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Cover

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḡawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *grec* 1853, f. 186v

Jari Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy. Avicenna and Beyond*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2015, VII-X + 257 pp.

This interesting volume collects Jari Kaukua's research conducted during his doctoral and postdoctoral studies and explores "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)" (p. 3). Kaukua does not intend to apply any of the modern Western notions of "self" and "self-awareness" to the examined period, but makes a distinction between a "phenomenological" level of discourse, regardless of the existence and the nature of its object, and a "metaphysical" level that takes these implications into account. This, in turn, allows him to distinguish between the description of self expounded by Avicenna and shared by later Arabic thinkers and their re-thinking of its significance in order to establish the nature of the self. On this basis, Kaukua proceeds to analyse the development of the concept of the self and self-awareness in the thought of Avicenna's twelfth-century critics, Abū l-Barakāt al-Baġdādī, Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and Suhrawardī, down to Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophical revision in the seventeenth century. He states clearly that his account does not mean to provide an "archaeology" of the Latin medieval and modern understanding of the self, but focuses on post-classical Islamic period as an autonomous field of philosophical research.

The first chapter presents the most important pre-Avicennian philosophical concepts of the self and self-cognition. Kaukua's point of departure are Aristotle's doctrine of "perception of perception" in *De Anima* III 2 – according to which one and the same subject perceives something and perceives itself to perceive that something –, and the Aristotelian doctrine of intellection as identity of the intellect in act and its intelligible object in *De Anima* III 4, *Metaphysics* XII 7 and XII 9. This doctrine was available to Arabic readers not only through the Arabic translation of Aristotle's corpus, but also in the pseudo-Aristotle's *Book on the Pure Good* (see proposition 12), the Latin *Liber de Causis*. In all these passages on intellection "we are dealing with an eternally actual intellect that is capable of bringing the world about through its overabundant act of self-intellection, that is, the Neoplatonic intellectual *hypostasis* which, when combined with the thought thinking itself that functions as the goal for all existing things in *Metaphysics* XII, acts as both the source and the point of return of the entire cosmos, including individual human intellects. Consequently, the sort of self cognition these texts describe cannot be identified with any ordinary type of human self-awareness" (p. 17). In the pseudo-*Theology of Aristotle* (from Plotinus's *Enneads* IV-V-VI) the human self seems to be described in a broader sense, but even though the inclination towards the self is in contrast with a mundane orientation and there are many references to entering oneself (*daḥala fī dātī*), and to returning to oneself (*raġa'a fī dātī*), it remains what results from the acquired knowledge of the true self: something that human beings try to reach, but that initially they do not have. This approach is very clear in al-Fārābī's *On Intellect*, where "intellection becomes self-intellection only when the intellect is fully developed and can therefore dispense with any reference to external material objects" (p. 19). According to Kaukua, all these pre-Avicennian Arabic concepts of the self do not suffice to explain the novelty of Avicenna's concept of self-awareness which is introduced by a general framework of Avicenna's psychology, and in particular of its key doctrines: the Avicennian substance dualism (the individual human essence is an immaterial substance which performs the functions of a form animating the body for its own ends; the body is the necessary condition for the coming to be of the soul as an individual); the doctrine of the five internal senses, and that of abstraction.

Chapter two briefly recalls Avicenna's definition of the soul as the first perfection (*kamāl*) of the genus "living body"; then it discusses Avicenna's famous thought experiment of the flying man, which

has been strongly debated by scholars. According to Kaukua, it suggests the phenomenological basis of self-awareness, conceived by Avicenna as something we can recognize in our everyday experience. Self-awareness, in turn, provides a pointer towards the truth of psychological substance dualism. Kaukua insists on the character of the reminder of the thought experiment of the flying man, not of the demonstration. “It is used to argue for the initial plausibility of the substance dualistic view that there might be something to human being apart from embodied existence. In other words, it is intended to convince the reader who fails to see that the thing which is a soul for the human body can be something in itself, independent of its relation to the body, and it does this by showing that there is a feature in our experience that gives a clue of what the incorporeal existence could possibly consist in” (p. 34). In other words, the flying man points to affirm the existence of one’s essence as separated from the body: in Kaukua’s reading self-awareness must be identified precisely with the awareness of this essence, conceived as unchanging in the flux of the various accidents appended to it.

