

Sources of the Self in the Arabic Tradition: Remarks on the Avicennan Turn

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Abstract Within the long history of Aristotelian psychological theorization, Avicenna stands out for his tightly argued and conceptually rich understanding of self-awareness. For Avicenna, a primitive and immediate form of self-awareness is explanatory of a range of phenomena, from the unity of our psychic functions to our very existence as cognizing individuals. The extent of Avicenna's influence is beginning to be recognized in the scholarship: it remains an open question what, if anything, might have influenced him. In this essay I point to Islamic theological discussions regarding immediate self-knowledge as a possible relevant parallel. The Muslim theologians' interests lay elsewhere, however, and their ontology of the soul diverged sharply from the Aristotelian, being atomist and occasionalist. Through evoking earlier Sufi attempts to flesh out a formal presentation of the soul to match their commitment to character reformation, I suggest that the Avicennan presentation of self-awareness provided an access point for religious writers to begin employing an Aristotelian psychology, given that it responded to existing theoretical concerns.

Since the publication of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, the historical roots of the modern Western understanding of subjectivity and selfhood have been undergoing review. Within this realignment of the overall scholarly narrative, a consensus has rapidly coalesced around the view that something remarkable occurs in the works of the Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā, the Latin Avicenna (980–1037 CE). Across his psychological treatises, Avicenna develops a theory of animal and human consciousness that builds on the earlier Aristotelian tradition while at the same time advancing several bold and novel claims. Foremost among these is the notion that a first-order primitive form of self-awareness is ineradicable and constitutes the bedrock of our continuous stream of consciousness, ultimately accounting for our very existence as individual and unitary beings. Avicenna furthermore contends that a second-order, self-reflective form of awareness is available to us as human beings,

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allowing for rational oversight of some of our psychic functions. Taken as a whole, Avicenna's psychology may yet come to be regarded as the most consciously self-centred (pun intended) theory of human cognition and subjectivity to be found in the Western tradition prior to Descartes.

Thanks to the efforts of Meryem Sebtı, Jari Kaukua, Deborah Black, Ahmed Alwishah, and others, we can claim to understand the nature of Avicenna's contribution better than we did, say, a generation ago.¹ But what of Avicenna's influences, and what of his influence?

As regards the latter, and to address first Avicenna's impact on Latin philosophy, Dag Hasse's 2000 survey monograph *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West* gives an overview of the early scholastic reception of Avicenna's so-called Flying Man thought experiment from the encyclopaedia *The Healing*, while scholars starting with Alain de Libera have done valuable work revising the received wisdom concerning what was once known as the "Avicennan-Augustinian" strand of Latin scholasticism.² Equivalently, and in a manner that is more exciting still, several outstanding studies have shown how the Flying Man undergoes a series of transformations in the early Arabic reception of Avicenna, ranging from Avicenna's master student Bahmanyār (d. 1067) to Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d. 1164).³ What is more, the reader can now trace the contours of a sophisticated and many-sided debate stretching from al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), through thirteenth-century commentators of the likes of al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274) and Ibn Kammūna (d. 1284), all the way to seventeenth-century authors of the likes of Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) and beyond.⁴ Yet even as the efforts of contemporary researchers in mapping out these developments are to be lauded, the results must still be regarded as provisional. If the conceptual richness of Avicenna's pioneering discussion is anything like what the current scholarly consensus suggests, then it may take a generation more of concentrated scholarly effort to map out with precision the many ways in which the Avicennan materials get reworked over the centuries.

What is more, all this expressly philosophical activity only constitutes the tip of the iceberg. It is by now well known that by the end of the twelfth century, Muslim theologians were in the process of abandoning the earlier, corpuscularist as well as

¹ See, e.g., Sebtı (2000), 102–111, Kaukua (2007), Black (2008); Alwishah's results from his 2006 UCLA PhD dissertation remain unpublished to the best of my knowledge.

