

Muhammad U. Faruque. *Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. xvi + 311 pages. ISBN: 9780472132621.

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Translated by Ayaz Asadov**

I shall start this review by stating that translating the book's title into Turkish is not that easy.¹ The reason is not the title per se, but rather the concept of the *self*. The existence of several translation alternatives in Turkish for the self such as *benlik*, *kendilik*, *ben*, *kendi* and *öz* is related to the unclarity of the concept. Although the term has a literal rendering in some Western languages for grammatically being a reflexive pronoun, *Selbst* in German, *soi* in French –in this sense an indirect possible Turkish equivalent would be “kendi” or “öz” –, the history of the concept and its semantic fields that it philosophically points to complicate the issue. Many contemporary debates about the self are, in principle, somehow related to discussions on whether the self is a construction or an invention, and what this concept signifies. To talk about the self, therefore, a philosopher will naturally want to specify and determine his object, making sure what his discussion is all about and building their ideas upon that specification. *Sculpting the Self* also proposes a definition of the self and an idea developed around it. In this review, besides discussing the book's overall project, I will focus on the author's understanding of the concept of the self.

Muhammad U. Faruque begins with the assertion that today's theories about the self and subjectivity are going through a major crisis and have reached a dead end. While arguing that the existing approaches are inadequate, his project aims

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1 I thank Mehmet Zahit Tiryaki for his helpful comments. Since this review is written in Turkish and then translated into English, it includes some discussions about possible translations of the notion of the self into Turkish. I think that these parts of the review do not only regard Turkish readers, but also can be useful to think about the notion itself by looking at its translatability into other languages.

at exploring the problem of the self and investigating its flourishing in an ethical sense. To do this, he places the views of authors from the intellectual tradition of Islam (as well as from other non-Western traditions) into a dialogue with contemporary approaches to the self. In light of certain authors from the Islamic tradition and contemporary discussions on the matter, he offers a definition for the self and seeks to establish a theoretical basis for the ethical perfection of the self based on these views.

The author refers to two main approaches to the self at the beginning of the book. The first view rejects the notion of self by arguing it to be a modern invention. According to the second position, all the contradictions related to the self can be resolved through the notion itself. In Faruque's view, the first approach throws out the baby with the bathwater. However, the second position presupposes a reconciliation of widely divergent views on the notion of self. By following this general position, the author develops his own approach in the book. He aims to explain the self as follows: "to explore and analyze selfhood and subjectivity in order to develop a new, multidimensional model of the self that underscores self-knowledge, self-cultivation, and human flourishing" (2). This approach can be viewed as the starting point and the purpose of the book and represents the author's treatment of the subject throughout the text as well as his overall position.

After contouring the project in the introduction, the author dedicates the first chapter of the book to a discussion of what the self is. He undertakes this task with the assumption that the self is a concept which defines the human being in the most general sense, as indicated in English too. Before attempting to discuss the implications of this assumption, I would like to look at the possible equivalents of the self in the classical languages of Islamic thought, as examined in the book by following the author's lead. The use of these concepts in Turkish which have their origin in Arabic and Persian (at times with meaning variations) can help us to find the counterpart of self in the Turkish language. In a fruitful discussion in the first chapter, Faruque discusses the connotations of terms such as *nafs*, *rūḥ*, *nafs nāṭiqā*, *anāniyya*, *khūd* and *dhāt*, and asserts that *nafs* can mean both soul and the self (24-26). By providing examples from classical texts, he establishes how the concept of *nafs* had not been used with a single meaning in Islamic thought and so he too does not restrict the self to the term *nafs*.

