; see Husserl (1998, 31), also, Heinämaa, Hartimo, and Meittinen (2014, 2).
5. For more on genetic analyses in phenomenology; see Husserl (1973).
6. For a detailed analysis of the dependency thesis; see Beyer (2021).
7. For more on the intersubjectivity; see Husserl (1960, esp. ch. 5).
8. For Husserl's views on ground of the transcendental ego; see Louchakova-Schwartz (forthcoming).
9. For the ontological objection to the transcendental ego (in Kant); see Henry (2016). For critique of Husserl's reduction and *a priori*-s; see Henry (2008).
10. For more on the first philosophy; see Allen (1982).
11. A reference to visuality gives Suhrawardī's philosophy a transcendental dimension; see Louchakova-Schwartz (2019; 2023). For the opposite view of Islamic religious philosophy as devoid of the transcendental dimension; see Ḥā'irī Yazdī (1992).
12. For phenomenological reductions; see Husserl (1998).
13. For more on the problems with the intentional object; see Drummond (2015).
14. For arguments in favor of visuality of light; see Louchakova-Schwartz (2015; 2019).