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Università di Pisa

Piazza Torricelli 4 - 56126 Pisa

P. IVA 00286820501 · Codice Fiscale 80003670504

Tel. +39 050 2212056 · Fax +39 050 2212945

E-mail press@unipi.it · PEC cidic@pec.unipi.it

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Finding Yourself in Avicenna: The Flying Man Argument and its Plotinian Background

Daniel Regnier*

Abstract

Avicenna's "flying man argument" may have a direct source in Plotinus' thought as adapted in the ps.-*Theology of Aristotle*. Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Inṣāf* contains a commentary on passages of the ps.-*Theology* which are directly relevant to the flying man argument. These passages treat of awareness, simplicity of the soul and ethical practice. I examine these passages of the *Inṣāf* in parallel with the source passages in the ps.-*Theology* and in Plotinus' *Enneads*. With reference to the flying man argument as it appears in *Kitāb al-Isārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt* and to Avicenna's *Metaphysics* of the *Ṣifā'*, I argue that at least in certain contexts the flying man argument functions as a moment in a Neoplatonic ethical program.

In his book entitled *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy*, Jari Kaukua examines the Avicennian understanding of self-awareness giving, quite naturally, a central place to the so-called "flying man argument". In the first chapter of his study, in a section entitled 'Self-cognition in the ancient heritage' Kaukua writes,

To thus sum up this quick foray into pre-Avicennian Arabic concepts of self and self-cognition, we can say that all the texts we have brought up [including the Arabic Plotinus] hinge on the activity of either human or superhuman intellect. From an Avicennian point of view, they deal with something that presupposes, rather than explains, what should properly and in the most basic sense be called self-awareness. Although some of the features in the passages we have considered do arguably play a role in the emergence of Avicenna's novel concept of self-awareness, they do not suffice to explain that emergence, nor can they provide the basis for an exhaustive understanding of that concept. We should not draw exaggerated conclusions from the fact that these pre-Avicennian texts use some of the same linguistic means to describe intellectual self-relations as Avicenna does to characterize self-awareness, for both the reflexive terms denoting the self (*dāt* and *nafs* in particular) and the variety of cognitive terms applied to render the cognitive aspect of self-awareness would have been available in the relevant sense from nontechnical colloquial speech.¹

Kaukua is certainly right to assert that pre-Avicennian texts, "do not suffice to explain the emergence, nor can they provide the basis for an exhaustive understanding of that concept [i.e. self-awareness]". However, the claim that pre-Avicennian philosophical texts

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¹ J. Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2015, p. 22.

– including the ps.-*Theology of Aristotle* – “presuppose, rather than explain” self-awareness is not justified.² To be sure, Kaukua does point out that the texts of the Arabic Plotinus are often explicitly interested in introspection and something like self-awareness,³ but he dismisses the importance of these texts for Avicenna’s thought.⁴ Of course, the fact that in his excellent study, Kaukua is really concerned with Avicenna and the reception of certain aspects of his thought by Sohrawardi and Mulla Sadra is reason enough for him to bracket the background in Ancient Greek philosophy. Kaukua’s readiness to downplay the importance of Neoplatonic thought in the context of a study on self-awareness in Avicenna is not due to negligence on his part.⁵ Rather, it reveals a lacuna in research on Avicenna and more generally in research on philosophy of the medieval Islamic world.

The detailed work on philosophical psychology offered by Neoplatonic thinkers and the reception of that work by thinkers of the Islamic world has not received sufficient attention.⁶ Instead, the scholarship often reduces Neoplatonism in philosophy of the medieval Islamic

² Later Kaukua will explain that Avicenna understands self-awareness as “primitive or irreducible” (Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 100). If self-awareness is ultimately simply a fact – and even if it is revealed by the introspective work of the flying man – then perhaps it might be said that Avicenna, too, presupposes it.

³ Kaukua writes, “The fact that the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic precedents for the Arabic discussion of self-cognition were designed to describe the second perfection proper to us as intellectual entities is particularly evident in the corpus known as the Arabic Plotinus. These texts are replete with uses of the term *dhāt* that read naturally as references to various self-relations entailing some kind of self-cognition (or self-recognition). Regular mention is made of, for instance, entering oneself (*daḥala fī dhātī*), returning to oneself (*raja’a fī dhātī*), being inclined towards oneself (*māla ilā dhātīhi*), and beholding oneself (*naẓara ilā dhātīhi*)” (Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, p. 18).

⁴ Elsewhere Kaukua does seem to admit the importance of the Arabic Plotinus for Avicenna’s understanding of self. For example, he writes, “The implied notion of the self is part and parcel of the general emanationist framework of the Arabic Plotinus, and it amounts to the type of upward epistrophe specific to human beings, to a turning back towards one’s origin in an imitation of its cognitive perfection. Extrapolating somewhat, we might say that this is self-cognition insofar as it amounts to the acquisition of a correct conception of one’s proper place in the cosmos of God’s creation, and to actions in accordance with this conception. Knowing oneself means recognizing one’s true self, what one is or can be according to the highest potencies inherent in one’s essence – not a mundane creature with a variety of ephemeral concerns but an intellectual entity capable of gazing at the divine. Thus, although the Arabic Plotinus addresses the human self in considerably broader terms than the narrow focus at self-intellection in *Metaphysics XII* and *Kitāb al-īdāh fī al-khayr al-mahd* allows, it remains on the level of what results from acquired knowledge. The implied concept of self is something we must strive to reach, and hence something that we do not initially have” (Kaukua, *Self-Awareness*, pp. 18-19).

⁵ In fact, I suggest that a careful study of the Arabic Plotinus in the context of Avicenna’s flying man argument supports Kaukua’s principal conclusions concerning the nature and function of the flying man argument in Avicenna’s thought.

⁶ This may be the result of a polarization in the scholarship. Its center is the oldest of philosophical dichotomies: Plato vs. Aristotle. On the one hand, Henry Corbin presented Avicenna as a platonically inspired mystic (H. Corbin, *Avicenne et le Récit Visionnaire*, Verdier, Paris 1999). On the other, Dmitri Gutas asserted that Avicenna was an Aristotelian who explicitly reject both Platonism and mysticism (see D. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition. Introduction to Reading Avicenna’s Philosophical Works. Second, Revised and Enlarged Edition*, Brill, Leiden 2014 [originally published in 1988] and D. Gutas, “Intellect Without Limits: The Absence of Mysticism in Avicenna”, in M.C. Pacheco – J.F. Meirinhos (eds.), *Intellect et Imagination dans la Philosophie Médiévale*, Brepols, Turnhout 2002, pp. 351-72.). The trouble is that by late antiquity there was no such clear line between Platonism and Aristotelianism. This is reflected in Avicenna’s thought such that both Corbin and Gutas can find plenty of material for their very different portraits of Avicenna. More recent scholarship is overcoming the dichotomy by paying attention to Avicenna’s sources in a less partial manner. See for example, R. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context*, Cornell U.P., Cornell 2003 and M. Sebtī, *Avicenne: L’âme Humaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2000.

world to a “general emanationist framework”.⁷ This is all the more striking since the word “emanation” has been studiously avoided in scholarship on Greek Neoplatonism since Dörrie’s 1965 article, “Emanation: ein Unphilosophisches Wort im Spätantiken Denken”.⁸ When it does pay attention to the intricacies of Neoplatonic psychological arguments, scholarship on philosophy in the Islamic world tends to prioritize Intellect over Soul.⁹ Of course, Plotinus himself does ultimately assert that authentic self-knowledge occurs at the level of the Intellect in *Ennead* V 3[49] which figures prominently in the *Epistle on Divine Science*, a significant part of the Arabic Plotinus.¹⁰

However, much of the Arabic Plotinus, particularly the ps.-*Theology of Aristotle* is based on texts drawn from Plotinus’ works on psychology (so much so that the ps.-*Theology of Aristotle* might more accurately have been entitled the *Psychology of Plotinus*). Moreover, not only does the ps.-*Theology of Aristotle* adopt Plotinian psychology, it also transforms it in subtle ways. Because of the wide circulation of the ps.-*Theology of Aristotle* in the medieval Islamic world there can be no doubt that philosophers of the Islamic world were confronted with a great deal of Plotinian thought on the soul. I suggest that thinkers of the Islamic world were influenced by more than the broad outlines of the work. It is certainly worth taking a closer look at the background of Avicenna’s thought in the Arabic Plotinus, particularly since we have a relatively clear – if incomplete – record of his engagement with it.

I will in what follows make only tentative and modest claims. I entertain the possibility that the Arabic Plotinus may have played some role in Avicenna’s formulation of the flying man argument. I suggest that a closer examination of the role that the Arabic Plotinus may have played in relation to Avicenna’s flying man argument can help us to better understand its meaning, its place in the history of philosophy, and Avicenna’s intentions in formulating it.¹¹ However in this paper I will confine myself to a close reading of a few passages of the ps.-*Theology* which Avicenna himself commented.

⁷ Kaukua, *Self-Awareness* (above n. 1) p. 18. Compare Rahim Acar’s assertion that “With the exception of the general emanationist model, there does not appear to be a specifically Plotinian influence (through the Arabic paraphrases of Plotinus) on Avicenna with respect to the existence of the human soul” (R. Acar, “Intellect versus active Intellect: Plotinus and Avicenna”, in D. Reisman – A. al-Rahim (eds.), *Before and after Avicenna: proceedings of the First Conference of the Avicenna Study Group*, Brill, Leiden 2003, pp. 69-87, esp. p. 86).

⁸ H. Dörrie, “Emanation: ein Unphilosophisches Wort im Spätantiken Denken”, in K. Flasch (ed.), *Parusia. Studien zur Philosophie Platons und zur Problemgeschichte des Platonismus. Festgabe für Johannes Hirschberger*, Minerva, Frankfurt a.M. 1965 (reprinted in H. Dörrie, *Scripta Minora*, Fink, Munich 1976.) Dörrie is certainly onto something when he asserts that emanation is an unphilosophical word. The term suggests a kind religious ‘world view’ rather than a position arrived at by reason. To be sure, the Arabic word *ḥayd* figures prominently in many works by philosophers of the Islamic world. One might even argue that it was the thinkers of the Islamic world who really invented the concept of emanation.

⁹ There are good reasons for this, of course. Thinkers of the medieval Islamic world gave intellect an important place in both cosmology and human cognition. See H. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect. Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect*, Oxford U.P., New York – Oxford 1992 and S. Ogden, “Avicenna’s Emanated Abstraction”, *Philosophers Imprint* 20, no. 10 (April 2020), pp. 1-26.

¹⁰ *Risāla fī l-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, in C. D’Ancona, “The Neoplatonic Epistle on the Divine Science: The Text, Three Translations and an Index”, *Studia graeco-arabica* 10 (2020), pp. 111-96.

¹¹ I am not the first to do so. Fazlur Rahman points to the *Mimar* I of the ps.-*Theology of Aristotle* (which despite its name is in fact the most significant part of the Arabic Plotinus), in which is rendered in Arabic adaptation the famous opening of Plotinus IV 8[6] as a precedent for the flying man argument (F. Rahman, *Avicenna’s Psychology*, Oxford U. P., London, 1952). Miriam Sebt discusses important aspects of the Neoplatonic background of the flying man argument in her book *Avicenna: L’âme humaine* (above n. 6); see especially pp. 117-18.

