

Jari Kaukua. *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. x+257 pages. ISBN: 978-1-107-08879-5.

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According to the portrayal in Jari Kaukua's doctoral dissertation "*Avicenna on Subjectivity: A Philosophical Study*," completed at Finland's Jyväskylä University in 2007, Avicenna's theory of subjectivity comprises two components, namely, *intentional* perception and self-awareness. In his thesis, Kaukua examines these components. In this new work, which can be called a synthesis of his post-doctoral studies, he focuses on self-awareness with regard to Aristotle, Avicenna, Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Suhrawardī, and Mulla Sadrā by pointing out the differences in their approaches.

Kaukua is inclined to examine this phenomenon not only as a historical problem, but also with respect to disputes in contemporary philosophy. Therefore, discussions regarding the self, selfhood, self-consciousness, self-awareness, and individual identity constitute important areas of problemata for comparisons between modernism and post-modernism. The author is aware that referring to the classical and post-classical problem of self or self-awareness can lead to criticisms rising out of the ambiguities in the modern concept of *self* and differences as regards contemporary perspectives on self-awareness. Nevertheless, he opines that an inquiry into the existence of self-awareness in classical thinkers is significant because although their concepts of self and self-awareness are not entirely analogous to those of modern philosophers, one cannot understand their underlying concerns and interests without any inspiration from modern concepts.

This situation seems relevant to the differentiation of the historicity or ahistoricity, so to speak, of *self-awareness of self-awareness theories*. The problem of *self-awareness* calls into question the relations of the self with atemporal and aspatial constant conditions, along with changes that could result from alterations in temporal and spatial conditions. The self, or its awareness of itself, is in a state that cannot be reduced to either the constant and unchanging or to the variable. Regarding these

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theories' historicity or ahistoricity, the issue of whether or not individuals from different times can speak about self-awareness based on a common ground comes into question. The author maintains that self-awareness theories in classical and post-classical Islamic thought are key to conversing about modern self and self-awareness problems.

Other issues in this regard are whether *self-awareness* shares the same ahistoricity and general features with *self-awareness theories*; the reducibility of the self and self-awareness to that which is ahistorical, general, and natural; and whether variable and subjective conditions (e.g., culture, environment, time, and place) are relevant or not. As the author pointed out in his earlier work on subjectivity, the dilemma is between a person finding herself naturally thinking of herself whenever she starts thinking about *self-awareness* and the potential ahistorical explanation offered by *self-awareness theories*.

Another aspect of the book's analytical method of self-awareness should be mentioned: He bases his inquiry on the distinction between metaphysics and phenomenology. According to Peter F. Strawson, metaphysics is the study of how things are, could be, or ought to be, whereas phenomenology is the study of the particular part of how things are, could be, or ought to be, as well as the character of experience with all of its sensory and intellectual content. Together with this assumption, the author is inclined to examine self-awareness as an experience more than anything else. At this point, Kaukua states that emphasizing an unseen self, subsequent to the apparent activities of a person, which hints at metaphysical reductionism, does not imply the denial of a self or self-awareness at the phenomenological level. He also asserts that neither approach excludes the other.

The author approaches the subject within the aforementioned framework. In chapters 1 through 4, he tries to determine the content regarding this problem in Avicenna, who did not deal with the matter in a particular chapter, and to construct a phenomenal and empirical self-awareness theory that could be deduced from him. In chapters 5 through 8, Kaukua examines how Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī, Suhrawardī, and Mulla Sadrā reacted to the content they inherited from Avicenna and how they treated the issue within their own systems.

Although the author relates Avicenna to concepts discussed in philosophical traditions prior to him, such as self-cognition/self-intellection, he states that this does not refute the fact that self-awareness emerged for the first time within Islamic philosophy in Avicenna's writings. This is because, according to him, self-cognition/self-intellection in the pre-Avicennan philosophical tradition cannot explain the development of self-awareness, which is the topic of this work. The type of self-awareness, adopted by Aristotle, is what Avicenna calls *shu'ūr bi al-shu'ūr* and what Kaukua calls *reflexive self-awareness*.

Avicenna diverges from Aristotle by adopting a more primitive type of self-awareness, one that could serve as the foundation of such a reflexive self-awareness. Thus according to the author, the problem of self-awareness, especially at the primitive level, is a new interest of Avicenna, who was a follower of the Peripatetic system. However, Avicenna also studied the Neoplatonic transformation in the philosophical schools of Late Antiquity to invent entirely new philosophical concepts and debates to examine his own *aporiai*. The author opines that although the existence of people and texts dealing with similar subjects prior to Avicenna cannot be denied, Avicenna added the problem to a philosophical tradition in a systematic manner.