² Note that the psychological part of the *Healing* was available since the late twelfth century in Gundissalinus's Latin translation, but that the Latin scholastic authors knew neither about Avicenna's remarks on the "Flying man" in the late *Pointers and Reminders* nor – crucially – his comments in the *Glosses* regarding our self-awareness as the grounds of our very existence.

³ For Bahmanyār see Sebtı (2005–2006), also Sebtı (2012), 532–539; for Abū al-Barakāt, see Kaukua's contribution to this volume; related research has also been presented by Lukas Muehlethaler on several occasions, although I am not aware of a publication; Pines (1954) offers a valuable earlier look.

⁴ Muehlethaler (2009) sketches out some of the earlier history leading up to Ibn Kammūna, while Kaukua (2014) canvasses the major figures of Avicenna, al-Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā. See also Marcotte (2006) for al-Suhrawardī and Kaukua (2010) for the somewhat anomalous place occupied by the enormously influential Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240) in the discussions.

occasionalist analysis of the soul and instead coming around to a broadly Avicennan/Aristotelian conception. Sufi and other spiritual authors similarly gravitated towards a broadly Avicennan representation of human psychology, following a period when more varied resources were called upon to expound on the human heart's relation to the cosmos, on the one hand, and its creator, on the other.

As Ayman Shihadeh has observed, scholars so far have proved reluctant to speculate on the feeding grounds for these latter, far-reaching changes in Islamic learning.⁵ Likely the sweeping nature of the questions involved has led the majority of researchers to exercise prudence and to concentrate instead on individual case studies. Throwing caution to the wind, I would here like to address some of these larger questions, even if impressionistically. What I want to do is take a bird's-eye-view of the intellectual scene leading up to Avicenna in order to contextualize his remarkable success. The pertinent questions to ask are these: what for an eleventh/twelfth-century Muslim readership was the fundamental draw of Avicenna's psychological views, especially his remarks on subjectivity and selfhood? And what, if anything, prepared the grounds for Avicenna's widespread adoption by people outside the narrow circles of professional philosophers?

In a nutshell, it appears to me that nothing in the Muslim intellectual vernacular directly anticipated Avicenna's tightly integrated Peripatetic faculty psychology. In that sense, his accomplishment retains its *sui generis* character. At the same time, pressures accumulating from two sides – theology and Sufi psychology – did prime Muslim scholars to seek solutions that would go beyond what was available in these more indigenous intellectual traditions. From the side of speculative *kalām* theology, the notion was familiar that humans are able to access and affirm their own mental states directly and without fail, while from the side of Sufi spirituality, there was a strong imperative to develop a moral psychology that would allow for real personal growth and a continuous understanding of the person. The second facet proved at least as important as the first when it came to the eventual dominance of the philosophical portrait of subjectivity and selfhood. Both conspired to make Avicenna's views attractive in the wider world of Muslim learning.

Avicenna: A Thumbnail Sketch

A condensed account of Avicenna's doctrine of self and self-awareness is necessary first in order for us to get our bearings. In presenting the following thumbnail sketch I build on the works of other scholars⁶; I am also painting a composite picture that purposefully skirts points of controversy and scholarly disagreement. Such is, for instance, the question of animal self-awareness, which, although an important philosophical question in its own right, touches only tangentially on the themes of the present investigation, which, to restate the point, is motivated by certain shifts in the

⁵ Shihadeh (2012), 475–476.

⁶ See note 1 for references.

way human self-awareness is treated in the Islamic materials.⁷ The following presentation, in other words, in no way aspires to be a research contribution, instead, it serves a purely perfunctory capacity.