My general method involves reading Avicenna's notes on the ps.-*Theology of Aristotle* (preserved as fragments of the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf*) in light of problems and themes raised by the flying man thought experiment and by scholars who have attempted to understand it. Although the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf* postdates Avicenna's earliest formulations of the flying man argument, the *Inṣāf* probably reveals at least in part a reading of the ps.-*Theology* dating to an earlier period in Avicenna's thought.¹²

The Flying Man in Recent Scholarship

The flying man argument appears in several places in Ibn Sina's oeuvre: twice in the *Šifā'*, in the *al-Iṣārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt* and in the *Ta'liqāt*.¹³ The following is a passage from the *Šifā'*:

[F]or the purposes of establishing the existence of the soul (*'iḥbāt wuḡūdi al-nafs*) belonging to us, here we have to provide a pointer (*tanbīa*) that serves [both] as alert (*taḍkīr*) and reminder (*iṣārā*) by hitting the mark with anyone who is at all capable of catching sight of the truth on his own, and also does not require straightening out his way of thinking, or hitting him over the head with it, or steering him away from sophisms. So we say that it has to be imagined (*yatawabbama*) as though one of us were created whole in an instant but his sight is veiled from directly observing the things of the external world. He is created as though floating in air or in a void but without the air supporting him in such a way that he would have to feel it, and the limbs of his body are stretched out and away from one another, so they do not come into contact or touch. Then he

¹² My conclusions differ from those of Adamson who suggests that Avicenna was not influenced by the ps.-*Theology*. See P. Adamson "Correcting Plotinus: Soul's Relationship to Body In Avicenna's Commentary on the *Theology of Aristotle*", *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement 83, Philosophy, Science and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic and Latin Commentaries: Volume Two*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2004, pp. 59-75. Adamson writes, "Above all what emerges from the commentary is the impression that Avicenna came to the text with his own fully-formed system. He corrects or interprets the text as needed in order to reconcile it with that system. Indeed, certain passages in the commentary depart entirely from exegesis in order to refute independent objections to Avicenna's own views. Fair Judgment was, after all, written well after the youthful Avicenna had discovered the truths to which he would cling unvaryingly throughout his career. As such it does not show us a philosopher who was building a theory through engagement with a text, as the ancient commentators had done. It shows us rather a philosopher passing judgment on a text, measuring it against the truth already established in other, independent works of his" (p. 74). On the contrary, I suggest that it is unlikely that the *Inṣāf* represents Avicenna's first encounter with the ps.-*Theology*. Rather, the *Inṣāf*'s comments on the ps.-*Theology* seem to be a frank summary of what a mature philosopher has come to think about sources with which he had worked for decades. It is difficult to understand why Adamson would assert that the *Inṣāf* "does not show us a philosopher who was building a theory through engagement with a text". Although Avicenna is certainly not uncritical in his reception of the ps.-*Theology*, it is hard not to feel that he engages with the text actively, sympathetically and sometimes even enthusiastically. Readers should have a look at the *Inṣāf* and judge for themselves. In any case, while I welcome a more accurate assessment of Avicenna as the penetrating philosopher that he was, an assessment to which Gutas has contributed perhaps more than anyone, I fear that in their efforts to correct Corbin, some scholars may go too far in dissociating Avicenna from Neoplatonism. On the one hand, it was not until relatively recently – i.e. with the appearance of Armstrong's translation of the *Enneads* – that English readers had access to an accurate representation of Plotinus' thought. Before then Plotinus appeared in English to be more poet than philosopher. And on the other hand, – for better or worse – both Plotinus and Avicenna, who we know primarily as very rigorous philosophers, do also seem to engage with what we might call mysticism, if one that is rather sober and intellectual.

¹³ It is also to be found in the short treatise *al-Risāla al-aḍawiyya fi 'l-ma'ād*, text and translation in Avicenna, *Epistola sulla vita futura*, ed. F. Lucchetta, Antenore, Padova 1969.

considers whether he can assert (*yatbutu*) the existence of the self (*wuğūd dātibi*) as something that exists without also [having to] assert the existence of any of his exterior or interior parts, his heart, his brain, or anything external. He will in fact be asserting the existence of his self without asserting that it has length, breadth, or depth, and if it were even possible for him in such a state to imagine (*yatabhayyala*) a hand or some other extremity, he would not imagine it as a part of his self, or as a necessary condition of his self – and you know that what can be asserted as existing is not the same as what cannot be so asserted and that what is stipulated is not the same as what is not stipulated. Thus, the self whose existence he asserted is his unique characteristic, in the sense that it is he himself, not his body and its parts, which he did not so assert. Thus what [the reader] has been alerted to is a way to be made alert to the existence of the soul (*wuğūd al-nafs*) as something that is not the body – nor in fact, any body – to recognize it and be aware of it (*annahu ‘arifun bihi musta‘irun labu*), it is in fact the case that he has been disregarding it and needed to be hit over the head with it.¹⁴

The significance of this passage and its parallels in Ibn Sīnā’s oeuvre is by no means obvious. It has been interpreted as:

- a proto Cartesian “*cogito*”,¹⁵
- a proof for the incorporeality of the human soul,¹⁶
- a proof for the substantiality of the soul,¹⁷

¹⁴ *Šifā’, Fī al-nafs* I.1, 15-16 Rahman (Avicenna, *Šifā’, Kitāb al-Nafs*, ed. F. Rahman, Oxford U.P., London 1959); pp. 18–19 Bakoš (Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Šifā’: Fī al-Nafs. In Psychologie d’Ibn Sina (Avicenne) d’après son oeuvre Aš-Šifa’ = Psychologie v jeho dile Aš-Šifa’*, ed. J. Bakoš, Éd. de l’Acad. Tchécolovaque des Sciences, Prague 1956). Translation in J. McGinnis – D. Reismann (eds.), *Classical Arabic Philosophy*, Hackett, Indianapolis-Cambridge 2007, pp. 178-9. Cf. Kaukua, *Self-Awareness* (above n. 1), p. 35.

¹⁵ G. Furlani, “Avicenna e il *Cogito, ergo sum* di Cartesio”, *Islamica* 3 (1927), pp. 53-72 and Th.-A. Druart, “The Soul and Body Problem: Avicenna and Descartes”, in Th.-A. Druart (ed.), *Arabic Philosophy and the West: Continuity and Interaction*, Georgetown University, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Washington 1988. There seems to be some good reason for this at the beginning of the *Išārāt* III (Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Išārāt wa-l-Tanbihāt*, ed. J. Forget, Brill, Leiden 1892, p. 119, translated by A.-M. Goichon, *Livre des directives et remarques*, Vrin, Paris 1951, p. 303). Of course, the interpretation of Descartes cogito is itself problematic.

¹⁶ E. Gilson, “Les sources gréco-arabe de l’augustinisme avicennisant”, *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 5 (1930), p. 40.

¹⁷ Rahman, *Avicenna’s Psychology* (above n. 11), p. 10: “That this passage is intended by Avicenna to prove not only the incorporeality but also, and indeed primarily, the substantiality of the human soul seems to me to be clear not only from the obvious meaning of the passage itself but from the entire context of this section”. Rahman compares the passage from the ps.-*Theology of Aristotle* which corresponds to the famous opening of *Ennead* IV 8[6]. Rahman’s remark “Avicenna has, however, couched in poetical imagery what was for Plotinus a personal experience” (note 1 p. 10) is puzzling. First of all, as I attempt to show in what follows, there are other passages in the ps.-*Theology* that are more immediately relevant to the “floating-man”. Secondly, Avicenna’s language in this passage is not particularly poetical. Finally, if there is a reason to compare the opening of Plotinus’ *Ennead* IV 8[6] with the “floating man”, and if both Plotinus and Avicenna are somehow referring to one and the same thing, then a more precise account of the relationship of these two passages is desirable. That is, if Plotinus recounts a personal experience, what does Avicenna do? For my part, I suggest that Avicenna’s floating man is intended to effect a state related to that described by Plotinus. Goichon takes the similar passage in the *Išārāt* to be a “preuve de l’existence de l’âme par la perception intuitive de l’être” (Goichon, *Livre des directives et remarques* [above n. 15], p. 303)

a pointer or proof that the soul is independent of body,¹⁸
 a reminder of the immateriality of the soul for use in dialectic or an exercise to prime intuitions,¹⁹
 an investigation into self-awareness,²⁰
 a doctrine of apperception,²¹
 a doctrine of self-awareness related to the unity and individuation of the self,²²
 an immediate and intuitive grasp of the soul in *mušāhada*, which is not compatible with Avicenna's usual epistemological principles,²³
 an investigation aimed at ascertaining the existence and the essence of the soul in itself, rather than in its relation to body.²⁴

¹⁸ D.N. Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul 1160-1300*, Warburg Institute, London 2000, pp. 81-7. Hasse summarizes his differentiated account of the flying man as follows: "To recapitulate: what the Flying Man affirms is the existence of his essence. What Avicenna intends to demonstrate is not always the same: In its strongest version, the story serves to point to the soul's independent existence from the body. The logical status of the Flying Man is to be a pointer for intelligent people in some texts and a simple illustration to an argument in others" (87). P. Adamson and F. Benevich argue that the flying man is a proof that the essence of the soul is ontologically independent of body. P. Adamson – F. Benevich, "The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna's Flying Man Argument", *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4/2 (Summer 2018), pp. 147-64.

¹⁹ Jon McGinnis writes, "Again as an argument for the immateriality of the self, such a thought experiment is wanting; however, Avicenna never intended it as an argument for the immateriality of the self. Instead, as he himself repeatedly says, he is merely trying to point us in the right direction or to prime our intuitions about the very nature of the self or I (*Psychology*, I, I, 15.19-16.20)" (J. McGinnis. *Avicenna*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2010, p. 146). Robert Wisnovsky writes, "Avicenna's floating man was not even meant to serve as a "proof" of anything; it is only a hint of what the soul is outside of the context of its relationship to the body, a hint that reminds us of the soul's essential immateriality. Avicenna's hope was that when his advanced students were stuck in the middle of some complex proof of the soul's separability from the body, they would not fall prey to sophistical arguments whose goal was to convince them that the soul was an atom, or some type of material object. With Avicenna's floating man always ready to remind them of the conclusion they must reach, their argumentative path would be surer" ("Avicenna and the Avicennian Tradition", in P. Adamson – R. Taylor [eds.], *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2005, pp. 92-136, p. 103).

²⁰ D. Black, "Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows", in S. Rahman – T. Street – H. Tahiri (eds.), *The Unity of Science in the Arabic Tradition*, Springer, Dordrecht 2008, pp. 63-87. Black argues that Avicenna identifies two levels of self-knowledge. She refers to that explored in the "flying" as "primitive self-awareness".

²¹ Marcotte and Eichner have used the language of apperception in relation with Suhrawardī and al-Rāzī both of whom are heir to Avicenna's flying man. See R. Marcotte, "Irja 'ilā nafsika: Suhrawardī's Apperception of the Self in Light of Avicenna", *Transcendent Philosophy* 5/1 (2004), pp. 1-21 and H. Eichner, "Knowledge by Presence, Apperception and the Mind-Body Relationship: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Suhrawardī as Representatives of a Thirteenth Century Discussion", in P. Adamson (ed.), *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth Century*, The Warburg Institute, London 2011, pp. 117-40.

²² Kaukua argues that the self is self-awareness. It is, he writes, "the mode in which we exist as immaterial substances" (Kaukua, *Self-Awareness* [above n. 1], p. 103).

²³ M. Sebtī, "Avicenna's "Flying Man" Argument as a proof of the Immateriality of the Soul", in E. Coda – C. Martini Bonadeo (eds.), *De l'Antiquité tardive au Moyen Âge. Études de logique aristotélicienne et de philosophie grecque, syriaque, arabe et latine offertes à Henri Hugonard-Roche*, Vrin, Paris 2014 (Études musulmanes, 44), pp. 531-43.

²⁴ T. Alpina, "The Soul of, the Soul in itself, and the Flying Man Experiment", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 28 (2018), pp. 187-224. Alpina argues that we should distinguish two parallel investigations in Avicenna's account of soul in the *Psychology* of the *Šifā'*. On Alpina's reading, the flying man marks a departure from an Aristotelian paradigm for the definition of soul.

Evidently, not all of these are mutually exclusive. At least some of them seem *prima facie* to be compatible one with another. In some cases, the differences seem simply to be a matter of terminology. These various readings of the flying man are motivated by several basic interpretative questions:

Did Avicenna intend the flying man argument to be some kind of proof?

If he did intend it as a proof, is it successful or fallacious?²⁵

If it is not a proof, what role is it supposed to serve?²⁶

What do the key terms in the various versions of the argument refer to?²⁷

If the flying man is about “awareness”, of what order is this awareness (e.g. is it “primitive” or “first order awareness”)?²⁸

Who or what is the subject of this awareness? The intellect? Imagination? The *wahm* (“estimative faculty”)? Or the soul conceived without reference to faculties?²⁹

Did Avicenna’s thought on the flying man evolve throughout his oeuvre?³⁰

In my view, reading Avicenna’s flying man argument in light of his engagement with the Arabic Plotinus can contribute, first of all, to a more complete set of research questions by adding a more explicit query concerning Avicenna’s sources. This is in itself sufficient reason to devote our attention to Avicenna’s reading of the Arabic Plotinus. But what is perhaps more important – although less easily demonstrated – is that when seen against the background of the Arabic Plotinus, Avicenna’s flying man argument looks different than

²⁵ See M. Marmura, “Avicenna’s ‘Flying Man’ in Context”, *Monist* 69 (1986), pp. 383-95 on the fallacy of going from the phenomenal to the metaphysical. See Adamson – Benevise, “The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna’s Flying Man Argument” (above n. 18) on the fallacy of going from conjecture (or hypothesis) to the real.