Furthermore, the various concepts Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1176/1762) used, who is among the thinkers the book discusses, to define the human being, renders it more difficult to identify a possible equivalent term for the self. In the face of all

these terminological difficulties, Faruque suggests viewing the self as a “spectrum concept” (27), which in its most general sense defines the human being in daily and philosophical language and encompasses a broad phenomenon that is expressed through various concepts in different disciplines and approaches. In this sense, for the author, it can be said that the self is a neutral concept that brings together different human qualities that define the human being. In short, Faruque summarizes what he understands from the self as “‘having a sense of *I* that involves self-awareness and self-knowledge.’ That is to say, the basic sense of the human self involves self-knowledge, first-person subjectivity, and agency.” (49)

From this perspective, at least in the context of this book, it then becomes further clear that the concept of the self does not have an equivalent in Turkish. Nevertheless, considering that every translation in some sense contains impossibility and that a translation can be possible with this awareness, each of the possible uses in Turkish that is mentioned above can be suitable in certain ways. For that, in what follows I will use *ben* (I) or at times *kendi* (II) (when it has a reflective function) for the self in Turkish.

Unifying the human self that has been expressed with different concepts in different times, languages and locations under this spectrum concept, Faruque in a way makes the self neutral and ahistorical by abstracting it from its essential historicity. In other words, he puts aside this notion’s particular history which constitutes its meaning and has a role in the current use of this concept. As the author mentions in a footnote on the first page of the book, this notion gained its meaning as a philosophical term for the first time by the use of John Locke (d. 1704) in English (in French, an equivalent of the self, “*moi*” was used first by Descartes (d. 1650)) and then continued as different manifestations in Cartesian thought in subsequent centuries. However, the author uses the self as an umbrella concept for understanding the human being. It is this umbrella concept that makes the “cultural and epistemic pluralism” (10), which he adopts as a methodological principle, possible. If the problems arising from the neutrality and universality attributed to the concept are put aside, one can say that the spectrum approach is useful in terms of lifting various restrictions present in intellectual history and allowing us to discuss an issue by incorporating other concepts.

Moreover, Faruque investigates how the concept of self can be applied to premodern thought, especially to non-Western philosophical traditions. I would like to briefly address this discussion at this point. The author narrates the views of some authors who held that the self cannot exist in premodern thought,

especially in Islamic philosophy and summarizes their views saying, “premodern societies did not have any notion of subjectivity” (11). Faruque argues that these ideas are originated from the Hegelian conceptualization of history and try to understand non-European histories according to a hierarchy where Europe has a privilege and others don’t have a universal character in history. As a result of such a problematic approach, these views have come to believe that premodern societies lacked the notions of selfhood and agency (15-16). For Faruque, the claim that premodern philosophers lacked the concepts of self and subjectivity leads to the assumption that these philosophers and even premodern societies lacked self-consciousness or self-knowledge. Faruque states that this assumption originates from Eurocentric prejudices, and he holds that such “lack” is impossible and that human beings have always had self-consciousness and subjectivity. I would like to pose another question to this useful discussion, which Faruque carries out by referencing rich sources. Does the assumption that premodern societies did not have the notions of self and subjectivity merely imply that these traditions were “lacking” or were “deficient” in something? Can the same claim not be made by emphasizing different aspects without being trapped in Eurocentric assumptions? To suggest that the notions of the self and subjectivity had emerged in (or perhaps given birth to) modern thought in a particular time for particular philosophical problems, and had defined the course of development of contemporary thought, offering a limited and politically motivated conception of the human being, does not imply an attribution of deficiency to premodernity. Contrary to Faruque, can one not consider how the conceptualizations that had developed in other periods with regard to the human being may be able to widen the restrictive discourses of modern thought and offer alternative understandings? Does the argument that the conceptualizations of the self and subjectivity did not exist in pre-modern periods merely attribute a deficiency to the past?

In my view, one must keep in mind that this alternative, which the author has not considered, is viable and may potentially offer other approaches to the discussion on the self and subjectivity in contemporary thought. For at least, when one considers the wider debates that took place around the idea of overcoming subjectivity in 20th century, the potential of this alternative, that the author hasn’t taken into account, becomes clear and inevitable.

