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978-1-107-08879-5 - Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond

Jari Kaukua

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

The Western world revolves around the self. A sure sign of this is the proliferation of various neologisms in, for instance, folk psychological, alternative therapeutic or economic parlance. We are all familiar with various self-help programmes, self-counselling sessions, prospects of self-development, self-transcendence or self-realization, the conscientious consumer's need of occasional self-compassion, and the rational economic man's guiding principle of self-interest. This general cultural trend has its parallels in philosophy and various other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. For the past decades, self-consciousness or self-awareness has been a constant concern of philosophers of mind, with the fact of first-personal, self-aware qualitative experience presenting arguably the most obstinate obstacle for the naturalist explanation of all and everything. Questions of perceived and constructed identity, or *identities*, have generated a thriving academic industry, with no recession in the foreseeable future. Indeed, modernity and post-modernity are often defined precisely by means of the novel notions of selfhood or individual identity (or the dissolution thereof) to which these epochs are alleged witnesses.

As a result of the sustained interest in selfhood, the term 'self', as well as the related psychological terms such as 'self-awareness' or 'self-consciousness', is a nodal point of both complementary and conflicting intuitions, interests and convictions. It is therefore not a surprise that the term is extremely ambiguous, and that there are in fact a number of more or less distinct concepts of self; a recent enumeration of variants in the philosophical scene alone finds no less than thirty-two different epithets used to characterize the self.¹ These concepts range from extremely narrow notions of subjectivity as a structural feature of all experience to considerably more complex concepts of the self as a narrative or socially constructed entity; some are motivated by epistemological interests while others emerge

¹ Strawson 2009, 18.

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[More information](#)

from research in genetic psychology, sociology or anthropology. On the other hand, extended cases have been made for the thesis that a coherent naturalistic ontology can do without anything like the self, which at best is an arguably useful psychological or cultural fiction, but more often a hopelessly entangled web of linguistic and conceptual confusions.²

Such heated activity about the self places the historian of ideas, particularly one working with a period and cultural context far removed from our own, face to face with a set of thorny questions. These arise first of all from the ambiguity of the term 'self' and the corresponding vagueness of the concept of self. Which of the many alternative selves are we investigating? What type of self-awareness are we scanning the historical material for? Are we describing the development of a psychological entity, writing the history of an epistemic question or an ethical dilemma, or telling the story of a conceptual fiction? Other questions seem even more serious: is it not rather suspect to set out straightforwardly to study the history of a topic so loaded with contemporary interest? Even if we were able to dispel the ambiguity about the self, why should we suppose that thinkers in a period and cultural context distant from ours were interested in it in the first place? Indeed, if interest in the self is constitutive to modernity, should we rather not assume that any sustained discussion about it is unlikely to have taken place before that particular epoch?

Worries of this sort are by no means exclusive to conscientious historians. Spurred by the ghosts of colonial history, the sociological and anthropological theses of the unimaginable variety of human intellectual and social life have penetrated our cultural consciousness and made us particularly sensitive to the diverse values, beliefs, convictions and experiences that people in different cultural contexts can hold and recognize. Indeed, this conviction of the variability of human being is pivotal to the post-modern idea that human selves or identities are constructed out of elements, many of which are not determined by our species but are rather open to all sorts of active interference by ourselves or by various forces in the cultural and social contexts of our lives. As tantalizing as it may initially seem to study an ancient Greek thinker's or a seventeenth-century Iranian philosopher's respective theories of the self, the first question to ask is why we can legitimately expect him even to recognize the entity.

In the following, my intention is not to start from any particular contemporary concept of the self or self-awareness. For this reason, it would be topsy-turvy to start off by describing the focus of our investigation

² Cf. Kenny 1988 and 1999; Dennett 1991; Olson 1998; Metzinger 2003 and 2011.

Introduction

3

in specific terms. Rather, I will begin by reconstructing a particular way of describing and conceiving of the self and self-awareness that emerges explicitly for the first time in Islamic philosophy in the psychological writings of Avicenna (d. 1037). Having laid this basis, I will proceed to study the development of this particular description and concept, as well as that of the arguments applied in its articulation, in the thought of Avicenna's most illustrious successors, down to the revisionist philosophical system of Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1635/6) in the seventeenth century CE. The point is to start from the way in which our authors describe, organize and classify their experience, asking why they chose to pay attention to this particular aspect of human experience, and what role the concept and the phenomenon of self-awareness played in their thought.