²⁶ McGinnis writes, “Again as an argument for the immateriality of the self, such a thought experiment is wanting; however, Avicenna never intended it as an argument for the immateriality of the self. Instead, as he himself repeatedly says, he is merely trying to point us in the right direction or to prime our intuitions about the very nature of the self or I (*Psychology*, I.1, 15.19-16.2)” (McGinnis, *Avicenna* [above n. 20], p. 146). Hasse explains, “Since the characterization of the story of the Flying Man as a *tanbih* is repeated at the end of the passage, I do not see any reason to accuse Avicenna of using a hypothetical example for categorical ends. In the case of the other three versions (numbers 3 to 5) which use the Flying Man as an illustration for an argument, nothing is said explicitly about its logical status” (Hasse, *Avicenna’s De Anima in the Latin West* [above n. 19], p. 87).

²⁷ The term *ḍāt* in the *Psychology* of the *Šifā’* I.1 is taken by some (such as Hasse) to refer to “essence” while others (such as Kaukua) believe that it refers to “self”. See the discussion in Kaukua, *Self-Awareness* (above n. 1), p. 38-42; he also discusses the term *’anniya*. See also Goichon, *Livre des directives et remarques* (above n. 15), pp. 304-7 for a discussion of the term *’anniya* in the context of the version of the flying man argument in the *Išārāt*.

²⁸ Black was the first to make this distinction (See D. Black, “Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows” [above n. 21]). It has been adopted by McGinnis and Kaukua. McGinnis writes, “In self-awareness, thinks Avicenna, one consciously reflects on oneself as an object of intellection. As such, self-awareness might be thought of as a second-order awareness: being aware of oneself as an object of awareness. Avicenna, however, also identifies a more basic or primitive form of self-awareness that he believes is essential not only to the intellect but also to the human soul more generally. This primitive self-awareness is the subconscious awareness of the I that accompanies all of one’s actions and conscious experiences, underlying and unifying them. It is for Avicenna our awareness of the very substance of our soul considered independently of its relation to the body and bodily activities. It is one’s self (*ḍāt*)” (McGinnis, *Avicenna* [above n. 20], p. 143).

²⁹ See the discussion in Kaukua, *Self-Awareness* (above n. 1), p. 61ff.

³⁰ Alwishah finds development in Avicenna’s understanding of the flying man argument (A. Alwishah, “Ibn Sīnā on Floating Man Arguments”, *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 9 (2013), pp. 32-53).

when this background is left out. In particular, I suggest that the background in the Arabic Plotinus can help us understand the subject of the flying man and, perhaps even provide some indication concerning the purpose of the argument.

Avicenna's notes on the ps.-Theology of Aristotle (fragment from Kitāb al-Inṣāf, the Book of Impartial Judgment)

In his work entitled *Kitāb al-Inṣāf (Book of Fair Judgment)* Avicenna wrote notes or what might even qualify as a 'commentary' on the ps.-*Theology*. Unfortunately this work was amongst those texts of Avicenna lost during the pillage of Isfahan by the sultan Mas'ud in 1030. Fragments of the *Inṣāf* did survive, however, and have been published by Badawī in *Aristū 'inda l-'Arab*. A French translation of the fragments of the *Inṣāf* which correspond to the commentary on the ps.-*Theology* was published by George Vajda.³¹ Before we look at specific passages of Avicenna's commentary on the ps.-*Theology*, it will be useful to consider some of its general characteristics.

First of all, Avicenna's general approach to the ps.-*Theology* in his comments in the *Inṣāf* is sympathetic. Much of his commentary validates and elaborates on the ideas put forward in the ps.-*Theology*. In fact, Avicenna goes out of his way to show that the ps.-*Theology* is consistent with his own thought. When the ps.-*Theology* asserts the preexistence of the soul – a doctrine Avicenna rejects – Avicenna suggests that that someone has tampered with the text.³² Moreover, at several points in the commentary Avicenna sends the reader to his work on "Oriental Wisdom" for further elaboration of the ideas in question.³³ Avicenna clearly sees the ps.-*Theology* as contributing key ideas to his own philosophical projects.

A comparison of the section of the *Inṣāf* on the ps.-*Theology* with that on *Metaphysics Lambda* 6-10 reveals markedly contrasting treatments.³⁴ Where the tone of the section of the *Inṣāf* on the ps.-*Theology* is sympathetic, that of the section on Aristotle's *Metaphysics Lambda* 6-10 is remarkably critical, at certain points even polemical. If his most scathing comments are reserved for interpreters who misread Aristotle's *Metaphysics Lambda*, Avicenna does not hesitate to point out inconsistencies' and lacunae in Aristotle's work.³⁵ In their introduction to Avicenna's notes on *Metaphysics Lambda*, Geoffroy, Janssens and Sebtī suggest that Avicenna distinguished between "authentic" Aristotelianism and misguided

³¹ G. Vajda, "Les notes d'Avicenne sur la *Théologie d'Aristote*", *Revue Thomiste* 51.2 (1951), pp. 346-406.

³² Daniel De Smet has suggested that some of Avicenna's comments in the section reveal a polemic against and Ismaili interpretation of certain Plotinian doctrines. See D. De Smet, "La doctrine avicennienne des deux faces de l'âme" et ses racines ismaéliennes", *Studia Islamica* 93 (2001), pp.77-89 and "Avicenne et l'ismaélisme post-fatimide, selon la *Risāla al-Mufīda fī idāh mulğaz al-Qaṣīda* de 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-Walīd (ob. 1215)", in J. Janssens – D. De Smet (eds.), *Avicenna and his Heritage*, Leuven U.P., Leuven 1999, pp. 1-20.

³³ See D. Gutas, "Avicenna's Eastern ("Oriental") Philosophy: Nature, Contents, Transmission", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 10 (2000), pp. 159-80.

³⁴ A team of French translators have recently published a critical edition and French translation of the parts of the *Inṣāf* which constitute a commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics Lambda* 6-10. Avicenne, *Commentaire sur le livre Lambda de la Métaphysique d'Aristote (Chapitres 6-10)*, éd. et trad. par M. Geoffroy (†) - J. Janssens - M. Sebtī, Vrin, Paris 2014 (Études musulmanes). See Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (above n. 6) p. 325, for remarks on Avicenna's critique of Aristotle in the commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics Lambda*.

³⁵ See Avicenne, *Commentaire sur le livre Lambda de la Métaphysique d'Aristote (Chapitres 6-10)* (above n. 34) pp. 18-23. Geoffroy – Janssens – Sebtī write, "IS [Ibn Sīnā] commentateur ne se prive pas de critiquer tantôt 'les commentateurs', tantôt Aristote" (p. 21).

interpretations of Aristotle developed through both Greek and Arabic traditions (“en fait bagdadienne[s]”) which he labelled “occidental” (i.e. in contrast to the “oriental” thought which Avicenna proposes is correct).³⁶ They suggest that, although he does point out lacunae and errors in Aristotle’s work, Avicenna’s strategy in commenting *Metaphysics Lambda* ultimately aimed to downplay the intrinsic weaknesses in Aristotle’s text in order to protect it from interpretations that compromise it even further.³⁷ They also show that in many cases Avicenna points to Neoplatonic sources in correcting erroneous interpretations of Aristotle.³⁸ The contrast between the highly critical approach of Avicenna’s comments on *Metaphysics Lambda* and the generally affirmative approach of his comments on the ps.-*Theology* might be explained with reference to various factors (e.g. the different topics treated in the two commentaries, differences between the nature of the commentaries which had accrued around the two works, etc.). Whatever the case may be, the difference in tone between the two sections of the *Inṣāf* certainly fits well with a reading according to which Avicenna was aware that he was dealing with two different authors.

The hypothesis that Avicenna doubted the authenticity of the ps.-*Theology* is based on a letter in which Avicenna outlines the aims and contents of the *Inṣāf*.³⁹ The hypothesis seems to date back to Kraus who translates the phrase ‘*alā mā fī al-Uṭūluḡiyyā min al-maṭ’an*’ by “nonobstant les critiques qui ont été formulées à l’égard de l’authenticité de cet ouvrage”. In fact, in the Arabic there is no explicit mention of “authenticity”. Gutas translates the ambiguity of the phrase more accurately, writing, “despite the fact that the *Theologia* is somewhat suspect”. Although Kraus’ reading of *min al-maṭ’an* to refer to the question of authorship is perfectly justifiable, one wonders if what Avicenna refers to as “suspect” (literally “attacked” and so in this context “criticized” or even “refuted”) in the ps.-*Theology* might not be more a matter of doctrinal content rather than authorship.⁴⁰ That is, perhaps Avicenna means to

³⁶ Avicenne, *Commentaire sur le livre Lambda de la Métaphysique d’Aristote (Chapitres 6-10)* (above n. 34), pp. 18-19.

³⁷ Avicenne, *Commentaire sur le livre Lambda de la Métaphysique d’Aristote (Chapitres 6-10)* (above n. 34), p. 21.

³⁸ See Avicenne, *Commentaire sur le livre Lambda de la Métaphysique d’Aristote (Chapitres 6-10)* (above n. 34), p. 19.

³⁹ *Letter to Kiyā* (T12, §3) cited in Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (above n. 6) p. 145 (‘A. Badawī, *Aristū ‘inda l-‘Arab*, Maktabat an-nahḍa al-miṣriyya, Cairo 1947, p. 121): “I had composed a book which I called Fair Judgment. I divided scholars into two groups, the Westerners and the Easterners, and I had the Easterners argue against the Westerners until I intervened to Judge Fairly when there was a real point of dispute between them. This book had contained approximately twenty-eight thousand questions. I commented clearly on the difficult passages in the essential texts up to the end of the *Theologia Aristotelis*, despite the fact that the *Theologia* is somewhat suspect (*min al-maṭ’an*), and I talked about the oversights of the commentators. I wrote it in a short period of time—[a work] 132 which, had it been transcribed clearly, would have comprised twenty volumes. Then it was lost in the course of some rout, since there was only the first draft. Investigating it and these controversies was a pastime; after completing something I am working on [at present], I will occupy myself with rewriting it, although even thinking about rewriting is oppressive. But it had contained a precise exposition of the weakness of the Baḡdādīs, and of their deficiency and ignorance. At the present moment it is impossible for me [to rewrite it]: I do not have the free time for it”.

⁴⁰ I think we could probably reconstruct Kraus’ argument as follows. Kraus takes “suspect” (*min al-maṭ’an*) in relation to the corpus of texts referred to in the term *fuṣūṣ* in the earlier part of the sentence. Here is the sentence in question: “I commented clearly on the difficult passages in the essential texts (*fuṣūṣ*) up to the end of the *Theologia Aristotelis*, despite the fact that the *Theologia* is somewhat suspect (*min al-maṭ’an*), and I talked about the oversights of the commentators”. So Kraus reads “suspect” to mean “may not in fact belong to the *fuṣūṣ* (“essential texts” in Gutas’ translation). And if the *fuṣūṣ* of the commentators is equivalent to the works of Aristotle, then to doubt its belonging to the *fuṣūṣ* is to doubt its authenticity as an Aristotelian text.

assert that he comments on the ps.-*Theology* as a useful and reliable source despite the fact that others had called into question its philosophical value (i.e. regardless of authenticity). As is mentioned above, Avicenna takes pains to point out how the ps.-*Theology* is consistent with his own thought, which suggests that he approves of the positions elaborated in the ps.-*Theology* – even perhaps those which are “suspect”.⁴¹ This hypothesis concerning the meaning of *min al-maʿan* leaves open the question whether Avicenna regarded the ps.-*Theology* as authored by Aristotle or not.⁴²

We find an indication concerning the importance of the commentary on the ps.-*Theology* in the *Inṣāf* in the memoirs of a student of Avicenna:

In the year when the horsemen of the late Sultan overran these lands, Avicenna was prompted for some reason to occupy himself with a book which he called *Fair Judgment*. It contained commentaries on all the books by Aristotle, among which he even included the *Theologia* [Aristotelis], about whose contents he brought out matters that had never been taken into account.⁴³

The claim that Avicenna’s discussion of the ps.-*Theology* was groundbreaking and original is significant. It suggests that Avicenna paid special attention to the ps.-*Theology* and that his treatment of it played a key role in distinguishing his work from that of other thinkers. Taken together with his remark that he paid attention to the ps.-*Theology* despite the fact that it was “suspect”, the assertion that Avicenna’s commentary on the ps.-*Theology* was groundbreaking suggests that it was a crucial source in distinguishing Avicenna’s thought from that of other philosophers.