The so-called Flying Man remains the most useful point of departure. Avicenna first presents his famous thought experiment in the section on the soul in his largest and best-known encyclopaedic work, *The Healing*, as a pointer (*ishāra*) to, and reminder (*tanbīh*) of, the human soul's basic immateriality and its separability from the body. On Avicenna's instructions, one is to bracket first of all (a) all experience (memory, imagination) and (b) all present sensation, which is to say the testimony of both the inner and the outer senses. Even under such conditions, Avicenna contends, no-one with genuine insight (*baṣīra*) will deny that the test subject will affirm the existence of her own self or essence (*wujūd al-dhāt*).⁸ To the contrary, there will be an affirmation (*ithbāt*) of this by anyone endowed with a sound disposition.⁹

The immediate purpose of the thought experiment is to lend plausibility to a thesis whose truth in Avicenna's opinion should be intuitively obvious to any mind that remains unencumbered by false precepts or pernicious opinion – namely, that we are not our bodies. This impression is reinforced by the reuse of aspects of the Flying Man in the *Immolation Destination*, a separate treatise on the soul that stems from the same period in Avicenna's life as the drafting of the *Healing*.¹⁰ In the *Immolation Destination*, Avicenna also suggests that what the thought experiment primarily shows is that an affirmation of the 'I' persists even in the absence of the limbs, the flesh, or the body, and that the 'I' in question must therefore be conceptually independent of these things. Such an affirmation is also independent of whether one is at all cognizant of the heart or the brain, or of their role in the management of the various psychic functions.¹¹ It remains to be determined what the essence is whose existence is disclosed in the Flying Man's immediate act of self-affirmation; Avicenna is even willing to concede that the Flying Man of itself by no means amounts to a demonstrative proof for its (modest) thesis.¹²

⁷For a careful comparison of non-human and human forms of self-awareness in Avicenna's works see López-Farjeat (2012).

⁸As has been noted by commentators from Druart (1988, 34) onwards, there is a crucial terminological elision here, inasmuch as the Arabic *dhāt* which is recognized and whose existence is affirmed can denote either a thing's essence or its 'self' in the indexical sense of that term.

⁹The last term is *khulq kāmīl*, which I take to refer to the putative test subject's capacity for passing sound judgement; *Al-Shifā': al-Nafs* I.1, 15–16 Rahman.

¹⁰On this title and its dating and positioning within Avicenna's authorship see Gutas (2014), 472–477.

¹¹*Risāla adḥawiyya*, 141–145. Presumably, the point made in evoking the special status of the heart and the brain is that a philosophical examination of the essence (*dhāt*) of one's soul or self (*nafs* – another inherently polyvalent term, see section "Sufi Self-Examination" below) does not reduce to mere physiological facts, regardless of whether those are construed in accordance with Aristotelian or Galenic principles.

¹²On this point see, e.g., Kaukua (2007), 72–74. Important here is the fact that the possibility of the Flying Man appears to be entertained by the estimative faculty: on the role of estimation in thought experiments see Kukkonen (2014).

For all that, the thought experiment brings with it several important findings that Avicenna can put to use across multiple domains. There is first of all the first-person indexical function that one's awareness of oneself serves in every cognitive act, something at which we have already hinted. Even the dreamer's sleep and the profoundly intoxicated person's experiences carry a mine-ness that leads one to conclude naturally, instinctually, and unmistakably that whatever happened, happened to her or him. From this, the unity of the soul follows, which is perhaps the single most important function that self-awareness serves in Avicenna's revised Aristotelian psychology. It is our continual self-awareness that allows us to say 'I saw that and became angry', or 'I tasted this and thirsted for more', with various psychic acts flowing seamlessly in service of a unified field of experience and action.¹³ There is an ineluctable unity, both synchronic and diachronic, that our awareness imposes on all our experiences and that could not be achieved otherwise.

