

Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond

Jari Kaukua

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Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond is not an easy read even for researchers interested in the topic and Kaukua does not help the reader with his writing style. Nevertheless, this should not stop the reader from patiently following Kaukua's reconstruction of the concept of self-awareness in Avicenna and post-Avicennan philosophies. Patience and careful reading will pay off, and one cannot help but admire a non-Western construct of self-awareness and the beauty of the neatly interwoven text.

Kaukua's research combines the research on Avicenna (980-1037) from his doctoral study and ideas developed by post-Avicennan philosophers in his Post-doctoral studies. According to him, self-awareness (*shuūr bi al-dhāt*) as a clearly definable concept of first personality can be found in Avicenna and what is more, we can find complex arguments to establish this. Kaukua takes a step further and claims that, by the 12th century, self-awareness was part of the traditional philosophical language. From the 12th century onwards, scholars make the flying man part of their discussion of the soul. This is indicator enough for Kaukua that they implicitly admit an Avicennan notion of self-awareness. According to Kaukua, even scholars such as Suhrawardī (1154-1191) and Mullā Ṣadrā (ca. 1571-1636), who dramatically revise the concept, continue to understand it in the basic Avicennan frame. Thus, more than the presence of the discussion and its place in the philosophical tradition, there is consensus on the concept. The claim is then that we have a concept of self-awareness in Avicenna's corpus as well as arguments to prove it. In addition, in the post-Avicenna era, we find the scholars "unanimously subscribe to Avicenna's description of self-awareness and his way of singling out this particular aspect of human experience" (p. 4). Kaukua makes the criticisms of the "sceptical strand" such as those of Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 1210) and Suhrawardī part of his proof that self-awareness was central in medieval post-Avicenna psychological discussions. Disagreements on the concept only emerge, once the discussion continues to the metaphysics of explaining this phenomenon. The critical analyses of Baghdādī (1074-1152) and Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī empty the concept from the idea of substance, whilst Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā refine and radically develop an evolved understanding of self-awareness. These two scholars present a broader application

of self-awareness. In Mullā Ṣadrā's case, new borders to the self are also assigned, with a questioning of the static self.

It is true that studies on the self in the pre-modern period generally neglect the development of the story in Islamic lands. Thus, this work is an important contribution to the studies on the self, and helps explore a much-neglected aspect. An important part of the book includes theories from post-Avicenna scholars which provide detailed evaluations of later period philosophy with a specific focus. In this way, the book, with its method and lengthy analyses, makes an important contribution to Islamic studies. If not a comprehensive showcase for psychological discussions in the Islamic philosophy after Avicenna, the book will make important contribution to Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā studies.

The author is aware of the risk of anachronism in applying the notion of self-awareness to the pre-modern period; this consists of a short section. In Kaukua's own words, he expects to demonstrate that philosophers in a period and cultural context that is distant from our own were also interested in the self. A discussion of the concept is not limited to modern society or to the historical predecessor thinkers. On the other hand, Kaukua seems to differentiate Avicenna's self-awareness from its modern counterpart by refraining from taking on any particular contemporary concept of self or self-awareness. This, he appears to think, suffices as a methodological opening for self-awareness in Avicenna and post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy. Thus, what we have is a non-Western pre-modern concept of self-awareness reconstructed around Avicenna's psychological writings in general, and his flying man argument in particular.

The first chapter presents the originality of Avicenna's stance and displays a number of candidates from the pre-Avicennan period who can play a central role for the reconstruction of the concept of self-awareness in the pre-modern period. The claim is that Avicenna presented a unique concept that had not been seen in the pre-Avicennan period. The remainder of the chapters evaluate the developed discussions in the tradition that follows Avicenna. The scrutinized analysis of the flying man is presented as a pointer in the Psychology of *Shifā*, is the starting point of an investigation into the soul in *al-Ishārāt wa al-tanbīhāt*, and is an intensive area of focus in *Ta'liqāt*. The argument eventually turns on proving substance dualism. Accordingly, the first pointer is not strong enough to act as a proof, as it experientially indicates a common psychological phenomenon. With the analysis of passages on the flying man argument, Kaukua claims self-awareness is at the centre, offering a possible solution to the inevitable problem of dualism; in addition,

this argument explains how a human can be both an immaterial substance and an individual instantiation of the human species.

The flying man argument is only one of the four arguments Kaukua derives from the Avicennan corpus of self-awareness. The other three arguments which are, “argument from constancy of self-awareness”, “argument against reflection-based models of self-awareness” and “argument from unity of experience” are also reflected in the works of Mullā Şadrā and Suhrawardī; these create the structure of the chapters which discuss Avicenna, as well as Suhrawardī and Mullā Şadrā.

Self-awareness is, as Kaukua repeatedly expresses, a concept Avicenna assumes that everyone is familiar with from their everyday experiences. The reconstruction in the fourth chapter concludes that a narrow sense of first personality is inherent in all human beings. Self-awareness is what remains when the human being is abstracted from sense perception, intellection or any objective experience: “flying man has no objective content of experiences, no acts of perception or intellection. Anything left of my experience is *dhat/* is me.” The commonality of this experience leads to a striking consequence: self-awareness is the first perfection of human species.