I am for my part inclined to see Avicenna as doubting the authenticity of the ps.-*Theology* not on the basis of his remark that it was “suspect” but rather because 1) Avicenna must have been aware that it was not treated as authentic by the greatest part of the commentary tradition that was available to him, 2) Avicenna’s exegetical attitude towards the ps.-*Theology* is very different from that which characterizes his commentary on authentically Aristotelian texts and 3) at no point (as far as I am aware) does Avicenna suggest that his opponents

⁴¹ In the estimation of Paul Kraus, “si Avicenna, en dépit de ces doutes, a commenté l’ouvrage, il ne le fait nullement par un souci à peine conscient de syncrétisme naïf, mais parce que, quel que soit le véritable auteur de la *Théologie*, cet ouvrage antique renferme des idées philosophiques si élevées qu’elles doivent être conservées et mises à la portée des chercheurs” (Kraus, “Plotin chez les Arabes, remarques sur un nouveau fragment de la paraphrase des *Ennéades*”, p. 273) cited in Adamson, “Correcting Plotinus”, (above n. 12). Geoffroy – Janssens – Sebtī follow D’Ancona in asserting that Avicenna did accept the ps.-*Theology* as an authentic Aristotelian work. See Geoffroy–Janssens–Sebtī, *Commentaire sur le Livre Lambda de la Métaphysique d’Aristote (Chapitres 6-10)* (above n. 34) pp. 8-9 and C. D’Ancona, *Plotino. La discesa dell’anima nei corpi (Plotiniana Arabica (Pseudo-Teologia di Aristotele, Capitoli 1 e 7, Detti Del Sapiante Greco))*, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2003, pp. 101-11.

⁴² On this question see the helpful discussion in Geoffroy–Janssens–Sebtī, *Avicenne Commentaire sur le livre Lambda de la Métaphysique d’Aristote (Chapitres 6-10)* (above n. 34), pp. 7-9.

⁴³ Cited in Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (above n. 6) p. 61. Gutas explains, “The translation below is based on the text of the *Discussions (Mubāḥaṭāt)* in the Oxford MS Bodleian, *Hunt*. 534, ff. 13b ult.–15b-2 (B) and compared throughout with the text in the Leiden MS *Warn. Or.* 864, ff. 64a1–66a11 (L)”. Gutas writes in a note concerning the fact that Avicenna’s treatment of the ps.-*Theology* was groundbreaking, “This is correct. The extant portions of Avicenna’s commentary (see W10) are thorough and original. This is largely due, of course, to the fact that the *Theologia*, not being an Aristotelian text, had not been subjected to repeated commentaries in the Greek tradition”.

– who were Aristotelians – failed in their interpretations of Aristotle because they neglected to take into account the ps.-*Theology*. These reasons, I admit, hardly represent a demonstration. However, the arguments asserting that Avicenna took the ps.-*Theology* to be authored by Aristotle are in my view no less compelling than those that support the contrary. It seems that until further evidence can be provided this shall remain a matter of speculation.

We can in any case be quite certain that 1) Avicenna thought that the author of the ps.-*Theology* was right on a number of key points and that 2) Avicenna's considered his own reflections on the ps.-*Theology* in the *Inṣāf* to be original and of key importance in defining his thought in relation to that of other philosophers.⁴⁴ Moreover, the general context of the *Inṣāf* suggests that what Geoffroy, Janssens and Sebti have called Avicenna's "Authentic" Aristotelianism draws from Neoplatonic sources (whether Avicenna recognized them as Aristotelian or not).

Let us now turn to the content of the passages of the ps.-*Theology* on which Avicenna comments. They are concerned especially with the relationship between soul and the intelligible world.⁴⁵ Many passages indicate that knowledge is linked with ethical practice. The notions of desire, nostalgia and love of the divine all figure in Avicenna's treatment of the ps.-*Theology*. Several passages examine the limits of soul. Remarkably, Avicenna discusses the universal soul at length; he is evidently interested in the broader cosmological context characteristic of Plotinian psychology. If Avicenna thought this background was simply obvious, he probably would not have deemed it worthy of the attention that he in fact gave it.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ In chapter 7 of *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (above n. 6) entitled "the evolution of Avicenna's attitude toward Aristotle the Aristotelian tradition, and his own work" Gutas discusses why in his later works Avicenna makes fewer explicit references to Greek sources. Gutas writes, "In Avicenna's later writings there is decreasing reference by name to scholars in the Greek tradition and a concomitant increase in qualifying descriptions when they are referred to at all. The implication of this new attitude is clear. Avicenna does not see himself, or does not wish to project himself, as belonging to the same philosophical tradition, defending and supporting his predecessors as he had done in the earlier writings. Instead, he presumes to judge and rank the previous Peripatetic philosophers, adopting the stance of an independent overseer. This is the same attitude we have seen earlier expressed in the Autobiography with regard to the accomplishments of each scholar" (Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, pp. 327-8). And at the end of the chapter Gutas concludes: "The evolution of his attitude toward Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition is therefore of significance in assessing the concomitant evolution of his purpose in the praxis of philosophy". It is noteworthy that the shift in attitude towards Aristotle is not evident in Avicenna's treatment of the ps.-*Theology*.

⁴⁵ Cristina D'Ancona has pointed out that this is one of the main themes of the work. See C. D'Ancona "The *Theology* Attributed to Aristotle: Sources, Structure, Influence", in K. El-Rouayheb – S. Schmidtke (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2017, pp. 8-29.

⁴⁶ Cf. Adamson's suggestion that Avicenna's main purpose in his comments on the ps.-*Theology* in the *Inṣāf* is to distance his thought from that of the ps.-*Theology*. He writes, "We can thus extract from this part of *The Healing* three points about the rational soul that define Avicenna's opposition to the Plotinian theory: –The rational soul does not exist prior to its embodiment. –The rational soul needs the senses in order to attain knowledge of the universals, despite the fact that the senses may be a hindrance in some circumstances. –Were the rational soul to have so casual a relation to the body as Plotinus holds, then it might be possible for the soul to transmigrate into other bodies; but this is impossible. These points of opposition should not, of course, obscure two important points of agreement between Avicenna and Plotinus: that the (rational) soul is separate from body and between body and intellect, and that the (rational) soul is immortal (albeit that Avicenna thinks it is immortal a parte post, and not as Plotinus thinks also a parte ante). But the differences are more interesting to us here, as they reappear in Avicenna's commentary on the *Theology*, in what amounts to a concerted attempt to correct Plotinus as he appears in the Arabic version" (Adamson, "Correcting Plotinus" [above n. 12], p. 64). There are several difficulties with

Plotinus as source for Avicenna's Flying Man

I will now turn to a detailed examination of several texts from the *Inṣāf*. I point out relationships between ideas put forward in the ps.-*Theology*, commented by Avicenna in the *Inṣāf* that are also at work, I argue, in the flying man. I suggest that we can understand the influence of Plotinian thought on the flying man to be arranged around three important points. The remainder of this paper is accordingly divided into three sections treating these three points: awareness, simplicity of the soul and ethical practice.

1. Awareness (šū'ūr) and Self in the Inṣāf and the Flying Man

Let us start by looking at a passage of Avicenna's commentary on the ps.-*Theology* in the *Inṣāf* that is most obviously related to the flying man argument:

Just as the ear when it is preoccupied by noise and bustle does not hear anything, so the soul preoccupied with that which it receives from the sensible world [is distracted] from the perception (šū'ūr) of its world. (*Inṣāf* p. 69.12-13 = p. 399 Vajda).⁴⁷

This passage describes the situation of a person similar to one about to undertake the flying man thought experiment. Avicenna draws a parallel between sense perception – between a single sense, in this case, hearing – and a more general capacity for perception (or awareness) of its world. The term for “perception” šū'ūr in this passage is precisely that which figures so prominently in the elaboration of the flying man argument as formulated in the *Šifā'* (where the term is often translated as “awareness”).⁴⁸ So the basic structure of the problematic and the vocabulary suggest that this comment in the *Inṣāf* may be related to the flying man argument.

This comment in the *Inṣāf* refers to a passage in the ps.-*Theology* based on the last chapter of Plotinus' *Enn.* IV 8[6], 8 (*On the Descent of the Soul*).⁴⁹ Here is the text from the *Theology*:

If anyone says: Why do we not sense (*nubissu*) that world as we sense this world? We reply: Because the sensible world dominates us (*ġalibun 'alayna*) and our souls have become full of its reprehensible appetites (*šahawātihī*), our ears of the abundant clamour and vociferation within it, so we do not sense that intelligible world or know what the soul brings from it.⁵⁰ We can sense the intelligible world and what the soul brings us from it only when we

Adamson's argument here. Above all, Adamson takes Avicenna's opposition to Plotinian positions formulated in the ps.-*Theology* as a premise in his argument. But he seems to misrepresent both Avicennian and Plotinian positions in so doing. For example, Adamson's point (II) above does not seem to accurately represent Avicenna's flying man argument. And although Plotinus does in a few passages seem to endorse transmigration, it is uncharitable to suggest that this amounts to a “casual” relationship between soul and body. Adamson regards Avicenna's claim that there was no or little change in his own psychological thought to mean that the ps.-*Theology* could not represent a source for Avicenna's psychological thought (and so takes the presentation of psychology *Šifā'* to be representative of Avicenna's mature thought when in fact there are significant differences between the presentation of psychology in the *Šifā'* and the *Išārāt*).

⁴⁷ All translations from the *Inṣāf* in this article are my own.

⁴⁸ See Black, “Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows” (above n. 21).

⁴⁹ For a critical edition, Italian translation and commentary of the parts of the Arabic Plotinus corresponding to Plotinus *Ennead* IV 9[6] see C. D'Ancona, *Plotino. La discesa dell'anima nei corpi* (above n. 39).

⁵⁰ The Arabic version of the text is remarkably moralizing in character in comparison with the Plotinian original. D'Ancona explains, for example, how “L'espressione και θορυβοῦτο, che rafforzava εὐ κρατοῦτο nel greco,

rise above this world and reject its base lusts and do not occupy ourselves with anything of its condition. Then we can sense it and the thing which descends on us from it through the medium of soul, while we cannot sense the thing that comes to be in one of the parts of the soul before that comes over the whole soul, such as desire, for we cannot sense it so long as it remains fixed in the appetitive faculty of the soul. We sense it when it proceeds to the sensory faculty and to the cogitative and dianoetic faculty (*al-qūwa al fikrīyya wa-l-dihnīyya*) (pp. 90.14-91.3 Badawī; trans. Lewis, p. 249 modified).

And this is the corresponding passage in Plotinus:

And, if one ought to dare to express one's own view more clearly, contradicting the opinion of others, even our own soul does not altogether come down, but there is always something of it in the intelligible; but the part which is in the world of sense-perception gets control, or rather if it is itself brought under control, and thrown into confusion [by the body], it prevents us from perceiving (οὐκ ... αἰσθησιν ἤμῶν) the things which the upper part of the soul contemplates. For what is grasped by the intellect reaches us when it arrives at perception (εἰς αἰσθησιν) in its descent, for we do not know (γίγνωσκόμεν) everything which happens in any part of the soul before it reaches the whole soul; for instance desire which remains in the desiring part is known by us, but [only] when we apprehend it by the power of the inner sense or discursive reason (τῆ αἰσθητικῆ τῆ ἔνδον δυνάμει ἢ καὶ διανοητικῆ ἀντιλαμβόμεθα),⁵¹ or both. For every soul has something of what is below, in the direction of the body, and of what is above, in the direction of Intellect (Plot., *Enn.* IV 8[6], 8.1-13).

The Plotinian passage makes several crucial claims: 1) the soul, although related to both the intelligible and the sensible, is always connected to the intelligible and 2) the soul is aware of its connection to the intelligible only when this connection is present to a lower level of cognition – sensation or discursive reason. To put it quite starkly, intellection is not sufficient for awareness of intellection in the embodied human being. Furthermore, 3) certain bodily conditions obscure perception or awareness of intellection. Finally, 4) the inner sense or discursive reason is the center of awareness and that to which intellection must arrive in order for the soul to become aware of it.

It is worth recalling that this passage occurs at the conclusion of *Ennead* IV 8[6], the treatise that begins with the famous passage concerning the outer body experience (figuring prominently ps.-*Theology*).⁵² The first chapter of IV 8[6] contains a clear formulation of the

è amplificata in senso etico-ascetico: nella versione araba, ciò che impedisce di cogliere l'esistenza del mondo intellegibile è il fatto che le nostre anime sono ricolme di piaceri riprovevoli e le nostre orecchie assordate dal frastuono del mondo: la condizione per percepire ciò che proviene dall'alto è fuggire il mondo e le sue cure" (D'Ancona, *Plotino. La discensa dell'anima nei corpi* [above n. 39], p. 358).