Before moving on to the book’s rich discussion, I will dwell a little more on the author’s conceptualization of the self. Faruque holds that the self has two different dimensions, which can be summarized as descriptive and normative. In his view, the contemporary debates are rooted in prioritizing one of these two dimensions at the expense of the other. By stating that the descriptive and normative levels

come from the spectrum nature of the self, he seeks to understand the self within this two-dimensional structure. For Faruque, the bio-physiological, socio-cultural and cognito-experiential dimensions are related to the descriptive side, while the normative level deals with the ethical and spiritual matters (33). Faruque summarizes the views of different thinkers who, he claims to have, understood the self only through its descriptive aspect. For example, in the descriptive side of the self, he discusses Foucault's (d. 1984) genealogy of the subject in the sociocultural conceptualization of the self. In the same vein, he draws the following conclusion when discussing the thinkers who conceived of the self in bio-physiological terms: "[This analysis] suggests that the self must be more than a social or physical entity" (39). He includes the phenomenological experience-based conceptualizations of the self, from thinkers such as Zahavi, in his analysis and concludes that this descriptive approach would also be insufficient as it fails to account for the normative dimension. By understanding the self in terms of this two-dimensional structure, Faruque asserts that the normative side, which can be transformed by cultivating human perfection and ethical-spiritual values, enables the self to arrive at the judgments of right and wrong in a context determined by sociocultural structures (44). He further claims that the self cannot be studied only from a third-person perspective as this method ignores the experiential aspect of the self. In short, while constructing his own conception of the self in light of this multidimensional structure, the author also criticizes the approaches that restrict the self to just one of the subdimensions of this structure. The book depends on this multidimensional structure for revealing its problematic regarding the self and aims to gain its position through this idea.

The theme of the book's second chapter is to develop an account of non-reflective self-knowledge that determines the author's foundation of the conceptualization of the self. This fundamental claim of the book comes with a paradox regarding the nature of the self and its knowing itself. Faruque also points out this paradox at the explanation of non-reflective self-knowledge: "On the one hand, the self must be known prior to everything else, since anything known must presuppose a subject for which it is known, while on the other hand, for something to be known it must be an 'object'—which leads to the paradox that while everything is known through the self, the self itself remains forever unknown (since the self or the subject can never be an object). (62-63)" One can also say that this is the most general paradox underlying transcendentalism in modern philosophy, in a sense it is a philosophical impasse for the transcendental subjectivity. In vulgar terms, it is the unbridgeable gap between the empirical and transcendental selves and the inability of the transcendental self's account for its relationship to the empirical self.

As Faruque explains in the same chapter, the Kantian discussion of “ich denke” (*I think*) comes from the same paradoxical situation of the self. For Kant (d. 1804), “I think” must accompany all representations but it is not given through senses. The condition of possibility of experience presupposes such a self-conscious subject who acts in this way. The author’s conclusion drawn from the discussion he carries out around Mulla Sadra (d. 1050/1641) is that non-reflective self-knowledge is necessary for all mental activities. In a similar vein to the transcendental problem, Faruque claims that this knowledge, which does not fall within the dichotomy of subject-object, can be affirmed by self-presence because this is an inevitable condition for any notion of subjectivity (78). Underlying this claim is the assumption that the self is always identical to its presence, and this presence is given to the self in an unmediated manner. This non-reflective knowledge and self-presence, which is empirically non-given but can be seen as the condition of possibility of all knowledge, are in a sense a foundational supposition for the author’s idea of the self and a postulate that grounds his subsequent arguments. Although Faruque attempts to support this premise in reference to different pre-modern philosophers, especially philosophers from Islamic thought, the problem of self-identity concerning the presence of the self lies at the heart of modern philosophy.