According to Kaukua, Avicenna intends to use the flying man experiment as a sign for his own substantial dualism. But according to this interpretation, this “concludes that he takes self-awareness to be a phenomenal feature of experience, not a mere transcendental or logical condition. Thus, in order to function as a pointer, self-awareness has to be accessible to each and every one of Avicenna’s interlocutors as an uncontroversial constituent of experience” (pp. 36-37). At this point, he states that Avicenna abstains from using matter to explain the individualization of immaterial substances and thus differs from the Aristotelian view, which explains individualization through matter, especially in the *Ta’liqāt*, where Avicenna considers self-awareness to be an important factor in the individualization of the human soul.

Likewise, according to him Avicenna’s initiation of the discussion on self-awareness within the context of God’s incorporeality shows us that he approaches the subject from the perspective of the traditional theory of Intellects. However, although his appeals to human self-awareness through tradition to explain our individual existence and God’s knowledge of Itself, he differs from the traditional understanding by emphasizing the directness of self-awareness. The author attributes this to the inapplicability of sensory, imaginative, estimative, and intellectual types of perception when it comes to explaining fundamental self-awareness.

If there is no mediator between a subject and its awareness of itself, as Avicenna states in his flying man experiment, then self-awareness must be thought of as something different from both sensory, imaginative, estimative perceptions and intellectual perceptions. The reason for this, which can be clearly seen in a question by Bahmanyār in the *Mubāhasāt* and upon which the author focuses, is because both estimative perception and intellectual perception pose a problem as foundations of self-awareness. Estimation (*wahm*) necessarily includes sensory content and thus a body, whereas foundational self-awareness, as expressed in Avicenna’s flying man experiment, is conceived of as being independent of sensory or bodily instruments.

Similarly, intellectual perception includes universals. But since every individual is unique in perceiving herself, intellectual perception cannot be the faculty that realizes foundational self-awareness. At this point, we see that although the author does not have a problem with the Avicennan idea that the essence of human beings is an incorporeal substance and intellect, he maintains that the foundational perception of this incorporeal substance and of the intellect of itself cannot be achieved through normal intellectual perception.

The author contends that a self-awareness theory constructed with the material in Avicenna has two important consequences that lay the foundation for subsequent thinkers' discussions and critiques. The first one is that "Avicennian self-awareness is static and allows no room for development" (p. 103), because self-awareness is congenital and cannot be related to secondary perfections of the human soul. Although a human being is obligated to develop her character, ultimately what she is in reality will not change and she will not be more or less than her own self. The second one appears when "the phenomenon of primitive self-awareness is a similarly static entity, that is, an Aristotelian substance" (p. 103). Avicennian *entities* as substances are, in this case, presented as things coming into being but not subject to change and development.

However, the author states that the perception of our own individuality does not convey the whole picture when it comes to determining the human essence as stripped of all bodily and sensory qualities and as non-definable in terms of anything more foundational. This is because although he has not analyzed the subject in detail, Avicenna's emphasis on *self-intellection* and *human individualization* shows that he is aware of the possible secondary (accidental) manifestations of individuality occurring in the tangible human being. Thus the unanalyzable *self* upon which he focuses with the flying man argument is an abstraction and seems to be the fundamental condition that human beings primarily possess.

Kaukua considers post-Avicennan controversies on self-awareness as a keen objection to the consequences summarized above. However, as far as he is concerned, post-Avicennan novel comments have developed within a framework that objects to self-awareness models with reflective foundations and assertions of self-awareness at a primal level. The authors' statement on the later explication of Avicenna's self-awareness theory can be applied to nearly every theory. Accordingly, "Avicenna's insights are neither a model to be slavishly followed nor an antiquated edifice to be simply discarded in favor of supposedly higher mystical ways to reach the Truth, but rather potent material for revision and reapplication" (p. 8) in the post-classical era.