⁵¹ If the term "inner sense" (τῆ αἰσθητικῆ τῆ ἔνδον δυνάμει, *Enn.* IV 8[6], 8.10-11) had not been suppressed in the translation into Arabic in the ps.-*Theology* we would have a direct precedent for Avicenna's notion of inner sense. In fact, there are other passages in the ps.-*Theology* that suggest that Neoplatonic psychology is behind Avicenna's understanding of the inner senses.

⁵² Pseudo-Aristotle, *Theology, Mimar 1. Text Uthūlūjiyā Aristātālis*, in 'A. Badawī (ed.), *Plotinus apud Arabes*, Dirasa Islamiyya, Cairo 1947, p. 22; English translation by G. Lewis in P. Henry – H.-R. Schwyzer (eds.), *Plotini Opera, Tomus II: Enneades IV–V*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris and Brussels 1959, p. 225; text and Italian translation in C. D'Ancona, *Plotino. La discensa dell'anima nei corpi* (above n. 39), pp. 229-30.

project which Plotinus undertakes in this work. The treatise is written from a radically first-person point of view. Plotinus starts the *Ennead* with a description of his own experience of detachment from the body. But he takes this experience to be pure fact and, despite what we might expect, does not puzzle over it. Rather, the *aporia* which motivates the treatise is formulated as follows: “I am puzzled (*ἀποροῶ*) how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it has shown itself to be by itself (*καθ’ ἑαυτήν*), even when it is in the body” (*Enn.* IV 8[6], 1.8-11). Despite the extraordinary phenomenological starting point, Plotinus’ investigation is really concerned with the experience of being embodied.

Plotinus’ concerns in IV 8[6] overlap with Avicenna’s concerns in the flying man, insofar as both Plotinus and Avicenna seem to be trying to account for an aspect of personhood which is often obscured by the relation of the person to the sense world. Because one can be connected to the intelligible (which, we must assume, means that the soul is intelligizing) without being aware of it, the intellect cannot be – at least not on its own – the center of consciousness. And this is indeed what Plotinus argues in the passage cited above: he asserts that we become aware of intellection only when intellection arrives at sensation.

The ps.-*Theology* highlights this problem formulating an explicit question where there is none in the Plotinian original: “Why do we not sense that world as we sense this world?” The repetition of the word “sense” reinforces the thought structure according to which awareness is not to be explained in terms of intellection (or at least not purely in terms of intellection). The ps.-*Theology* renders the Greek *αἴσθησις* by “sense” *ḥiss* (and the IVth verbal form *’ahassa-yuhissu*). But while in Plotinus’ Greek the term *αἴσθησις* only appears twice in the passage, *ḥiss* and its cognates appears 11 times in the Arabic of the corresponding ps.-*Theology* passage. This is because *ḥiss* translates not only *αἴσθησις* but also a number of other terms for cognition in Plotinus’ Greek. *Ḥiss* (“sense”) translates the term *γινώσκω* (which appears twice in the Greek passage). Although *γινώσκω* can simply be translated as “to know”, it implies *direct* observational knowledge and seems essentially to mean what Avicenna will mean by *šū’ūr*.⁵³ In the Arabic of this passage *ḥiss* also translates the term *ἀντιλαμβάνομαι* (which appears twice in the Greek). *ἀντιλαμβάνομαι* literally means “to apprehend, perceive, grasp with the mind”. In short, it seems that the ps.-*Theology* takes a differentiated vocabulary for perception, awareness, and consciousness and reduces it to a vocabulary of “sensation” (*ḥiss*).

In fact, the ps.-*Theology* enunciates clearly what is only implicit in the Plotinian original and what might otherwise sound like a paradox in Greek Philosophy: “we can sense the intelligible world (*naqwa ’ān nubassa bi-l-’ālam al-’aqlī*)”. This phrase makes it clear that the notion of *ḥiss* in this passage of the ps.-*Theology* covers a variety of awareness that is of an order higher than ordinary sense perception.

I suggest that Avicenna’s notion of awareness (*šū’ūr*) may in fact be a development of the notion of *ḥiss* we find in this passage of the ps.-*Theology*. Read in this Neoplatonic

⁵³ The basic meaning implies direct observational knowledge. It means to “be aware”, “come to know”, “perceive”. In past tenses it has stronger sense of certainty. The aorist *γινῶναι* is used in contexts concerning self-knowledge and second order knowing in Aristotle. For example in the *Posterior Analytics* I 9, 76 a 26-28: *Χαλεπὸν δ’ ἐστὶ τὸ γινῶναι εἰ οἶδεν ἢ μὴ. χαλεπὸν γὰρ τὸ γινῶναι εἰ ἐκ τῶν ἐκάστου ἀρχῶν ἴσμεν ἢ μὴ. ὅπερ ἐστὶ τὸ εἰδέναι* (“It is difficult to be aware of whether one knows or not. For it is difficult to be aware of whether we know from the principles of a thing or not – and that is what knowing is”, trans. J. Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, I-II, Princeton U.P., Princeton 1984, Vol. 1, p. 124).

context the flying man argument appears to be designed to make the soul aware of its upper connection to the intelligible world. However, Avicenna deploys the flying man argument in contexts where there is no reference to an intelligible world.⁵⁴ To be sure, the intelligible world is a key element distinguishing Plotinian Platonism from the general paradigm we – including Avicenna – encounter in Aristotle’s works. A Neoplatonic conception of the intelligible universe often sits uncomfortably with a more clearly Aristotelian account of intellect. There are at least two points of friction: first, where intellection in the Aristotelian sense involves a more binary distinction between intelligizing and not intelligizing, the Plotinian account of relationship between the individual person and the intelligible world admits of a greater range of distinctions. That is, in the Plotinian account, a soul can be more or less connected to, aware of, looking towards etc. the intelligible world. It is as if intelligizing admits of degrees.⁵⁵ Second, where the Plotinian account of the intelligible world lends itself to an overlapping of ethical, epistemological and metaphysical categories, Aristotle’s understanding of intellect facilitates a clearer demarcation of different realms of science and human activity. So, to illustrate, whereas Aristotle has good grounds in his conception of intellect for distinguishing between $\pi\rho\acute{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$ and $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$ – and ultimately between practical virtue from intellectual virtue – Plotinian ethics function within a different set of parameters where these two realms of activity tend to blur one with another.

To sum up, the fact that Plotinus can talk of ‘sensing’ or ‘feeling’ the intelligible opens the door to understanding the soul’s self-relation in terms that are not strictly intellectual.

Awareness and the double cognitive power of the soul

A few lines after the passage we have just looked at Avicenna expounds upon the idea that the soul has two faces or powers.

Every soul has two powers: a power disposed to perceive (*yuhassa*) its connection (*bihā muwāṣalatihā*) to the intelligible world and a power disposed to perceive its connection to the sensible world. The first power is the material intellect (*al-‘aql al-hayūlānī*) and the habitual intellect (*al-‘aql bi-l-malaka*) the second power – closer to the soul – is the practical intellect (*al-‘aql al-‘amalī*), this being the internal and external senses (*Inṣāf*, p. 69.14-16 = pp. 399-400 Vajda).

This passage makes it clear that in his reading of the ps.-*Theology* Avicenna is not simply glossing Plotinian Neoplatonism in its own terms. Rather, he translates Plotinian assertions into more ostensibly Aristotelian concepts. The notion that the soul has two faces figures prominently in *Psychology of the Šifā’* (I.5, 47.8-18) and has been the subject of a number of studies.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ However, Kaukua has drawn attention to the very significant fact that in the *Ta’līqāt* “Avicenna’s description of the characteristics of human self-awareness takes place in the wake of an account of God’s knowledge of Himself and His creation” (Kaukua, *Self-Awareness* [above n. 1], p. 56).

⁵⁵ For a suggestion concerning how the various levels of human intellect in Avicenna can be understood in Neoplatonic context see De Smet, “La doctrine avicennienne des deux faces de l’âme” et ses racines ismaéliennes” (above n. 32) pp. 87-8.

⁵⁶ See T. Kukkonen, “Faculties in Arabic Philosophy”, in D. Perler (ed.), *The Faculties: A History*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2015, pp. 66-96, especially pp. 86-7.

Read against Avicenna's comments on this passage, the flying man argument seems designed to refocus the distracted soul which is "preoccupied with that which it receives from the sensible". It functions as an ingenious imaginative exercise designed to hypothetically neutralize the input of the senses. This passage suggests that Avicenna might owe the very method of the flying man to his reading of Plotinus.⁵⁷ Furthermore, if the soul is conceived in terms of two basic cognitive faculties directed in two opposing directions, which are at least to some extent in competition with one another in relation to consciousness (pp. 41-42 Badawī = p. 357 Vajda), the attempt to direct consciousness in only one direction (even if only in imaginative exercise rather than in, say, an ascetic practice) would seem to follow quite naturally.

2. *Simplicity (basāṭa) of Soul's essence and Soul's knowledge*

Although the idea of 'sensing' the self apart from body is problematic where there is hard dualism between intellection and sensation, it has some plausibility in light of the suggestion that the soul is unified. Not surprisingly, interest in the soul's unity accompanies Avicenna's interest in self-awareness.

Avicenna elaborates at some length in the *Inṣāf* on the notion of the unity or simplicity of soul; this is a Plotinian theme in his work. Plotinus insists unrelentingly on the unity and simplicity of soul throughout his writings, including passages that are adapted in the ps.-*Theology* (especially in *Mimar* II). In fact, when dealing with the unity or simplicity of soul the author of the ps.-*Theology* adds text that goes well beyond mere translation of the Plotinian original. The basic idea in Plotinus (and in the ps.-*Theology*) is that, although the powers of the soul appear to be many and diverse, they are in fact manifestations of a single power of the soul. This is of crucial importance, because it means that even lower soul powers represent, albeit in a less pure form, the true essence of the soul. A corollary of this is that the whole range of soul powers exists, albeit in a latent way, even when the soul is not in body.

The position asserting the unity of the soul's power contrasts with the picture formulated in the early work *Compendium on the Soul* where Avicenna asserts that the lower soul powers die with the body.⁵⁸ Avicenna seems to have changed his view on the relation of the lower soul powers to the soul understood as a whole. Although Avicenna continues to insist that the true soul is the intellect, he comes to embrace the Plotinian idea that all soul powers are authentic manifestations of soul.⁵⁹ In the *Iṣārāt* Avicenna represents the unity of the soul (see

⁵⁷ The famous opening of Plotinus IV 8[6] which figures in the ps.-*Theology* does not tell us how to separate the soul from body.

⁵⁸ *Mabḥat 'an al-quwā al-nafsāniyya* section ten. The text is in *Aḥwāl al-nafs*, ed. A.F. Ahwānī, Cairo 1952, pp. 147-78. Latin translation in Andrea Alpago, *Avicennae philosophi praeclarissimi ac medicorum principis Compendium de Anima*, De Mahad, etc. (Venice 1546; reprinted in Westmead, Farnborough 1969). There exists an English translation by E.A. van Dyck, in *Avicenna's Offering to the Prince: A Compendium on the Soul* (Verona 1906). See text and German translation in S. Landauer, "Die Psychologie des Ibn Sinā", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 29, 3/4 (1876), pp. 335-418.

⁵⁹ See Vajda, "Les notes d'Avicenne sur la *Théologie d'Aristote*" (above n. 31), pp. 402-3. The development in Avicenna's understanding of the unity of the soul powers seems to run parallel to a shift in Avicenna's views on the animation of plants: see A. Tawara, "Avicenna's Denial of Life In Plants", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 24 (2014), pp. 127-38.

the remark concerning Razi *ad loc.*) by the image of the tree: the soul is to its powers as a tree is to its branches.⁶⁰

Several sections of the *Inṣāf* represent commentaries on the Plotinian notion of the unity of the soul and its powers. Avicenna writes:

In its substance (*ḡawhar*), the soul has one power, not many different ones. Nor is the soul an assemblage of different powers. On the contrary, it is simple (*mabsūta*) in its essence (*al-dāt*), its essence being a noble power (*qūwa šarīfa*). This power belongs to it in a proper sense and is the intellectual power. It gives to bodies their powers as long as they [i.e. the bodies] are properly disposed (*‘alā mazāḡihā*). The powers are multiplied insofar as they are powers of body in body, not insofar as they are powers of the soul in the soul. (*Inṣāf* p. 54.5-8 = pp. 376-7 Vajda).⁶¹

This passage is relevant to the flying man argument for several reasons. First of all, it deals with concepts crucial to the flying man argument: substance (*ḡawhar*) and essence (*dāt*) of soul. However, this passage goes beyond the flying man argument insofar as it asserts that the essence of the soul is to be power.⁶² Avicenna explicitly adopts this Plotinian position and it plays a decisive role in his discussion of the flying man argument in the *Išārāt*.