Self-awareness furthermore allows for the individuation of human souls on a phenomenological and thereby also an ontological level. Jari Kaukua detects in Avicenna's use of self-awareness an argument for its individuating function already in the *Psychology of the Healing*.¹⁴ More explicitly, as a justly famous passage folded into Avicenna's *Glosses* has it, if our awareness of ourselves (*dhātunā*) constitutes our very existence (*nafs wujūdunā*), then it is the very coming into being of self-aware human beings that guarantees their individuation beyond the standard Aristotelian account of individuation by matter (which is apt to fall away at the moment of the death of one's body and the dissolution of the body-soul compound).¹⁵ This is innate knowledge, which in Avicenna's thought makes it implicit: we do not have to take ourselves or our thoughts as an *object* of our thought in order to possess this kind of primitive self-awareness. Nor does it require any level of theoretical or objective understanding of what that essence is that possesses this awareness.¹⁶

Kalām Self-Knowledge

Avicenna's conception of human consciousness is nothing if not striking. It takes the familiar Peripatetic psychological framework, then injects an intuitive appeal to self-awareness into its core that at once changes everything and nothing. Avicenna's self-aware subject is able to order and regulate her various psychic functions as so many facets of a single experience; her unity of consciousness extends to a diachronic continuum unperturbed by bodily changes and modifications; she is even

¹³ See, e.g., *al-Shifā': al-Nafs* V.7 and *Ishārāt*, 119. The primary importance of psychic unity is stressed especially by Deborah Black (2008).

¹⁴ Kaukua (2007), 79–80, referring to *Al-Shifā': al-Nafs* V.3, 226–227 Rahman.

¹⁵ *Ta'liqāt*, 161.

¹⁶ This is to say that the *dhāt* in Avicenna's sentence construction is to be understood in the reflexive sense: in every perception and thought, and even in the absence of either, is carried the affirmation of ourselves as the subject of this presence or absence.

capable of transcending the limits of embodied existence thanks to the first-person indexical nature of her intellectual acts, which conspire to guarantee her a place among the separable substances rather than being relegated to the standard fate of any hylomorphic compound. The question then arises: does Avicenna base his distinctive take on the human psyche on any existing precedent?

I do not know of any thoroughgoing attempts besides Meryem Sebtî's to canvass possible precedents to Avicenna's reconceptualization of human subjectivity or the way that self-awareness figures in his philosophical psychology and ontology of the soul.¹⁷ This may be because Avicenna's theory of self-awareness is so self-evidently original that no antecedents are imaginable; or perhaps philosophers working on Avicenna have considered it sufficient at this stage to construe a viable interpretation of his own writings, with little heed paid to possible distractions such as antecedents or influences. Either stance would be eminently understandable. What would be strange was if Avicenna's Flying Man were to be left suspended in a vacuum indefinitely.

This is not a matter of searching for precursors simply for the search's sake, nor is it in any way meant to undermine the extent to which we should regard Avicenna as a true philosophical original. In the first place, the record clearly shows that even if every element in Avicenna's treatment of the soul came from pre-existing sources, his synthesis would still retain its distinctive character. In the second place, and more as a matter of general principle, the notion is surely both false and unhelpful that it somehow lessens the value of a given philosophical insight or innovation if it turns out that pieces of it have been acquired from elsewhere.

The point can be handily illustrated through the example of Avicenna's metaphysics. Rob Wisnovsky has painstakingly shown how elements of Avicenna's pioneering treatment of necessary and possible existence are lifted from late antique and *kalām* discussions, yet given a distinctive and highly creative spin by Avicenna and integrated into a tightly woven metaphysical framework.¹⁸ I contend that it can similarly serve a positive purpose to establish the extent to which Avicenna in his treatment of consciousness builds on pre-existing materials or responds to existing concerns. By examining the uses of self-awareness in Avicenna, as compared to other authors, and the resources on which these different thinkers and intellectual traditions draw, we will be in a better position to understand the particular way in which Avicenna's own thought functions; also, what appeal it held for contemporaries as well as subsequent generations of thinkers.