Chapter three explores Avicenna’s possible reasons for introducing his new concept of self-awareness. He states that not only intellection, but more generally the soul entails incorporeality and hence indivisibility, despite the multiplicity of activities and organs involved in its function as the form of a body. In fact, departing from Aristotle’s hylomorphic psychology, Avicenna solves the problem of the individuation of human beings by stating that the soul’s individuality requires a relationship to a body proper to it and it alone (a “configuration”, i.e. a tendency to be concerned with a particular body). This, however, raises the issue of how the soul can still exist and be an individual after the death and the corruption of the body. In this regard, “Avicenna suggests that the relation to the body has to be understood as a property of the soul, as a temporally qualifiable ‘being-related-to-the-body’ that can be the soul’s property whether or not any body actually exists” (p. 45). Avicenna mentions five different individuating properties of the soul (*Šifā’, Fī l-nafs* V 3): (i) a set of ‘rational actions and passions’, which constitute immaterial character traits corresponding to the humoral temperament of the soul’s erstwhile body; (ii) an intellect developed to an extent peculiar to each human soul; (iii) the awareness each person has of her- or himself; (iv) particular character traits acquired through habituation; (v) the possibility of other individuating properties that we may not be aware of (the list is compared with similar properties mentioned in *Šifā’, Madḥal* I 12). The problem seems thus not to be solved by Avicenna in a satisfying manner: the soul’s individuating properties are somewhat “accidental”, due to their provenance from the union of the soul to the body. The third property, however, unlike the others, may be independent from the body.

The role of self-awareness in the individuation of a human being is developed in the *Tā’līqāt* (160-161), a later compilation, in a context dealing with God’s intellectuality: self-awareness is innate, and does not involve the use of cognitive instruments; it is essential, necessary and concomitant to human being, it constitutes human existence. Self-awareness “is the mode in which individual immaterial human substances exist just as materiality is the mode in which individual human bodies exist” (p. 54). In Kaukua’s interpretation, then, Avicenna may have perceived self-awareness as the solution to the question of how a human being can be both an immaterial substance and an individual instantiation of the human species, and represents the highest form of unity that man can achieve, coming closer than human intellection to the self-intellection proper to God.

Chapter four presents Kaukua’s reconstruction of Avicenna’s concept of self-awareness. This concept is singled out by two conditions: continuity and the fact that it is experientially given (as in the case described by the “flying man”). The first condition marks the difference of Avicennian self-awareness from reflective awareness (explicit consideration of an ongoing act by the very subject of the act), less fundamental than the former. Avicenna employs the argument that infers the unity of the soul’s substance from the unity of the experience. In *Šifā’, Fī l-nafs* V 7, he states that

the unifying principle is not the body but “the thing that each of us sees as himself”, although the inference of a metaphysical subject from an experiential phenomenon may be fallacious. Moreover, two Avicennian arguments are explored in order to establish the concept of self-awareness more clearly: the first one attempts to demonstrate that self-awareness does not arise from the subject’s reflection upon himself, but is prior to it; the second is an argument from personal identity which proves the existence of the self by proving the endurance of a numerically one substance through the change of its attributes. Elsewhere (*Mubāḥaṭāt* III, 68) he provides another argument for continuity, relying on the distinction between self-awareness and memory: “The idea is that the self is constantly present to itself, regardless of whether anything else is present to it, or whether it ever turns to reflect on this presence” (p. 88). Kaukua then examines Avicenna’s concept of self-reflection and of how the intellect can grasp an individual under a universal description only with reference to an individual meaning. On the whole, Avicenna’s self-awareness is more fundamental, since it emerges in this study as “an inherent feature of all human experience from the highest echelons of intellection down to the lowest strata of sense-perception” (p. 102).

Chapter five moves to Avicenna’s heritage in the thought of his twelfth-century successors. Kaukua first presents an overview of Avicennian material in al-Suhrawardī’s writings, such as the “Peripatetic” *Talwīḥāt* and the “illuminationist” *Ḥikmat al-iṣrāq*, where the reader can find all the main arguments on self-awareness presented in Avicenna, but with a new emphasis on the thesis that “the different mode of givenness of ourselves allows us to conclude that our selves are not bodies” (p. 112). Then Kaukua goes on to show how the concept of self-awareness as a substance is questioned by two critics of Avicenna, Abū l-Barakāt al-Baḡdādī (*Kitāb al-mu’tabar, al-‘ilm al-ṭabī‘ī* VI 1) and Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (*Mabāḥiṭ* II 2.2.1.3): awareness of the self does not allow one to conclude that the nature of the self is that of a substance, i.e. of the soul. This criticism was picked up by Suhrawardī, who refuses the conclusion that self-awareness can be referred to any entity as its property or a mode of existence.