Moreover, Faruque attempts to present in this chapter the claim that “self-knowledge at its most foundational level is characterized by an absolute immediacy that transcends all objectifiable experiences” (92) by reference to Heidegger’s (d. 1976) *Dasein*. It can be said that Heidegger’s *Dasein* cannot be a proper choice to ground non-reflective self-knowledge for the self. As widely discussed in the secondary literature on Heidegger, *Dasein* aims to overcome the very notion of subjectivity underpinning modern philosophy in order to offer an alternative notion of defining the human. For this reason, Heidegger had shifted the axis of the discussion from epistemology to ontology by claiming that *Dasein* is not consciousness or the Cartesian ego. Whether Heidegger achieved what he had set out to accomplish is another matter of discussion, albeit his project inspired many thinkers from both continental and analytical philosophy in the 20th century. For example, the question of “who comes after the subject?” which Jean-Luc Nancy (d. 2021) directed at many philosophers in France in the 1980s takes its orientation from *Dasein*.² Faruque’s attempt to provide an example of non-reflective, absolute, unmediated self-knowledge by citing a single passage from Heidegger’s *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (*The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*) out of

2 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Introduction”, *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor ve Jean-Luc Nancy (New York & Londra: Routledge, 1991), 1-8.

context is a way of attributing Cartesian problems to Heidegger which he strictly strives to refrain from his account on human being. In *Grundprobleme*, which is basically in the form of lecture notes, Heidegger sometimes approaches modern philosophy and Husserl's (d. 1938) phenomenology with Husserl's own concepts (such as with the difference between Heidegger's and Husserl's "form of reduction" and, something Heidegger never mentions this term in his works) to make some topics more comprehensible for the audience. At this juncture, the question remains whether the author is trying to shift his problem onto Heidegger with this single brief quotation from this discussion on *Dasein*, as well as to what extent the epistemology-based conception of the self, the notion that *Dasein* attempts to overcome in general, can be constructed using *Dasein*.

The third chapter of the book "Self-Knowledge and the Levels of Consciousness" aims at disproving Hume's (d. 1776) thesis that "the self is but a bundle of perceptions without which it is a non-entity." In order to do this, Faruque undertakes to elucidate the ways in which non-reflective self-knowledge relates to the "I" and other modes of consciousness. Having criticized Hume's views, Faruque goes on to suggest that knowledge and existence of the self are one and the same by referring to Mulla Sadra (112) and then linking this idea to Sartre's (d. 1980) discussions of consciousness. He comes up with a tripartite (non-reflective, reflective, and intersubjective) structure of consciousness and concludes that this structure is identical to the self. As a result of this discussion, he argues that any phenomenal state that the self ascribes to itself already presumes an underlying (the subject in the literal sense) consciousness and therefore no phenomenal state of mind can attest to the existence of the self as an I (120). The point the author wants to make on the basis of the underlying non-reflective self-knowledge is to show that the self cannot be conditioned merely by sociocultural and bio-physiological phenomena. At the end of the chapter, he tries to explain this idea by examining Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938).

The fourth chapter investigates the question of the body in detail, and it plays a central role in the book. By thoroughly analyzing the issues of contemporary neuroscience, Faruque argues that an objectified conception of consciousness presents a reductionist view. Theoretical attempts to define what consciousness is in terms of psycho-physical states do not talk about the consciousness itself, but rather its manifestations on the physical plane. Faruque's portrayal of the notion of consciousness in contemporary neuroscience discussions makes the basic hypotheses of this approach comprehensible even to readers unfamiliar with the terminology. His criticism of the bio-physiological views of consciousness shows

that these approaches exhibit a reductionist attitude toward consciousness. Furthermore, Faruque attempts to understand the neuronal activities through “pneuma” and “pneuma psychikon” and he expands his approach by including Galenic medicine (d. ca. 216) into the discussion. His account of the embodiment of the non-physiological self and the relation of the bodily aspect of the human being to consciousness is based on an examination of Shah Wali Allāh’s views regarding *latāif*. This chapter makes the book probably one of the most significant and original takes on the discussion of the body, neurons and subjectivity. Such a broad “translation” of the Galenic understanding of the body and soul into contemporary debates is a seminal example for understanding classical thought as well as in terms of bringing classical thought into a dialogue with contemporary issues. The author points out that the double structure of the self does not ignore the bio-physiological side, but that understanding the self only through this aspect constitutes a reductionist attitude and it fails to even overcome the problems within neuroscience itself (such as moving from a physical process to a non-physical understanding of consciousness, which electro-chemical nerve impulses fail to explain).