Once again, Plotinus is not content to provide a third-person account of the soul's unity. Rather, he explains how it is that the unity of the soul is experienced from a first-person

⁶⁰ Cf. Kaukua who writes “Avicenna’s dualism is thus ultimately based on the traditional view that intellectuality entails incorporeality. But since he argues for a strong unity of the soul despite the multiplicity of its faculties, Avicenna thinks that incorporeality is not exclusive to an intellectual ‘part’ of the human being. On the contrary, each of us is incorporeal even when considered as a soul, that is, as the agent of acts that take place in the body. Since we have experience of remaining the same entity when we think intellectually and when we perceive, desire or move our bodies, Avicenna concludes that the soul behind all these acts is one, and differentiated only by means of its faculties or capacities. With the exception of intellection, the soul’s use of its faculties of course does take place by means of respective corporeal organs, and so the acts are corporeal, but since the agent remains one and the same from one act to another, and since this one agent is capable of intellection, it must be incorporeal” (*Self-Awareness* [above n. 1], p. 44).

⁶¹ Vajda thinks that the following passage of the ps.-*Theology* – which, although an elaboration of Plotinian ideas, has no direct parallel in Plotinus – is behind this comment: “When the soul shapes the member according to the shape suited to receive her faculty, she manifests her faculty from that member. The difference in the faculties of the soul is in the way in which the shapes of the members differ, and the soul does not have differing faculties, nor is she compounded of them: rather she is simple, possessed of a sublime faculty, perpetually giving faculties to bodies. For she is in them in a manner that is simple, not compound, and when the soul comes to give faculties to bodies those faculties are to be ascribed to her, because she is the cause of them, and the qualities of the effect are to be ascribed to the cause rather than to the effect: particularly when they are sublime when they are more appropriate to the cause than to the effect” (p. 41.10-16 Badawī; trans. Lewis, p. 43). However, the following passage which is found a little bit earlier in *Mīmar* II might just as well be the departure point of Avicenna’s comment: “If anyone says: If the soul knows the single simple thing and the compound of many layers at once, how does she become possessed of many faculties, some of them coming first and some last? We say: The power of the soul is single and simple (*qūwa al-naḡsi wāḡida mabsūta*), and it is only in other things and not in her own being that her faculties become many. The proof is that her faculties are one and simple is her activity, for that too is one; although the soul performs many actions, yet she performs them all together, and it is only in the things which receive her activity that her activities, become many and divide, for, since they are corporeal and particulate, they have no power to receive the soul together but receive them in a particulate manner; consequently the plurality of activities is in the things, not in the soul” (pp. 32.3-9 Badawī; trans. Lewis, pp. 65-7).

⁶² Cf. *Inṣāf*, p. 55 = p. 378 Vajda.

perspective. He deals with the simplicity or unity of the soul with constant reference to the nature of human consciousness. The following passage from the ps.-*Theology* illustrates this tendency:

And what prevents the soul, when she is in the upper world, from knowing the object of knowledge at once (*duf'atan wāhidatan*), be the object of knowledge one thing or many? Certainly nothing prevents her from that, because she is simple (*mabsūta*), possessed of simple knowledge, knowing the one thing, be it simple or compound, at once, like the eyesight which sees a whole face at once (*duf'atan wāhidatan*), although the face is compounded of many parts, while the eyesight perceives it as being one and not many (p. 31.2-6 Badawī; trans. Lewis, p. 65).

Consistent with Plotinian doctrine, the ps.-*Theology* attributes real self-knowledge to intellect rather than to soul.⁶³ However, as pointed out above, the ps.-*Theology* tends to blur the line between intellect and soul. The subsequent section of *Mimar* II of the ps.-*Theology* is concerned with self-knowledge of the intellect, but towards the end of the passage it becomes clear that its subject is embodied or individual intellect. The passage reads:

The intellect is its real self in actuality only when it does not cast its gaze on the thing it wishes to know, for it is then its real self in actuality (*huwa mā huwa bi-l-fa'al*). Someone may say: If the intellect does not wish to know anything and does not cast its gaze on anything it must inevitably be empty and void of everything (*fāriḡ khālīn 'an kul ša'*), and this is absurd, because it is the province of the intellect to intelligize always (*ya' qul dā'imān*), and if it always intelligizes it must cast its gaze on the things always, so as never to be its real self (*huwa mā huwa*) in actuality at all, and this is most repugnant. We reply: The intellect is all things, as we have frequently said, so when it intelligizes itself (*dātahu*) it cogitates on all things. This being so, we say that when the intellect sees itself, it sees all things, and so is its real self in actuality (*huwa mā huwa bi-l-fa'al*), because it is only on itself (*'ala dātihu*) and not on anything else that it is casting its gaze, so as to have encompassed all things outside it. When it casts its gaze on the things, it is encompassed in them, and is its real self in potentiality not in actuality (*huwa mā huwa bi-l-qūwa lā bi-l-fa'al*), as we said above. If anyone says: If the intellect cast its gaze now on itself, now on the things, and this is its activity, then it must needs be mutable, while previously we said that the intellect does not change in any respect at all, we say: Even if it does cast its gaze now on itself, now on the things, it is in different places that it does that. For when the intellect is in its intelligible world it does not cast its gaze on anything outside itself but only on itself, and when it is in a world not its own, i.e. the sensible world, it casts its gaze now on the things and now on itself alone (*dātihu faqat*). That comes about because of the state of the body in which it comes to be, through the medium of the soul. (pp. 32.14-33.10 Badawī; trans. Lewis, p. 67 modified).

This is based on a passage of Plotinus that is even more reminiscent of the flying man than is the ps.-*Theology*:

⁶³ On self-knowledge of the Intellect in Plotinus see *Ennead* V 3[49] and the commentary by W. Beierwaltes, *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit*, Klostermann, Frankfurt 1991.

[O]ne should certainly remember that even here below (ἐνταῦθα) when one contemplates (θεωρῆ), especially when the contemplation is clear, one does not turn to oneself (ἐπιστρέφει πρὸς ἑαυτὸν), but one possesses oneself (ἔχει μὲν ἑαυτὸν); one's activity, however, is directed towards the object of contemplation, and one becomes this, offering oneself to it as a kind of matter, being formed according to what one sees, and being oneself then only potentially. Is a man then actually himself in any way when he is thinking nothing at all (ὄταν μηδὲν νοῆ)? Yes, if he is [merely] himself he is empty of everything (κενός ἐστι παντός), when he is thinking nothing at all. But if he is himself in such a way as to be everything, when he thinks himself, he thinks everything at once; so that a man in this state, by this intuition of himself (τῆ μὲν εἰς ἑαυτὸν ὁ τοιοῦτος ἐπιβολῆ), and when he actually sees himself, has everything included in this seeing, and by his intuition of everything has himself included. But if this is what he does, he changes his acts of intelligence, and we ourselves did not think it right to assert this before (Plot., *Enn.*, IV 4[28], 2.4-15).

In the Plotinian original the subject of the passage is the embodied human subject “here below” (ἐνταῦθα), which corresponds essentially to soul. Only at the very end of the passage does Plotinus make reference to acts of intelligence (νοήσεις). In fact, if we read what follows this passage it becomes clear that Plotinus' concern here is to try to determine to what extent self-knowledge at the level of the embodied self can be accounted for in terms of intellection. He will resolve the problem by contrasting knowledge at the level of intellect with knowledge at the level of soul.

The ps.-*Theology* formulates the problem articulated by Plotinus in terminology of a more Aristotelian cast: intellection, act and potency. The author of the ps.-*Theology* also reinterprets the grammatical subject of the Plotinian discourse such that intellect is subject from the very the beginning of the passage. In the Plotinian original the subject of the passage is somewhat ambiguous. In his translation Armstrong renders the ambiguous reference as “one who is here”. This makes good sense, since Plotinus is talking about our, as it were, “normal” existential point of view as inhabitants of the sensible world. Plotinus then proceeds to lead this point of view back to the point of view of the intellect. That is, the text operates on the basis of a contrast between the embodied individual intellect of the ensouled being and intellect taken as a super individual level of reality. Having thus obscured – or, more charitably, “reworked” – the structure of the Plotinian argument, the author of the ps.-*Theology* will a few lines down reinstate a clearer contrast between soul and intellect, reproducing more exactly the structure of the Plotinian argument.

Both the original and the ps.-*Theology*'s adaptation of this passage distinguish two kinds of self-knowledge: 1) the comprehensive self-knowledge of pure intellection and 2) the limited self-knowledge of embodied intellection, i.e. of soul. The comprehensive knowledge of the self-intellection of intellect involves a perfect correspondence between knower and known. It is a permanent immutable state. It is comprehensive in that it includes a grasp of all the forms in the intelligible universe. The limited self-knowledge of the soul involves something akin to the self-knowledge of intellect but lacks comprehensiveness, is not stable and involves a greater degree of alterity. The ps.-*Theology* understands this alterity in terms of act and potency as we saw in the passage cited above: “When it casts its gaze on the things, it is encompassed in them (*muḥāṭan bibā*), and is its real self in potentiality not in actuality (*huwa mā huwa bi-l-qūwa lā bi-l-fa'al*)”. We can gloss this

in terms of soul: the soul is not fully actualized when it is directing its attention outwards and fails to achieve full unification with the intellect. The ps.-*Theology* makes it clear that the soul achieves full actualization and self-knowledge only upon becoming completely one with intellect.⁶⁴

The original passage in the *Enneads* is uncannily reminiscent of the flying man. It talks about an intuition of the self (τῆ μὲν εἰς ἑαυτὸν ... ἐπιβολῆ). And it asks about the nature of selfhood in abstraction from having consciousness of objects. Plotinus asks, “Is a man then actually himself in any way when he is thinking nothing at all (ὅταν μηδὲν νοῆ)? Yes, if he is [merely] himself he is empty of everything (κενός ἐστι παντός), when he is thinking nothing at all”. In the flying man Avicenna does not ask about the nature of the self in the absence of thought but rather in the absence of sensation. However, the structure of the argument is similar. (This, incidentally is a point at which both Plotinus’ and Avicenna’s investigations into self-knowledge look very different from Descartes, since Descartes’ cogito is not an attempt to filter out elements in consciousness but rather to assert what is common to all of them.) Moreover, Plotinus’ idea that grasping the self is better understood as “having the self” (ἔχει ... ἑαυτὸν) certainly echoes in Avicenna’s idea that self-awareness represents a self-relation that does not have the same structure as what we normally call knowledge. It is almost as if Avicenna is in the flying man extrapolating out from the ps.-*Theology* back towards an even more purely Plotinian insight.

Ultimately, both the ps.-*Theology* and Plotinus model the soul’s self-knowledge on the self-knowledge of intellect, but suggest that the failure of the self-knowledge of the soul to be as comprehensive and unified as the knowledge of intellect is a function of the soul’s failure to completely unify its attention.

Against this background, the flying man might be understood as a reminder that the soul is both an immaterial and a unified substance. In the *Išārāt* shortly after outlining the flying man argument, Avicenna writes,

This substance (*ḡawhar*) in you is one (*wāḥid*). Rather, when verified, it is found to be you (*huwa ’anta*). This substance has branches and powers that spread in your organs. (*Išārāt*, vol. 2, pp. 356.1-357.1 Dunya).⁶⁵

Of course, in classical Greek metaphysics every substance is a unity. However, this substance metaphysics developed by Plotinus plays out at the level of psychology in a

⁶⁴ “For when the soul is in the intelligible world she unites with the mind, there being no intermediary thing at all between her and the mind; similarly when the soul leaves this world and enters that upper world, she makes her way to the mind and cleaves to it, and having cleaved to it unites with it without loss of her self; on the contrary she becomes more distinct and purer and cleaner, because she and the mind are then one thing and two, like two species. If the soul is in this state she does not admit change in any way at all but is unchanging in her world, for she knows herself and knows that she knows herself, with a single knowledge, with no division between the two of them, and she becomes like that only because she becomes herself the cogitator and the object of cogitation, and she becomes so only through the intensity of her coalescence and union with the mind, so that it is as if she and it were one” (pp. 34.18-35.8 Badawī; trans. Lewis, p. 69).

⁶⁵ *Al-Išārāt wa-t-tanbīhāt li-Abī ‘Alī ibn Sīnā, ma’a Šarḥ Našīr ad-Dīn at-Tūsī* 4 vols., ed. S. Dunya, Dār al-ma‘ārif, al-Qāhira 1968-72. English translation in S. Inati, *Ibn Sīnā’s Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics*, Columbia U.P., New York 2014, p. 97; French translation in Goichon, *Livre des directives et remarques* (above n. 15), p. 311.

very particular way. His conviction that the metaphysical reality of the self is accessible to experience – rather than being available only via argumentation – seems certainly to be at play in the flying man argument.