To anticipate the story this approach will yield, it is illuminating to make a heuristic distinction between the phenomenology and the metaphysics of the self and self-awareness. To borrow Galen Strawson's succinct demarcation, 'Metaphysics . . . is the general study of how things are or can be or must be. It's a matter for scientists and mathematicians as well as philosophers, and I take it to include physics as an evolving part. Phenomenology is the study of a particular part of how things are or can be or must be. *It's the general study of the character of experience in all its sensory and cognitive richness.*'³ Thus, the metaphysics of the self (or self-awareness) concerns the question of what sort of entity (or event, state or capacity) it is in reality, whether such things as selves really exist in the first place, and if so, whether they are anything like they initially seem to be. In contemporary terms, the paradigmatic question to ask is whether our naturalistic framework of explanation needs such entities as selves at all, or whether we can explain them away by reductive recourse to something more foundational. But even if we adopt a reductionist metaphysical stance towards the self, we need not deny its persistence on the level of phenomenology. If it is an undeniable fact that people are aware of themselves in some sense, and if this is all we mean by their having selves, then the phenomenological level is a matter of discussion of how to describe the phenomenon. We can make positive assertions about the phenomenon without committing either to realism about a corresponding thing or to the denial thereof; in Strawson's words, there can be self-experiences on the phenomenological level (perhaps even consensus about

³ Strawson 2009, I.

distinctions between their types) even if nothing like selves existed according to our metaphysics.⁴

Thus, one way of characterizing the plot of the present story is to say that it is an unfolding of different metaphysical interpretations on a shared phenomenological basis. The repetition of familiar Avicennian arguments related to self-awareness, often word for word, sediments the phenomenon of self-awareness into a received foundation of psychology. From the twelfth century CE onwards, most philosophical authors will begin their discussion of the human soul, sometimes even their entire psychology, with the famous thought experiment of the flying man, or apply in crucial stages the evidence of the subjective unity of experience or the argument against reflection-based models of self-awareness. As I will argue in detail, this is because they unanimously subscribe to Avicenna's description of self-awareness and his way of singling out this particular aspect of human experience.

The consensus dissolves, however, as soon as the discussion shifts to the metaphysical explanation of the phenomenon and the conclusions that can legitimately be drawn on its basis. As we will see, Avicenna himself considered self-awareness to be a potent pointer towards, if not a proof of, the truth of his substance dualist view of human being, but this move was already being questioned by the first generation of his students. This sceptical strand was continued and established as a firm part of the subsequent theological tradition by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) towards the end of the twelfth century CE. Yet it was not the whole story, for Rāzī's contemporary Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191) not only adopted Avicenna's description of self-awareness, but also placed it at the very foundation of his new illuminationist concepts of knowledge and being. Thus, from a potent piece of evidence in human psychology, the phenomenon of self-awareness became the paradigmatic type of knowledge, and the cornerstone of an entire metaphysics.

Not only was the phenomenon of self-awareness open for radically new argumentative applications – there was also room for debate concerning the correct metaphysical account of the entity behind self-awareness, the human self. This becomes eminently clear in our investigation of the thought of Mullā Ṣadrā, who embeds the received description of self-awareness in a radically revised metaphysical framework. A determined subscriber to his predecessors' means of describing and delimiting the

⁴ Strawson 2009, 2. Following Strawson, in the present study the terms 'phenomenology' and 'phenomenon' are not used to refer to the thriving tradition of philosophy founded by Edmund Husserl.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08879-5 - Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond

Jari Kaukua

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

phenomenon, he nevertheless criticized their conception of the self as being inadequately static. Instead of a stable substance that endures unchanged through the constant flux of its attributes and relations to the world, Ṣadrā preferred to conceive of the self as a substance in motion that is thoroughly determined by the variation of its attributes, and unified only in the sense of being a single continuous stream of existence that is aware of itself.

In an approach of this kind, the proof of the pudding can only be in the eating. I am not studying human selfhood and self-awareness as a ‘perennial’ topic of philosophy, but aim instead to describe one historical, and radically contingent, trajectory that to me seems best understood by means of our terminology of self and self-awareness.⁵ In the end, the texts under study must not only provide the ingredients for our reconstruction of the Islamic philosophers’ description of self-awareness, they must also yield sufficient evidence that philosophers writing in Arabic from the eleventh century CE onwards had both the motivation and the conceptual means to pay systematic descriptive attention to their experience. Although Avicenna’s, Suhrawardī’s and Mullā Ṣadrā’s concepts of self and self-awareness are not without parallels among contemporary classifications of different types of selfhood and self-awareness, the crucial claim remains that we can and must reconstruct those concepts, and the underlying preoccupations, interests and convictions, without taking our primary cue from corresponding modern concepts.