In the post-Avicennan period, Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's critiques of Avicenna's self-awareness theory, as expressed between the lines

along with Suhrawardi's and Mulla Sadra's new self-awareness comments, stand out. Kaukua states that "Abu al-Barakāt questions the great Peripatetic's claim that the connection between the incorporeal substance of dualist psychology and the I one is constantly aware of is self-evident" (p. 115). According to al-Baghdādi, "no man in the street will feel compelled to commit either to the hylomorphic theory of the soul as the enmattered form of the body or to the dualist notion of the self as an independent entity that acts by means of the body but does not exist in it" (p. 115). What is important for al-Baghdādi is that the "nafs signal the speaker's awareness of his individual existence, that is, of the fact that he exists (his *anniya* or thatness) as an individual (his *huwiya*, itness or heness)" (p. 115). The author maintains that al-Baghdādi's critique points out that Avicenna's appeal to the self-awareness phenomenon is not persuasive in the context of the self's metaphysical position or the problem of its category.

Kaukua focuses on al-Rāzī's critique, in which he discusses the incorporeality of the human soul. Basically, al-Rāzī criticizes the relationship between self-awareness and the substantiality of the soul and claims that "the substance dualist view requires arguments that go beyond the phenomenon of self-awareness" (p. 116) because, as he opines, substantiality is not clearly expressed within self-awareness. The author sees this as the main point of difference between al-Baghdādi and al-Rāzī. In this sense, the former has taken the latter's critique one step further, "for instead of merely questioning the demonstrative force of self-awareness in the question of substantiality, al-Rāzī expressly denies any necessary connection between self-awareness and substantiality" (pp. 117-18).

From the author's viewpoint, the importance of these two critiques stem from setting the stage for Suhrawardi's understanding of self-awareness. According to Kaukua, Suhrawardi has also departed from Avicenna's metaphysical exposition of self-awareness as the existence of the human substance by choosing to explain self-awareness in phenomenological instead of more foundational metaphysical terms. Furthermore, in his interpretation self-awareness goes beyond being a psychological argument and is placed within the central context of his Illuminationist theory of knowledge and existence, in which "knowledge as presence" and "being as appearance" (p. 124) are highly significant. Consequently, self-awareness as a subject of psychological interest in Avicenna has become a foundation through which other things are explained and has formed the backbone of epistemology and metaphysics with Suhrawardi.

Mulla Sadra seems to have shifted the problem to a context related to the real metaphysical explanation of the human soul as the being behind self-awareness. Sadra's criticisms of his predecessors focuses on their conception of the self as a

static being, for “instead of a stable substance ... Sadra preferred to conceive of the self as a substance in motion that is thoroughly determined by the variation of its attributes” (p. 5). In this case, the self is freed from its narrow and static meaning and becomes a being involved with the manifestations of experience. Hence, the self is subject to change and development. Additionally, the author seems to have observed potential relations between Sadra’s interpretations of self-awareness and contemporary discussions on the self. To Kaukua, he represents the middle ground between those who reject self-awareness and those who defend it, because Sadra neither denies the self as a principle underlying our experience nor the self as being in a state of change and motion.

After his analyses of each thinker’s self-awareness interpretations, Kaukua concludes that although there are many views on the formation of self-awareness, the self, as proposed by classical Islamic philosophers, must be accepted as a postulate. Thus, the self stands out as an entity independent of both an individual’s own choice and effort as well as social construct, historical, and sociological conditions. This means that these philosophers did not take into consideration the modern self, which is constructible and shapeable due to the effects of various conditions. However, the author finds the remark that this situation, which was particular to Islamic philosophy and caused by Islam or the decline of science and philosophy in post-classical Islamic intellectual life, is no more than an easy solution. According to him, the liberal individualist view that focuses on the constructing the self has not been tested to see whether it has a sound theoretic foundation or whether the constructability of the self is an illusion.

Kaukua is aware that his portrayal of both Avicenna’s self-awareness theory, which can be understood only by reading between the lines, and the self-awareness discussions found in post-Avicennan philosophy and conducted at the phenomenological level, is an act of interpretation and reconstruction. In this respect, the Avicennan self-awareness theory reconstructed and analyzed in the book with respect to such modern concepts as experience and phenomenology has, at first glance, certain problematic points with regard to the standard Avicennian interpretation. Indeed the author argues that even Avicennian and later self-awareness theories founded upon this specific reconstruction, as well as focused phenomenology and experience, require correction and amendment. But in any case, this work “that marries philosophical suspense to historical truth” (p. 11) focuses on the issue of self-awareness and presents its manifestation during a particular era of the history of philosophy. It therefore constitutes an important example with regard to the possibility of talking about *self*, *selfhood*, and *self-awareness* within the history of philosophy as a contemporary issue.