Moving past such metalevel considerations, one must admit right off the bat that close precursors to Avicenna's treatment of human consciousness are hard to come

¹⁷ Sebtî (2000), 117–120 points to a passage in the Plotinian *Theology of Aristotle* (*mīmar* 1, paraphrasing Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.8.1) and another in the Hermetic *Kitāb mu'ādhala al-naḥs*, each of which is interesting in the present context. I would contend, however, that the *Theology*'s description of casting the body aside only shares surface similarities with Avicenna's Flying Man, while the Hermetic treatise is of marginal importance historically. Sebtî further mentions Jāhīz's brief report on the Mu'tazilite theologian Mu'ammār Ibn 'Abbād al-Sulamī (d. 830 CE): this seems to me more apposite, as it connects up with the narrative I sketch out below.

¹⁸ See Wisnovsky (2003), Madelung (2006) offers further materials.

by in the philosophical tradition. One finds a discussion in late antiquity, interesting in its own right, of the so-called attentive faculty (*to prosektikon*), a Neoplatonist conceptual innovation designed to account, e.g., for our ability to see that we do not see.¹⁹ But that late antique discussion does not readily map on to what we find in Avicenna, which is not surprising, given that the principal sources we have for the “attentive faculty” – pseudo-Simplicius, pseudo-Philoponus – may not have been known to the Arabs or at any rate exploited by Avicenna. Seven years after Jari Kaukua and I published a short piece on sense-perception and self-awareness in Arabic thought, I can still do no better than to recite our tacit admission of defeat: “For purposes of exploring the Muslim philosophers’ views on consciousness and awareness it is perhaps safest at this stage to treat them as constituting a fresh start.”²⁰

What Kaukua and I did not give adequate consideration to at the time was the fact that Muslim philosophizing extends beyond the comparatively narrow confines of Arabic Aristotelianism (Arabic Aristotelianism, in Venn diagram fashion, in turn embraces Jewish and Christian interlocutors as well as Muslims). This, it turns out, may have been a mistake. For in formal Islamic theology, or *kalām*, we find at least one crucial Avicennian tenet presaged, *viz.*, the notion that one may access one’s soul or self (Ar. *nafs*, a term that is crucially ambiguous) in an affirmative fashion and through a direct and irrefutable cognition that is beyond anyone’s ability to doubt. In various *kalām* treatises from the classical period, and especially in the school of thought named after al-Ash‘arī (d. 936 CE), an appeal to our immediate affirmation of our own selves and our mental states is a recurring feature. Whether such antecedents contribute anything to our understanding of Avicenna is the subject of much further investigation; I won’t pretend to be able to assess the matter properly here. But what seems to me uncontroversial is that if one wishes to understand Avicenna’s subsequent success within theological circles, it will be helpful to identify conceptual openings where – whether by accident or by design – what Avicenna had to say fit with existing concerns.

Let us begin with the great Ash‘arite master Abū al-Ma‘ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), who is best known to Western audiences as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s onetime teacher but who enjoys a substantial independent profile in the Muslim world as a theologian and legal scholar. Right at the onset of his *Book of Guidance*, al-Juwaynī lists knowledge of self as one of the types of necessary knowledge.²¹ This is likened to one’s knowledge of perceptions, on the one side, and to one’s knowledge of the impossibility of contraries being united in a single being on the other. In each of these cases, what is important is that the human being – “God’s servant”, to use al-Juwaynī’s parlance – does not have power over these convictions arising: they arise according to the divine decree and God’s custom (the contrast is with acquired knowledge, which for al-Juwaynī signifies knowledge acquired through inference). Accordingly, one cannot avoid having these beliefs, nor are they subject to doubt. One does not ordinarily doubt one’s raw perceptions *qua* perceptions, or the truth of

¹⁹ See Hubler (2005) and for a selection of primary sources Sorabji (2005), 145–158.

²⁰ Kaukua and Kukkonen (2007), 101.

²¹ *Kitāb al-irshād*, 14.

the laws of contradiction and the excluded middle. Neither, so al-Juwaynī contends, does one doubt one's knowledge of oneself.