Since the present book is a story of the emergence and development of one particular concept of self and self-awareness, it is by necessity relatively narrow in its focus. Consequently, it does not strive to give an exhaustive overview of the different possible concepts of self and self-awareness that one might be able to locate in Islamic intellectual history between the eleventh and the seventeenth centuries CE. If such a general investigation were conducted rigorously, that is, according to the sort of bottom-up approach we have just sketched, it would exceed the limits feasible for a single-volume study, and would most certainly be beyond the capacities of the present author. A more liberal charting of the landscape, on the other hand, could scarcely avoid taking its cue from some contemporary ways of conceptualizing the self and self-awareness, which would seriously compromise its value for the systematically and historically demanding reader.

⁵ Thus, I wholeheartedly subscribe to the concern over anachronistic rational reconstruction as semi-nally formulated in Skinner 1969, although I believe that it must be qualified by a recognition of the limits of all historical reconstruction. For an attempt at articulating those limits, with a particular view to the questions of self and self-awareness, see Kaukua and Lähteenmäki 2010.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

This is by no means the first historical study of the self and self-awareness in pre-modern philosophy. Charles Taylor's seminal *Sources of the Self* already set off with a sketch of the opening of the interior space of experience in ancient philosophy, even if the book's main emphasis was on the emergence of the specifically modern notion of selfhood.⁶ More recently, Richard Sorabji published a large volume with the succinct title *Self*, which deals emphatically and at considerable length with ancient and medieval views on a range of metaphysical, psychological and ethical questions related to selfhood and self-awareness.⁷ Roughly simultaneous to Sorabji's book, Raymond Martin and John Barresi came out with an intellectual history of personal identity titled *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self*.⁸ Finally, Alain de Libera's ongoing *Archéologie du sujet* is an engaging story of how the modern notion of subjectivity emerges from the development of decidedly medieval philosophical concerns.⁹ These are just some of the most prominent recent examples, which can be supplemented by several excellent studies focused on a single thinker or a more distant period.¹⁰ Yet in spite of the considerable joint merits of these books in covering a vast array of thinkers, none of them ventures very far into the territory of Arabic or Islamic philosophy, with the stand-alone exception of Avicenna, whose thought experiment of the flying man is often quoted as a perspicacious if puzzling attempt at describing and delineating the phenomenon of self-awareness. Similarly, the handful of articles or book chapters that have been written on self-awareness in Islamic philosophy are mostly focused on Avicenna.¹¹

That historians of the self have neglected the post-Avicennian development in Islamic philosophy is not particularly surprising. Until quite recently, Islamic philosophy was regarded as a fringe phenomenon in the broad scope of the history of philosophy, worthy of inclusion only to the extent that it played a role in the transmission and transformation of the Greek heritage before its final appropriation by the Latin philosophers and theologians from the thirteenth century onwards. While the absence of verifiable contacts between the principal proponents of Islamic and Christian philosophy after Averroes' death in 1198 CE may have legitimated the delegation of the study of the subsequent Islamic tradition to the

⁶ Taylor 1989. ⁷ Sorabji 2006. ⁸ Martin and Barresi 2006.

⁹ De Libera 2007 and 2008, with two more volumes announced.

¹⁰ Cf., for example, Gill 1996 and 2006 (on Greek literature and Hellenistic philosophy, respectively); Cary 2003 (on Augustine); Remes 2007 (on Plotinus); Cory 2013 (on Aquinas).

¹¹ Cf. Sebt 2000, 100–117; Black 2008 and 2012; and Kaukua 2007. Marcotte 2004 and Kaukua 2011 deal with Suhrawardī's relation to Avicenna.

Introduction

7

orientalists, this was often coupled with the more derogatory thesis that there simply was no philosophical activity worthy of the name in the Arabic language after Averroes' allegedly unsuccessful attempt to defend philosophy against Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111 CE) fatal blow dealt in his critical *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*.