The fifth chapter has the same title with the book: “Sculpting the Self.” The word “sculpting” here means to shape a material thing through certain techniques and comes from the Latin *sculperre*, which means “to carve.” Faruque uses this term to focus on the physical, material aspect of how the self is shaped. His idea of human perfection follows Pierre Hadot’s (d. 2010) famous notion of “philosophy as a way of life.” Setting out the central idea of the book, the chapter clarifies the idea of achieving human perfection by cultivating the self. The discussions Faruque carried out in the previous sections somewhat prepare the ground for the subject matter of this chapter, because the attainment of human perfection is dependent on the conceptualization of self and the self-knowledge that precedes it. When one considers the distinction Faruque makes at the beginning of the book between the normative and the descriptive in order to show the multidimensional structure of the self, he holds that the realization of human perfection is derived from the normative side, not the descriptive. While this viewpoint in a way combines the two sides of the self, it also establishes the hierarchy between the normative and descriptive selves. Moreover, in this chapter, Faruque comes to take into account spirituality in the flourishing of human being. Drawing on Nietzsche’s (d. 1900) comparison of Schopenhauer (d. 1860) and Kant, the author counterposes the idea of “philosophy as a way of life” against the understanding of philosophy as an academic discipline and thus argues that the normative side of the self has a spiritual purpose. By stating that the contemporary philosophical debates on the

self do not take the non-reflective self-knowledge into account, Faruque claims that self-knowledge in the virtue of its normative aspect serves this kind of aim. Thus, the author discusses the mystic notion formed around the idea of “Whoever knows his self, knows his Lord” in Islamic thought through various thinkers, especially Mulla Sadra. The author also projects the traces of this idea as far back as Socrates, the Stoics, and Chinese thought.

Leaving aside other aspects of Faruque’s meticulous, rich and nuanced discussion on human flourishing and spirituality, I now turn to the hierarchy he formed between the descriptive and normative “selves” that I pointed out above. Although Faruque states that human perfection comes from the non-reflective self-knowledge belonging to the normative side, this perfection always concerns the empirical aspect, which is referred to as the descriptive side. Faruque expresses that point as follows: “Such a process of sculpting the self can transform the everyday self and reorient it toward a journey of self-perfection, flourishing, and inner peace.” (255) The question or maybe the paradox concerning the relationship between the empirical and transcendental self still remains here. One cannot avoid asking how the transcendental or normative self, which cannot be experienced, shapes the empirical or descriptive self that is incapable of determining the everyday, physical and material side of the human being. How can the founding role of self-knowledge be described in this relationship? In other words, after having strictly separated the empirical from the transcendental and establishing a difference in an ontological level between them, it does not seem to be a proper gesture to think of the transcendental self effecting the domain of the empirical, and also to set a dominating role to the transcendental one over it. For example, what would the phenomena of birth and death, which occur in a way that concerns the everyday empirical self, mean in such a structure? Where would the birth as an event that enables the self to be in this world, to know itself, and to attain non-reflective self-knowledge, as the author puts it, fit within this framework? Moreover, the issue of the self, which the author treats and reflects upon from the start as an epistemological matter, takes on an ontological dimension in his account in this chapter. One then gets here a kind of ontology of the self that is based on epistemology. In fact, although the approach of the book aims to emancipate its subject matter from Cartesian dualism, it can contrarily be seen as an attempt of reading and understanding the self from the view of Cartesian thought.