But what is there to know about oneself in this necessary manner, according to the *kalām* authors? The first and most obvious answer is that what is affirmed is one's own existence; and indeed this seems to be the implication that is prevalent in the Ash'arite theologians' works.²² For example, 'Abd al-Qāhir Ibn Ṭāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 1037) in his manual on the *Fundamentals of Faith* plainly states that it is one's knowledge of one's own existence (*wujūd nafsihi*) that is affirmed. Al-Baghdādī follows this up, though, by stating that primitive mental states are likewise necessarily affirmed. One cannot reasonably doubt what one discovers by way of introspection concerning pain, pleasure, hunger, thirst, heat, cold, sorrow, joy, and the like.²³ This appears similar to the modern epistemological stance that the affective judgement of being in pain is a raw datum, or brute fact, and that as such it lies beyond doubt. What is additionally interesting is that there appears to be a mine-ness to the affective states brought up by al-Baghdādī that goes beyond al-Juwaynī's examples of sense-perception.

Further context for these statements can be garnered by considering the case of al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013). Al-Bāqillānī, who stands on the fringes of the Ash'arite movement, in his *Introduction* lists many of the same examples we find in al-Baghdādī and al-Juwaynī. Besides the evidence conveyed by the five senses there is a sixth type of knowledge that is necessary in character, a knowledge that appears in the soul or in one's self (*fī al-nafs*) originally or from the get-go (*ibtidā'an*), not having been brought on by sense-perceptions.²⁴ The first example of such an innate kind of knowledge mentioned by al-Bāqillānī is the human being's knowledge of oneself, as well as of one's inner states such as wellbeing, illness, pleasure, pain, and so on. Al-Bāqillānī, however, supplements this list by further cognitions of a different sort: one's knowledge of one's own power and impotence (*qudra*, *'ujz*) is of a necessary character, for instance, and the same goes for desire and aversion (another binary pair), perception and blindness, and whatever else one assigns to a living thing. Al-Bāqillānī furthermore says that assigning intentions to speech acts is something that occurs to us necessarily. These are all things that we know without an intermediary, which is to say directly and immediately, with no inferential process involved.²⁵

²² It is not impossible that al-Juwaynī would have drawn inspiration from Avicenna – he certainly did so in the domain of metaphysics – but as we shall see, the Ash'arite line about necessary self-knowledge predates Avicenna, and the evidence points to al-Juwaynī operating within the *kalām* tradition of psychology, not the Avicennan one.

²³ *Kitāb uṣūl al-dīn*, 8.

²⁴ One should not mistake what is being said here: al-Bāqillānī claims that sensory knowledge, too, is necessary. This breaches the conventional requirement that necessary knowledge be immediate rather than arrived at through an intermediary (here, sensation); it appears, therefore, that for al-Bāqillānī, as opposed to many of his theologian colleagues, the criterion of indubitability is the overriding concern when it comes to determining what is necessary knowledge and what is not.

²⁵ *Kitāb al-tamhīd*, 29–30. Al-Bāqillānī follows up these psychological examples by other standard examples of *a priori* knowledge such as the knowledge that every predicative proposition is either

The way these exclamations are embedded in the epistemological prefaces to *kalām* treatises seems to serve no immediate purpose. Unlike, say, the establishment of the principle of non-contradiction, which is another standard example of a piece of necessary knowledge, these self-evident psychological manifestations do not provide a stepping-stone towards any proof for the existence of God, nor do they contribute to an affirmation of His attributes. So what could have motivated *kalām* declarations about one's own existence and primitive mental states being known immediately and *a priori*? Only a speculative answer may be ventured at this point, and one that requires much further work to be substantiated. Where one might find use for the necessity of self-knowledge and the affirmation of one's own mental states is in the interstitial spaces between law and *kalām* where an influential debate took place concerning whether, how, and why humans acquire liability (*kaṣb*, *iktisāb*) for their own actions and intentions. It is here that one might expect to find appeals to my mental states being *mine*.²⁶