It has since been conclusively shown that Ghazālī did not put an end to the development of philosophical thought in the Islamic world, either single-handedly or as the spearhead of a wider opposition from orthodox theologians. In fact, the contrary consensus is beginning to emerge according to which he may not even have intended anything of the sort. Instead, Ghazālī has been argued to have knowingly incorporated a great amount of philosophical material, not to mention the philosophical method of rigorous argumentation, into his own thought, and to have been followed in this by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, another highly venerated Sunnī theologian.¹² Thus, although self-proclaimed philosophers may have grown rare in the subsequent centuries of Islamic thought, philosophical activity prospered in Sunnī theological writing and teaching, quite likely down to our era.¹³

On the other hand, Iran has fostered a thriving philosophical tradition through to the present day. In the light of our increasing knowledge of the development of this field of intellectual activity, it seems a safe estimate to say that post-Avicennian Islamic philosophers were not afraid of making departures comparable in extent to their early modern European peers.¹⁴ This is especially evident in the thought of Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā whose revisions of received views will be our major concern in the following. Nevertheless, the strictly philosophical value of this tradition is sometimes still obscured by the fact that some of its most prominent Western scholars have tended to emphasize other, more mystical aspects of the philosophers' thought. This is especially true of the pioneering work of Henry Corbin who played a major role in their introduction to the Western public. Corbin was an eccentric thinker who developed his own method of phenomenological interpretation, which hinged upon the explicit permission, or indeed requirement, to give up most of the rigour of the historical method; instead, one was to strive to imaginatively reinvigorate the mystical insights of one's objects of study. Instead of an attempt at philosophical understanding, this often involved extravagant emphasis on the symbols and myths, which

¹² See Wisnovsky 2004a; Shihadeh 2005 and 2006; Griffel 2009.

¹³ See Wisnovsky 2004b; El-Rouayheb 2010.

¹⁴ For a concise account of the central debates in Iranian philosophy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Pourjavady 2011, 1–105.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08879-5 - Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond

Jari Kaukua

Excerpt

[More information](#)

some of the authors frequently employ, to draw daunting connections not only between different eras of Iranian thought but also between the Islamic philosophers and historically unconnected European mystics such as Jakob Böhme or Emmanuel Swedenborg.¹⁵ This approach to reconstructing the history of Iranian philosophy has hardly increased the credibility of the tradition in the eyes of less extravagant readers, and the situation has not been helped by the fact that a number of influential scholars have maintained Corbin's emphasis on mysticism.¹⁶ Although many of these scholars, and Corbin in particular, should be lauded for their historical and philological contributions, their work has been a mixed blessing for the wider recognition of the *philosophical* merits of post-Avicennian philosophy.

The recent past notwithstanding, few specialists today will debate the inclusion of post-Avicennian philosophical authors in the class of subjects meriting serious philosophical study. But despite several excellent studies since the 1980s,¹⁷ our understanding of later Islamic philosophy is not yet on the level that we have come to expect in the case of canonical figures such as al-Fārābī, Avicenna or Averroes. In my view, it is crucial for reaching this goal that we interpret the 'post-classical' authors in close and rigorous connection to the classical Avicennian framework, in the understanding of which we can rely on several decades of first-rate philosophical scholarship on a wide range of topics. As this study of self-awareness suggests, even the most original moves of thinkers like Suhrawardī or Mullā Ṣadrā can be fully appreciated only against this background; Avicenna's insights are neither a model to be slavishly followed nor an antiquated edifice to be simply discarded in favour of supposedly higher mystical ways to reach the Truth, but rather potent material for revision and reapplication. This is most obvious in Suhrawardī's employment of Avicenna's psychological arguments for the irreducibility of self-awareness as the basis for his new metaphysics of light and appearance in the *Hikma al-ishrāq*. It is true that the debts are not always acknowledged, and it is not uncommon that we have to show the Avicennian credentials of an author against his express denouncement – again, Suhrawardī's wholesale rejection of Peripatetic metaphysics and theory of science, preliminary only to the introduction of another piece of Avicennian evidence, is a case in point – but in this regard the post-Avicennian philosophers are by no means unique.

¹⁵ For a prime example of Corbin's method in practice, see Corbin 1971, vol. 11.

¹⁶ Cf., for instance, the work of Corbin's close associate Seyyed Hossein Nasr (such as his 1978 and 1996); and studies like Morris 1981 or Amin Razavi 1997.

¹⁷ Cf. Ziai 1990; Jambet 2002 and 2008; Bonmariage 2007; Rizvi 2009; Kalin 2010; Rustom 2012.