The conclusion (*consummation* as the author puts it) chapter of the book underscores that selfhood is both perceptible and accessible in light of the normative

self. This means that the descriptive dimension of the self “can be expressed in terms of consciousness and first-person subjectivity, while its normative dimension can be expressed in terms of an anthropocentric ideal that underscores self-knowledge, self-cultivation, and self-perfection” (256-257). Here Faruque comes to claim that his version of anthropocentrism lies not in individualism, but in the fact that the self, which flourishes through spiritual practices, discovers its reality and establishes its identity in the non-I. The self’s unification with those outside in its own identity, which the author talks about with reference to mystical traditions, is not going beyond humanity; rather as the author puts it: “The goal of sculpting the self through philosophy and spiritual practices is not divinity, but full humanity.” (260) Here Faruque briefly refers to the issue of sociality. I think that this inquiry can only offer a limited space for a kind of political thought through the mystical conception of the self that opens itself to the outer world by experiencing itself in the non-I. Although the book does not have any aim or discussion about political philosophy, thinking of the coexistence of self with other selves in the everyday domain in terms of the self’s identification with those outside of it does not constitute a sufficient basis for the matter of sociality or political philosophy. As the author emphasizes in this chapter, though the undertaking of the book does not lead to the idea of individualism, the fact that it conceives of the self at the individual level rather than collective or political way, and moreover understands the sociocultural everyday self through the determination of the normative self may not provide a favourable space for the discussion of political thought.

After the brief description of the chapters, I now want to touch on a few more general remarks related to the book. One can say that the assumed neutral and ahistorical position of the concept of the self as mentioned at the beginning actually perpetuates certain problems stemming from Cartesian thought and its continuing traces in modern philosophy. Faruque’s concept of the self relies on an epistemology-centered approach and then it eventually arrives at an ontological level by establishing a hierarchy between the transcendental and the empirical selves under the names of descriptive and normative. In this respect, the attempt to understand the human being under the notion of the self and the ahistorical status that such a philosophical discourse assigns to itself in a way ignores the historicity of the concept and problems born from its history. Certain presupposition coming from the ahistorical status of this concept reflects how the book treats its subject matter. Another issue is how the book delimits the delimitation of the sociocultural dimension, that takes part in the construction and formation of the self, only to the descriptive domain through the hierarchy that is established between the

empirical and transcendental. Even though non-reflective self-knowledge occurs in the normative dimension, the fact that it easily determines and transforms the everyday self leads us to think that non-reflective self-knowledge is not exempt from sociocultural determinations and conditions. In short, it means that the book is apt to ignore the historical formation of the self, that is to say how the normative self is constituted in time and society.

Finally, I would like to discuss the term “Islam” which is used in the subtitle and appears in the main body of the book. The author uses the phrase “in Islam” with regard to its common meaning when he describes his own project in the sense of the exploration of self and selfhood in particular. Although “in Islam” connotes the meanings of “in Islamic Thought”, “in Islamic Philosophy”, “in Islamized philosophy” and so on for the American audience, this wording arguably has some presuppositions. Reduction of not just Islam but religion in general, with its countless dimensions, only to a thought or philosophy mirrors a problematic approach. Moreover, it signifies a particularization of any cultural and philosophical tradition in comparison to European philosophy with its “universal” character. So such an expression might be seen as an effort to present particular, provincial philosophies and in this case even, the crumbs of thought within a religion. Needless to say, this attitude is (or was) very common in many orientalist studies, however, it is difficult to understand the reason for such a use in a philosophical work that aims to overcome Eurocentrism.

Reflecting Faruque’s detailed and subtle discussions within the context of a review article is certainly impossible. The critical questions that I have raised about the author’s views have been possible due to the spaces opened up by the qualified analyses in the book. If I question Faruque’s arguments, my criticism is carried by admiration of his scholarship and by the conviction that this book has something to offer to discussions on the self. Faruque’s original piece sets an example not only for studies on the self but also for cross-cultural philosophy studies. Bringing philosophers from different pre-modern intellectual traditions together on a specific issue, engaging them in contemporary debates and trying to come up with solutions to current problems is praiseworthy, to say the least. It also requires expertise from different fields. In every sense, Faruque’s multifaceted work is an inspiring contribution to contemporary studies in philosophy.