Certain formulations of ‘Platonic’ two-worlds models – such as a Cartesian two-substance model – generate insuperable problems of reconciling different orders of being. The Plotinian model – no doubt ‘Platonic,’ but hardly Cartesian – which I suggest can be perceived behind the flying man argument, relies on a softer division between the intelligible and the sensible.⁶⁶ The unity of the soul as espoused by Plotinus plays out at the level of faculty psychology in his conviction that the soul powers are always present in the soul even in the absence of the bodily organs specific to them. As we have seen Avicenna discusses this idea in the *Inṣāf*⁶⁷ and endorses it in the *Iṣārāt*. The implication is that intellection is not the only power of the soul that is ‘intellectual’. Both Plotinus and Avicenna do insist that the intellect is the essence of the soul. What manifest as lower soul powers are on this account integral parts of a unified soul which is properly part of the intelligible world. An awareness that is not localized exclusively in the intellect can on this picture make sense as the act of a unified soul.

The subject of the flying man

Avicenna’s reception of the Plotinian notion of the unity of the soul might aid us in determining the subject of the flying man argument. One might assume that the flying man argument is an act of intellection, or that the imagination or perhaps even the *wahm* are implicated in the process of undertaking the thought experiment.⁶⁸ In light of Avicenna’s reading of the ps.-*Theology* in the *Inṣāf* and in light of the fact that in his psychological works, the flying man generally precedes discussions of the faculties, it seems that the answer to the question of the subject should be simply, “the soul”.

In the *Iṣārāt* Avicenna indicates that the flying man argument points to an immediate form of knowledge. He explicitly denies that any faculty can be invoked to explain the flying man. He writes,

With what do you apprehend (*tadrak*) yourself (*dātahu*) at that time, prior to that time, and posterior to it? Also, what is it of yourself that is apprehended? Is that which apprehends [yourself] one of your external senses, is it your intellect, or a faculty other than your senses and what belongs to them? If it is your intellect or a faculty other than your senses by which you apprehend [yourself], then do you apprehend [it] by means of an intermediary (*bi-wasaṭ*) or without an intermediary (*bi-ḡayr wasaṭ*)? I do not believe that in that case

⁶⁶ Avicenna seems to approve of this. In fact, in the *Inṣāf* Avicenna asserts that body in itself is not the obstacle. He writes, “Indeed, it is not because of its association with the body that the soul is alienated from the higher perfection – if it uses the body in an inappropriate manner – but rather on account of the disposition that emerges in the soul in this way [i.e. because of the way in which it directs its attention]” (*Inṣāf*, pp. 41-42; cf. p. 357 Vajda) and subsequently adds, “When the soul is preoccupied with something, it turns away from other things and is veiled off from them, although discursive thought (*fikra*) can follow a way to an extensive perception (*idrāk*) of the divine reality (*mā’na al-rubūbiyya*). But perception is one thing, true witnessing (*al-maṣābada al-haqqa*) another ... and preoccupations veil off perception, then how about true witnessing!” (*Inṣāf* p. 44; cf. Vajda pp. 360-61).

⁶⁷ *Inṣāf* p. 49 = Vajda pp. 356-7.

⁶⁸ Avicenna hesitated to answer the question concerning which faculty is the subject of flying man argument. See Kaukua, *Self-Awareness* (above n. 1) p. 98.

you are in need of an intermediary. Thus it is without an intermediary [that you apprehend yourself]. It remains, therefore, that you apprehend yourself without the need for another faculty or an intermediary (*ḡayr iftiqār ila qūwa ukbra wa ila wasaʿ*). Hence it remains that you do so by means of your [external] senses or internal [powers] without an intermediary. Reflect further! (*Išārāt*, pp. 345.3-346.3 Dunya; trans. Inati, pp. 94-5, cf. Goichon pp. 305-8)

Avicenna thus denies that the soul in self-knowledge must or even can be conceived in terms of faculties. This suggests that Avicenna thinks that self-knowledge at the level of soul is the work of the power of soul conceived generically. However, Avicenna does not tell us how exactly this works. It is very tempting to see Avicenna as endorsing a view of self-knowledge at the level of soul as this view is presented by Plotinus and represented in the ps.-*Theology*: on this view, as we have seen above, self-knowledge at the level of soul is to be understood as analogous to self-knowledge at the level of intellect. The difference between self-knowledge at the level of soul and self-knowledge at the level of intellect is a matter of degree. Self-knowledge at the level of soul is subject to distraction and dispersion, or as the ps.-*Theology* puts it, it involves an incomplete actualization of potential.

3. *The Flying Man and Ethical Practice*

Plotinian ethics draw on several models: a Stoic model of freeing the self from affections, an Aristotelian model of virtue ethics, Platonic care ethics (particularly as formulated in the *Phaedrus*) and a model involving assimilation to the divine (the *ὁμολώσις θεῶν* of the *Theaetetus*). This final model is associated with the pursuit of self-knowledge because the self in Platonic metaphysics includes a divine element. Becoming like God (in fact Plotinus rarely uses the term God, but rather refers to the One and Intellect) is achieved by leading an ethically pure life (often construed in terms of virtue ethics) and perfecting the intellect (construed in terms of contemplation). It is achieved by way of a progressive process of “ascent” or “elevation”. This model might be seen as the dominant paradigm in Plotinian ethics.⁶⁹ Although it can be inflected in a soteriological manner it also coincides with a eudaimonistic model where happiness is to be found precisely in the elevation of soul to intellect. The imperative to become like God was, of course, particularly attractive to philosophers pursuing their work in relation to Abrahamic religions, including philosophers of the medieval Islamic world. The model of the elevation of soul to intellect plays a crucial role in Plotinian psychological works that found their way into the ps.-*Theology*. Although it is sometimes suggested that Avicenna did not have an ethics, it is indisputable that Avicenna endorsed something akin to the Plotinian ethical program of elevating (or perfecting) the intellect. In this section, I will consider the possibility that the Avicenna’s flying man argument may have been influenced by ethical structures he found in the ps.-*Theology*.

Much of the ps.-*Theology* focuses on situating the soul in the context of an intelligible universe and providing normative principles concerning how the soul ought to relate to the intelligible universe. The ‘return’ or ‘ascent’ (*ἀνάβασις*) of the soul to the intelligible, resulting

⁶⁹ This model need not be construed in a particularly other-worldly way and is at work in the Platonic and Aristotelian idea that one should have the best part of oneself dominate the person as a whole (see for example Arist., *Eth. Nic.* IX, 8 1168 b 31-32 and 1169 a 2-3).

from a kind of ‘turn’ (ἐπιστροφή), is elaborated at length in various passages of the ps.-*Theology*. Such passages often include axiological claims, the outline of an ethical program, and are characterized by a general soteriological tone. Avicenna comments a number of these passages at length in the *Inṣāf*. He seems to endorse the axiological claims and concomitant ethical program while reproducing the soteriological tone of the ps.-*Theology*. Several of these passages argue that the return to the intelligible can be realized by the neutralization of the senses.

Here is one such passage of the ps.-*Theology* which Avicenna comments:

If this is so we revert and say that the thing wherewith the soul sees (*tarā*) the high intelligible things while she is there, she sees them while she is here, and that is her power. Her activity is but the ascent (*nubūd*) of that power, for she longs to behold that world and her power to perceive things there with the slightest efforts, and here she perceives them only with toil and difficulty. Only in the select few of men and such as are of the fortunate does that power ascend. By this power the soul sees the sublime high things, be she there or here. (pp. 101.18-102.5 Badawī; trans. Lewis, p. 75)⁷⁰.

In his comments on this passage Avicenna shows particular interest in the notion of “ascent” (*nubūd*), so it is worth citing the definition of it which occurs in the ps.-*Theology* a few lines below the passage we have just read: “By ‘ascent’ (*nubūd*) I mean that when the soul desires knowledge of the world of intellect her power rises (*rafa* ‘at *qūwaha*) from this lowly world”.⁷¹ Avicenna will explain at some length how the avoidance of sense distraction affects the state of the soul. According to Avicenna neutralizing the distraction of the senses ultimately leads to *al-mašāhada al-ḥaqqā*. Vajda translates this as “true contemplation” (contemplation véritable). The term “contemplation” suggests that the Greek concept of θεωρία might be at play here. But *al-mašāhada al-ḥaqqā* literally means “true witnessing” indicating an experience which is not to be unpacked simply in terms of intellection as θεωρία normally is. Indeed, the term *mašāhada* suggests a reference to Sufi ideas and might be translated as “testimony”, “experience” or “vision”:⁷²

⁷⁰ Lewis’ translation of *qūwa* (corresponding to δύναμις in the Greek of the passage that follows) as “potentiality” is very problematic. That the term should be translated by “power” here (as often in the Arabic Plotinus, since Plotinus is explicitly critical of the distinction between act-potency as developed by Aristotle: see *Enn.* II 5[25]) is obvious in the passage immediately preceding this one. As it stands, Lewis’ translation of this passage is almost non-sensical: “We reply that the soul knows the high intelligible things here by the potentiality whereby she knew them while she was there, except that when she entered the body she needed something else whereby to attain the things she used to acquire when naked, so potentiality manifested activity and made it function, because the soul found her potentiality sufficient, potentiality being, in the high intellectual substances, that which manifests and perfects activity, whereas in the corporeal substances it is activity that perfects potentiality and brings it to the limit” (p. 101.12-17 Badawī; trans. Lewis, p. 75).

⁷¹ Cf. p. 102 Badawī; trans. Lewis, p. 75. Sebti translates *nubūd* by ‘éveil’ (M. Sebti, “La notion de *Muṣāhada* dans la philosophie d’Avicenne”, in D. Cohen-Levinas – G. Roux – M. Sebti [eds.], *Lectures philosophiques de la mystique dans les trois monothéismes*, Hermann, Paris 2015, pp. 187-211 esp. p. 167). This term is rather common in the ps.-*Theology*. Vajda translates it by ‘élan’ which with its Bergsonian overtones suggests a very dynamic metaphysical and moral movement. The Arabic does indeed seem to have positive connotations beyond the English “ascent”. Hans Wehr translates: *nubūd* “raising, boosting, revival, restoration, promotion, advancement, furtherance, encouragement, activation”. In modern Arabic it has been used to refer to rebellion and even airplane take off.

⁷² Hans Wehr suggests for *muṣāhada* translations such as “seeing, viewing, witnessing, inspection”. See Sebti, “La notion de *Muṣāhada* dans la philosophie d’Avicenne” (above n. 71).

[The author] mentions true contemplation (*al-mašāhada al-ḥaqqā*): this is that in which one turns⁷³ towards the true forms without needing to look towards that to which they [the forms] give birth or that which proceeds from them [i.e. the forms]. This occurs when the power is completed and perfect and [the soul] contemplates the true genus by its power, without engaging other means than that which the text calls “ascent” (*nubūd*) that is, the fact of turning away (*i'rād*) from this world and its preoccupations and turning towards the true world. But this ascent is useless when the soul is separated from body (*Inšāf*, p. 71.18-21; cf. p. 403 Vajda).

What is important in our present study is, first of all, the notion of preoccupation (*šāgil*, pl. *šawāgil*) running parallel to the idea put forward in the earlier passage that the occupation of the senses hinders awareness or perception of higher realities. Avicenna glosses the notion of “ascent” (*nubūd*) which he finds in the ps.-*Theology* with the notion of “renunciation” or “rejection” (*i'rād*). The relationship between ascent and renunciation is can certainly be found Plotinus generally, but it is by no means obviously at work in this context. This may have something to do with the fact that in the ps.-*Theology*'s “definition” of “ascent” (*nubūd*) the term for “rising up” (*rafa'a-yarfa'u*) can also mean “remove” or “eliminate”.

If we appeal only to Plotinian thought, we would point to the notion of the undescended soul which occurs *expressis verbis* in the same context as the very first passage from the ps.-*Theology* that we looked at above:

We say that the soul does not descend in her entirety to this lower world of sense, neither the universal nor our souls, but part of her remains in the world of mind, not quitting it, since it is not possible that a thing should quit its world completely save by its corruption and emergence from being [...] We say that every soul has something that is joined to the body and is joined to the mind above (pp. 90.9-91.5 Badawī; trans. Lewis, pp. 249-51).