Kaukua prepares the reader for this conclusion in the first chapter when he eliminates candidates who came before Avicenna for a conceptualization of self-awareness. Our perception that we perceive, discussed in *De Anima* III.2, is included in Avicenna’s psychology as a theory of inner senses. The notion however, is not related to the general phenomenon of consciousness. Moreover, Avicenna’s flying man is freed from any sense perception and thus excludes the perception of perception as well. Another candidate is the unity principle in intellection. This is not a valid candidate for self-awareness as it is related to purely immaterial intellection. The last example is that the actual intellect is able to consider itself at will. These examples reinforce Kaukua’s stance that Avicenna’s self-awareness is more direct and primitive than self-reflection.

In this instance, one can talk about two types of self-awareness, one primitive and the other reflective. In addition, Avicenna admits to a reflective self-awareness as well (*Shuūr al-shuūr*). However, this type of awareness requires the human capacity to reflect in the first person and in a more primary foundational mode, according to the requirements. In the reflection-based model of self-awareness, a subject can recognize themselves only if they are already familiar with themselves. In the primitive sense of self-awareness, Avicenna believes each human is intuitively and continuously aware of a stable ‘I’ which

remains a substantial core throughout their lives. Kaukua defines this as the mode in which we exist as immaterial substances. Two consequences emerge from this phenomenon: First, self-awareness is static. Although it is the first perfection, self-awareness does not change over time. There is not more I-ness or less according to this presentation. Secondly, the self, indicated by this phenomenon, is also static. It is the Aristotelian substance, which does not undergo change.

Abu Barakāt al-Baghdādī starts with usage of *nafs* in common language and approves the givenness of the self is common to all humans. Nevertheless, his criticism starts with the next step: that this givenness does not tell us anything more about the self. No proper category or correct metaphysical classification can be derived from this self-awareness. Abu Barakāt separates the claim of substantiality from the phenomenon of self-awareness. Thus, the move from incorporeal self-awareness to the substantiality of soul, which was not questioned or explained in Avicenna, is rejected. In the section titled “Self-awareness without substance”, Kaukua lists criticisms by Abu Barakāt, Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī and Suhrawardī, which are built on this move from incorporeal self-awareness to substantiality. In Rāzī’s explanation, this separation results in claiming that substantiality is accidental to self-awareness. Suhrawardī has a more substantial problem with the notion of substance in his metaphysics and his epistemology. Thus, in his case, even accidental relations are denied and only a negative property is attributed to substantiality: it is a mere consideration.

Suhrawardī’s self-awareness is direct, not substantial or undefinable. Kaukua links his concept of knowledge by presence to Avicenna’s self-awareness. Thanks to Avicenna’s discussion, direct knowledge by presence becomes possible. The ontology of lights is also related to the concept of self-awareness. Suhrawardī’s pure lights are featured with self-awareness, a feature they share with human beings. In the same way that lights come in varying degrees, self-awareness is in degrees as well. Thus, each being has the same self-awareness; however, some have less and some others have more. Sections on Suhrawardī contextualize self-awareness and knowledge by presence, explaining the knowledge of God. According to Kaukua, human experience and its basis in self-awareness is used to explain God’s knowledge of Himself and His creation.

Kaukua’s further analysis of Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā explains not only that self-awareness had become part of the philosophical tradition by the end of the 12th century, but also that there were complex philosophical discussions which were thriving and developing in the post-Ghazali era.

Accordingly, the claim that Islamic philosophy was complete after Ghazali is simply not true. The shifts in frameworks, the changes in application of the concept and developments in the conceptualization process of self-awareness prove that discussions in these centuries had liveliness and critical structure.

The fundamentally expanded usage in Mullā Şadrā's case should be identified as a stronger shift than presented by Kaukua. Kaukua in contrast, emphasizes that Mullā Şadrā and Suhrawardī stay within the limits of Avicenna's original understanding of self-awareness.

Suhrawardī's central concept "light (*nūr*)" and Mullā Şadrā's "existence (*wujūd*)" appear influential in these theoretical shifts. One interesting topic in Suhrawardī's evaluation arrives at a result of identification of ruling lights with self-awareness. On one hand, Suhrawardī follows Avicenna in not admitting substantial change in the soul. However, his hierarchical ontology of lights requires that self-awareness comes in degrees.

Mullā Şadrā's analysis demonstrates the importance of the concept in his philosophy. Nevertheless, this is an expected result; the surprise is that Mullā Şadrā's case is a more scattered scene of discussion related to self-awareness than expected. Mullā Şadrā's self-awareness is present even at a sub-conscious level and is applied even to animals. His understanding of active knowledge, that knowledge is perfection and that knowledge and object are asymmetrical, Kaukua claims, are constructive elements of his concept of self-awareness.

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