Chapter six presents Suhrawardī’s separation of Avicenna’s phenomenology of the self from his metaphysics. Starting from the problem of how the divine knowledge both of universals and particulars is to be conceived, Suhrawardī expounds an epistemological model which is able to account for the subject’s knowledge of itself and of other objects, be they universal or particular. “Avicenna’s theory of knowledge, because it is based on the inherence of cognitive forms in the knowing subject and makes the apprehension of particular objects conditional to a relation to matter, fails on both accounts as an explanation of God’s knowledge” (p. 127). In fact, Suhrawardī points out that, since self-awareness is prior to reflection, it is a type of knowledge that the Avicennian inherence theory cannot explain. He subsequently rethinks this model by introducing the notion of knowledge as “presence” (*ḥudūr*) of what is known to the knower (*Talwīḥāt* III.3.1). The use of the notion of presence in a similar context can also be found in the writings of Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, although the identification of knowledge and presence is typical of Suhrawardī. The metaphysical counterpart for this substitution is that Suhrawardī replaces the Peripatetic notion of substance and of definition, both unsuitable in his eyes, with those of “appearance” (*zuhūr*, a sort of stream of existence) and of “light” (*nūr*, that is, the very fact of appearing): these two are the fundamental elements of his illuminationist theory, since they do not need definition. Kaukua explains that, according to this theory, the appearance to another presupposes appearance to itself and that “the pure lights or appearances behind the lights or appearances for another are Platonic forms, which account for the identity and stability of concrete appearances by being their immediate causes in a downward emanative process of illumination” (p. 152). The “self” is reconsidered in these new terms as pure existence and a separate light, capable of a dynamic progression in the degree of its self-awareness.

Chapters seven and eight consider Mullā Ṣadrā's concept of self-awareness. Mullā Ṣadrā (1571/2-1635/6) has developed his own metaphysical thought on the basis of Avicenna, Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arabī. As shown in chapter seven, in his *al-Ḥikma al-muta'aliya fī al-asfār al-arba'a* Mullā Ṣadrā employs the argument of the flying man, recast in the form of the experiment of the "flying animal": it differs from Avicenna because of its systematic role (it is now considered a proper "proof") and its broader scope to prove the existence not only of the intellectual, but also the sub-intellectual mode of mental existence. Mullā Ṣadrā's basic concept of self-awareness is nonetheless consistent with the Avicennian model, as shown by the reprise of its various arguments on the topic.

Mullā Ṣadrā's most famous theory is that of the change in the category of substance, which entails the possibility of an evolution in human self-awareness and of including in the subject's self-awareness the individualizing properties inherited from the conjunction with the body. By arguing so, Ṣadrā provides an answer to Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's criticism against Avicenna on the problem of the separability of self-awareness from other constituents of the human experience. He identifies self-awareness neither with substantiality nor with pure existence, but with a particular mode of existence, thus developing a middle stance between the two options.

Chapter eight proceeds to show that Mullā Ṣadrā's concept of mental existence is "thoroughly detached from matter. Even though its objects may have a spatial structure and location and in this sense be analogous to material things, their spatiality is not material but experiential, a matter of either imagination or perception" (pp. 195-6). The soul implied in Mullā Ṣadrā's idea of mental existence is also inseparable from its acts, thus departing from Avicenna's theory and denying the validity of the "flying man", because it isolates the soul from its acts. Moreover, the soul performs its acts both necessarily (i.e. naturally) and voluntarily (because of the lack of an external agent that forces it to do so).

Mullā Ṣadrā also discusses again the arguments on the unity of the soul, since the identity of the human self may be dissolved due to his theory of substantial change. In order to do this, he has recourse to Ibn 'Arabī's concept of "fixed essence" (*'ayn ṭābit*) as the foundation in God's mind of the identity of the existents. He also draws his solution from the pseudo-*Theology of Aristotle*: "The thrust of the material is that the identity in change is due to an atemporal, unchanging and unified principle governing the change" (p. 211). The change in substance is conceived as unified by considering pre-reflective self-awareness as the process of temporal continuity of its existence, a continuity that is necessarily lost in the act of self-reflection, since the latter can only focus on a single moment of the process: "the later self [...] is aware of itself as the present state of a developmental process, and thereby grasps the earlier phases as so many steps that have led it to the present" (p. 222). This new concept of selfhood, departing from the conception of its static identity, implies furthermore that the possibility of attaining "transparent" self-awareness is reduced.

Kaukua's conclusion summarizes the overview through the authors examined, pointing out that, notwithstanding the remarkable shift from Avicenna's conception of the soul as substance to Mullā Ṣadrā's dynamic selfhood, no solution similar to the one of Western modernity occurred, since the idea of self as a construction remains absent. However, he wishes that the concepts expounded throughout his book provide an interesting set of questions for reflection also within contemporary debate in the philosophy of the mind.

An Appendix on the Arabic terminology related to self-awareness (pp. 233-7), the Bibliography and an Index of names close this challenging volume which has the merit of drawing attention of the philosophical debate to the pre-modern, non-Western conception of self-awareness in post-classical Islamic philosophy.

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