Of course, since Avicenna rejects the preexistence of the soul, he cannot endorse the view that the soul animates the body by descending into it. Yet in his major psychological works, Avicenna does adapt Plotinus' notion of the undescended soul in his doctrine of the two faces of the soul.⁷⁴

On Practice

Avicenna comments in the *Inšāf* on the ideas that 1) the elevation of the soul to intellect requires some kind of organized practice and effort and 2) results in happiness. He writes,

In the present context, the effort is the work that the soul does to turn itself from the immediate object of love which is the body, in order to give its attention to the true object of love. At first this requires a painful effort, and practice is necessary so that it become natural. Happiness in the beyond is the reward for this effort. (*Inšāf*, pp. 44.17-45.3; cf. p. 362 Vajda)⁷⁵.

⁷³ The text has a negation here, but, following Vajda's suggestion (in a footnote to his translation), I suppress it, since otherwise the text seems to not make sense.

⁷⁴ As noted above. Cf. *Inšāf* p. 69; cf. p. 399 Vajda.

⁷⁵ Several other passages in the *Inšāf* deal with similar themes. Avicenna evokes the Platonic idea of happiness as a prize or reward for athletic or soldier-like efforts (*Resp.* X, 621 C-D; cf. Plot., *Enn.* IV 3[27], 32.24-27;

Avicenna explains that the end of humans is to perfect the intellect:

[In the case of] the rational soul, the perfection proper to it consists in its becoming an intellectual world in the which there is impressed the form of the whole; the order in the whole that is intellectually apprehended; and the good that emanates on the whole, beginning with the Principle of the whole [and] proceeding then to the noble, spiritual, absolute substances, then to the spiritual substances – [substances] that in some manner are connected to bodies – then to the exalted bodies with their configurations and powers, and so on until it completes within itself [the realization of] the structure of existence in its entirety. It thus becomes transformed into an intelligible world that parallels the existing world in its entirety, witnessing that which is absolute good, absolute beneficence, [and] true absolute beauty, becoming united with it, imprinted with its example and form, affiliated with it, and becoming of its substance.⁷⁶

Avicenna's account of ethical ends functions on the basis of an axiology in which intellect contrasts starkly with lower levels of soul. If there is dualism in Plotinus, Avicenna goes even further writing,

If this is compared with the loved perfections belonging to the other faculties [of soul], it would be found to be of [so high a] rank that it would be repugnant [even] to say that it is better and more complete than [these lower perfections]. Indeed, [these latter] have in no respect any comparison with it in terms of virtue, completion, abundance, and the rest of that with which the pleasures of apprehended things are completed, which we have mentioned.⁷⁷

That Avicenna sees the elevation of the soul as the result of effort which terminates in happiness is clearly explained in the following passages of the *Metaphysics* of the *Šifā'*:

We have established the true nature of the afterlife and have proved that true happiness in the hereafter is achieved through the soul's purification. The soul's purification removes it away from the acquisition of bodily dispositions opposed to the means for happiness. This purification is realized through moral [states] and positive dispositions. Moral states and positive dispositions are acquired by acts whose task is to turn the soul away from the body and the senses and to make continuous its remembrance of its [true] element. For if the soul returns to itself, it will not be affected by the bodily states. What will remind [the soul] of this and help it [achieve this state] are certain arduous acts that lie outside natural habit; indeed, they are more on the side of a burdened exertion.⁷⁸

Avicenna asserts that neutralization of the senses affects the ability of the soul to be aware of other aspects of reality. What is more, he thinks that turning away from the

there is also an important Cynic background): "The pure soul turns away from this world, even while is still associated with the body, not recalling with what happens to it and not liking to mention it. How wonderful the soul having achieved the happiness of total abstraction and connection with the truth!" (*Inṣāf* p. 48.3-5; cf. Vajda, p. 368).

⁷⁶ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, ed. and trans. by M. Marmura, Brigham Young UP, Provo 2005, p. 350.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

senses results in – or at least is involved with – a “higher” state of the soul. On the one hand, the Platonic ascent from the cave can be interpreted in naturalistic and scientific terms. Perhaps in the flying man argument Avicenna wants the reader to “rise” to a higher scientific perspective appropriate to understanding the soul. And the elevation of the soul in a kind of spiritual hierarchy does not seem a priori to be involved in the flying man argument as it figures in the *Šifā’*. There the flying man argument is presented as a theoretical tool in a context largely devoid of any ethical concerns. Pointing to a permanent feature of the soul hardly seems to be transformative in any ethical sense. Perhaps Avicenna saw in the Neoplatonic philosophical exercises a model which he transposed into a more clearly delineated epistemological context. According to this reading Avicenna was able to abstract from an ethical (and soteriological context) a thought structure which serves as an epistemological foundation.

On the other hand, Avicenna’s explicit endorsement of a Neoplatonic ethical program involving elevation of the soul makes it hard to imagine that he could invoke neutralization of the senses without at least passing concern for the elevation of soul. The flying man in the *Išārāt* looks very different from the versions in the *Šifā’*. This is largely a matter of context. The flying man figures at a point in the text of the *Išārāt* where, having treated logic (extensively) and corporeal substance (rather briefly), Avicenna is about to talk about the divine. It would be preemptory to conclude on the basis of the position of the flying man in the structure of the *Išārāt* that Avicenna sees the flying man as an argument pointing to the true ‘divine’ part of the self on a Neoplatonic ethical model of elevation of soul to intellect. Yet there is an unmistakable cohesion between the comments in the *Inšāf*, the flying man, and the overarching Neoplatonic ethical program that Avicenna endorses both in the Metaphysics of the *Šifā’* and the *Išārāt*.

If Avicenna had ethics in mind when formulating his flying man argument, then perhaps it might serve less as a proof than as a practical tool for realizing the nature of the true self as it figures in the intelligible cosmos. In other words, the flying man argument might serve as what Pierre Hadot refers to as an *exercice spirituel*. I translate Hadot’s term as “philosophical exercise” on account of what I take to be the misleading connotations of the word “spiritual” in English.⁷⁹ In fact, Hadot himself in applying the notion of philosophical exercise to Plotinus, a notion he developed in the first instance with reference to Roman Stoics, cites passages concerning the soul’s self-knowledge which are related to those passages of the ps.-*Theology* which may have served as a source for Avicenna in the formulation of his flying man argument.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Although even in French the word *spirituel* certainly can have religious connotations, it also clearly relates to more natural phenomena, such as “wit”, “mind”, and “intellect”. It is worth recalling that Hadot even translated the Greek νοῦς as *esprit* in his translations of Plotinus into French. In English, however, the religious and supernatural meanings associated with the term “spiritual” overwhelm connotations connected to mind and intellect. My sense is that it would make much more sense to talk about a “philosophic exercise” when referring to what Hadot was interested in in philosophy. Moreover, “spirit” commonly translates the Greek πνεῦμα in the context of Christian thought.

⁸⁰ Hadot writes of Plotinus, “In the philosophy of Plotinus, spiritual exercises are of fundamental importance. Perhaps the best example can be found in the way Plotinus defines the essence of the soul and its immateriality. If we have doubts about the immortality and immateriality of the soul, says Plotinus, this is because we are accustomed to see it filled with irrational desires and violent sentiments and passions. If one wants to know the nature

In general, rather than presenting itself as a purely objective account of theoretical positions, the *ps.-Theology* adopts a hortatory tone. It develops theoretical positions in the general context of a practical ethical program. This is particularly true of the passages concerned with sense perception and the nature of the self. A question of crucial importance which emerges in the context of Avicenna's commentary on the *ps.-Theology* is: to what extent might the practical or ethical aspect of the *ps.-Theology's* treatment of self-knowledge and sense-perception be at play in the flying man argument? Should perhaps the flying man argument be understood as a philosophical exercise?

Characterizing the flying man argument as an exercise intended to affect the disposition of the philosopher at a practical level makes sense in the context of the *Išārāt*. However, such a characterization fits less easily in the context of the *Šifā'*, a theoretical work adhering closely to the principles of Aristotelian science. Nevertheless, to characterize the flying man as a spiritual exercise is not that far from previous readings of the argument. Already McGinnis' suggestion that we should understand the "flying man" not as a proof but rather as a "tool so that one can think rightly about what he believes that we humans are" sounds something like a philosophic exercise. The idea of the flying man as a philosophical exercise is also compatible with Kaukua's interpretation of the flying man argument as providing a kind of non-reducible first-person perspective.⁸¹ Nevertheless, if the flying man performed as an exercise might indeed play a role in affecting the disposition of the philosopher, this does not seem to be its exclusive function.

We do in any case find at work in the flying man parallels to the axiological structure in the Neoplatonic account of the turning away from the senses that we find in the *ps.-Theology*. We have, then, in Avicenna two thirds of the Neoplatonic triad *κατάβασις* (descent) – *ἐπιστροφή* (turn) – *ἀνάβασις* (return). There can be no *κατάβασις*. Or if there is, it occurs at

of a thing, one must examine it in its pure state, since every addition to a thing is an obstacle to the knowledge of that thing. When you examine it, then, remove from it everything that is not itself; better still remove all your stains from yourself and examine yourself, and you will have faith in your immortality. (I 5[7], 10, 28-32) [...] Here we can see how the demonstration of the soul's immateriality has been transformed into experience. Only he who liberates himself and purifies himself from the passions, which conceal the true reality of the soul, can understand that the soul is immaterial and immortal. Here, knowledge is a spiritual exercise" (P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Blackwell, Oxford 1995, pp. 100-1).

⁸¹ See Kaukua's summary in his conclusion: "Again, it is true that Avicenna held the human substance at its barest, in the undeveloped state of mere first perfection, to be nothing but a first-personal perspective to a variety of its potential determinations, that is, to the various acts human beings are capable of, or to the perceptions, volitions and cognitions they have the means to acquire. Considered in isolation, this perspective is not constituted by anything, and thus cannot be described or defined by means of anything more elementary. This, however, does not mean that Avicenna considered such pure first-personality to be the whole story about our possibilities to exist in the first person. Although he did not present a sustained analysis, the remarks he makes on self-reflection and the individuation of human beings, for instance, suggest that his account of the concrete first-personality instantiated in persons like you and me would have been considerably more complex and inclusive of the various accidental determinations we in fact have. The I-ness he focuses on is an abstraction, a minimal condition we must fulfill in order to exist in the first place, and it is only this aspect of us that he holds to be unanalysable" (Kaukua, *Self-Awareness* [above n. 1], p. 229). Recall that Kaukua wrote, "To thus sum up this quick foray into pre-Avicennian Arabic concepts of self and self-cognition, we can say that all the texts we have brought up [including the Arabic Plotinus] hinge on the activity of either human or superhuman intellect. From an Avicennian point of view, they deal with something that presupposes, rather than explains, what should properly and in the most basic sense be called self-awareness" (p. 100). If, as Kaukua asserts, self-awareness is 'unanalysable,' might it be true that Avicenna, too, 'presupposes' self-awareness?

a level distinct from that of the individual soul, which only comes to be in the composite of matter and form. However, in the *Inṣāf*, in the Metaphysics of the *Šifā'* and to a large extent in the *Iṣārāt* Avicenna clearly gives us a program for ἐπιστροφή and ἀνάβασις. All the talk of elevation or return ultimately has its sources in Plato: the cave analogy of the *Republic*, the charioteer's flight to the intelligible in the *Phaedrus*, and the ladder of love in the *Symposium*. At least in some sense, then, Avicenna was a Platonist, even if malgré lui.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have identified a few elements in the ps.-*Theology* also discussed by Avicenna in the *Inṣāf* which appear to be relevant to the flying man argument: neutralization of the senses, ascent, a conception of soul as a unified power, undescended soul (reflected in Avicenna's idea of the two faces of the soul) and the overarching Neoplatonic ethical program.

Although my goal in this study has been to present direct textual evidence for the claim that Avicenna's flying man was at least in part inspired by a reading of the Arabic Plotinus, I offer a tentative interpretation of the basic meaning of the argument against this background. In the context of the question of the nature of the true self Avicenna seems to endorse the view that the self is ultimately intellect, which – in accord with a Plotinian paradigm – is self-aware and has self-knowledge. Avicenna adopts the Plotinian notion of the unity of the soul and its powers and he believes that the self-knowledge of intellect can become manifest at the level of an awareness which is accessible in normal human experience and even as pre-experience (in sleep). This awareness, which can be abstracted from sense-perception, corresponds to the true substance and essence of self.

There can be little doubt that Avicenna took at very least some inspiration from the ps.-*Theology* for his flying man argument. An even stronger claim might be in order: the complex Plotinian attempts to articulate the nature of the self and human consciousness on the border between two worlds nourished Avicenna's thought.