Introduction

9

Thus, by means of the particular case of self-awareness I hope to substantiate the claim that we should read authors like Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā as reacting first and foremost to *philosophical* debates and texts, and to interpret them with the sort of expectations of conceptual rigorousness and insight that guide us in the formative case of Avicenna. Conversely, the study will also propose that the investigation of the reception of some of Avicenna's original ideas may be a considerable asset in our attempts to understand those ideas in their inceptor by providing corroboration for our reconstructions of them. In the case of self-awareness, the novelty of Avicenna's concept gives rise to a number of complications in the framework of Peripatetic psychology, epistemology, and metaphysics, which in turn has made its reconstruction a matter of considerable difficulty and debate. While similarity with a particular strand of reception is of course no evidence for the correctness of any single interpretation of the view that is being received, the twelfth-century discussion of self-awareness can still help us by showing which interpretation the thinkers temporally and culturally close to Avicenna considered as the most plausible. This is evinced by their devising additional arguments along Avicennian lines, such as the systematic distinction between the subject and the object of experience in terms of 'I' and 'it', respectively, or their introduction of highly clarificatory new terms to describe self-awareness, such as Suhrawardī's 'I-ness' (*anā'īya*).

The first chapter of the book discusses the most prominent pre-Avicennian philosophical concepts of the self and the various types of self-cognition, and introduces briefly some of the basic doctrines of the Avicennian psychology that provide the framework for much of the ensuing discussion.

Chapter 2 will introduce the phenomenological basis of Avicenna's new concept of self-awareness. I will start with one of his most famous arguments, the thought experiment featuring the flying or floating man. By reading the flying man in its immediate context and in close connection with the argumentative goals it is intended to reach, I attempt to show that Avicenna builds his concept of self-awareness upon something he expects us all to be familiar with from our everyday experience. This is an important point to make not only because the nature of the thought experiment has been a matter of scholarly debate, but first and foremost because its familiar phenomenological basis is crucial to my later reconstruction of Avicenna's concept of self-awareness.

Chapter 3 adopts a parallel line of approach by considering Avicenna's possible motives in introducing the new concept of self-awareness. This

Cambridge University Press

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Jari Kaukua

Excerpt

[More information](#)

question of theoretical rationale becomes pressing because of the striking claim that Avicenna makes in his mature correspondence, namely the claim that self-awareness amounts to the existence of the immaterial human substance. The interpretation I suggest is that Avicenna may have perceived self-awareness as instrumental to presenting a coherent psychological substance dualism in the Peripatetic framework that founds individuality on a strong connection to matter. In other words, he may have seen in self-awareness a solution to the question of how a human being can be both an immaterial substance and an individual instantiation of the human species.

After these preparatory chapters, I finally present my reconstruction of Avicenna's concept of self-awareness in Chapter 4. By considering a number of Avicennian arguments related to self-awareness, I attempt to show that the new concept is intended to capture a very narrow sense of first-personality inherent in all human existence. I argue that this reconstruction of the concept is particularly charitable to Avicenna, because it is capable of fulfilling the stringent requirements placed upon the concept by all the argumentative contexts in which the phenomenon is applied. This is further supported by a consideration of the scattered remarks Avicenna makes on reflective self-awareness.

Chapter 5 moves on to discuss the treatment of this aspect of the Avicennian heritage in the thought of his twelfth-century critics. The chapter shows how the critical remarks of Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. 1164/5 CE) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī lead eventually to Suhrawardī's separation of the phenomenon and the concept of self-awareness from Avicenna's metaphysical account of it as the existence of the human substance. Henceforth, self-awareness can be conceived in purely phenomenological terms, that is, without explaining it in more foundational metaphysical terms.

As will be shown in Chapter 6, the separation of Avicenna's phenomenology of the self from his metaphysics is decisive for Suhrawardī's own attempt at developing a self-styled illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) alternative to Avicenna's Peripatetic system. Through a close reading of the passages in which he introduces the pivotal concepts of knowledge as presence (*ḥuḍūr*) and being as light (*nūr*) or appearance (*ẓuhūr*), I show that self-awareness is pivotal to the definition of both new terms. Thus, Suhrawardī is witness to a seismic shift in the application of the concept of self-awareness without any change in the description of the underlying phenomenon. Regardless of its great explanatory power, Avicenna seems to have restricted the importance of self-awareness to psychological concerns, but in Suhrawardī it becomes a cornerstone of both epistemology and metaphysics.