In al-Bāqillānī's case, for instance, it is noteworthy that he supplements his catalogue of necessary knowledge with reports (*tawātur*, *khawātir*). He even says that the manifest things we witness concerning others necessarily tell us something about their emotions and intentions.²⁷ At first blush, this would seem to stretch the definition of necessary knowledge well past the breaking point. However, if the goal is to establish the limits of legal or moral liability, then al-Bāqillānī's determinations make a degree of sense. If reliable reports are ones that come at us from so many directions that doubting them becomes senseless, then they acquire necessity for us *ipso facto* so that correspondingly, belief in them becomes just another fact of life (al-Bāqillānī's example is of belief in far-off places such as China and Khurāsān, but the more usual domain of application was the way that the many stories concerning Prophet Muḥammad's exemplary conduct and character were related). Analogously, although much more contentiously, if we are able to make instinctive and immediate judgements about the intentions of others based on their behaviour and speech, then we can (a) recognize other humans as living beings like ourselves (the 'other minds' problem does not arise, because such recognition happens instinctually and inevitably rather than being based on deduction and inference) while at the same time (b) allowing the perceiver to proceed from words and deeds to the intentions, attitudes, and beliefs that underlie them, and to pass judgement accordingly.

This last point was already developed by the antecedent Mu'tazilite school of theology, which in many ways forms a useful point of comparison with the Ash'arites.²⁸ The Mu'tazilites, too, thought that certain logical principles constitute a kind of a priori knowledge that is necessary and beyond doubt, and their examples, too, came first and foremost from the domain of proving God's existence (e.g., the principle that everything must be either eternal or originated and that one and the

true or false, and that two diametrically opposed statements cannot both be true simultaneously (or for that matter false).

²⁶ For the *kalām* doctrine of acquisition see Wolfson (1976), 663–719.

²⁷ *Tamhīd*, 30–31.

²⁸ See Vasalou (2009).

same thing cannot be both of these at the same time). What is more, the Mu'tazilites, too, supplemented such a priori truths with certain necessary presuppositions concerning human nature and human existence. The Mu'tazilites maintained that we all automatically and necessarily affirm our own status as living and (therefore) willing and thinking beings. This may be thought to link up with the Mu'tazili affirmation of humans being the authors of their actions (in contradistinction to classical Ash'arite *kalām*, where God's omnipotence and the denial of secondary causality dictate that it is God who assigns every accident to every atom at each moment of time, so that only God can be called an agent in the true sense of the word).²⁹

Binyamin Abrahamov, in a study of al-Ash'arī's doctrine concerning the human subject's acquisition of voluntary acts, brings out some of the flavour of this theological reasoning, which carried over to the period of Ash'arite dominance.³⁰ In the *Book of Glimmerings*, the eponymous founder of the school points to a difference that everyone readily acknowledges between movements such as shaking from palsy or fever, which are truly involuntary and as such necessary, and movements that are due to volition. The difference comes down to the fact that impotence (*'ujz*) characterizes the former state whereas there is a power (*qudra*) present in the latter, which must therefore be attributable to the human subject. What is more, al-Ash'arī puts it that every "human being knows the difference between the two states, both when it comes to himself and when it comes to others, by a necessary knowledge that does not admit of doubt", which is to say, by necessary knowledge precisely as it is defined in the theological tradition.³¹ As in al-Bāqillānī, so also in al-Ash'arī there need be no further explanation for how we differentiate between our possessing power (*qudra*) vs. being reduced to rank impotence (*'ujz*) – we simply make the distinction, as immediately and as surely as we apply the principle of non-contradiction. Also in a manner similar to al-Bāqillānī, the problem of other minds is explicitly short-circuited. We just *know*, directly and without an intermediary, that there is a difference between the rock that is thrown forcibly and the person who moves by the force of will – that the first movement occurs solely due to external factors, whereas the latter has an internal aspect (this notwithstanding the fact that God is the sole Creator of all states of affairs at all moments in time).³²

What al-Ash'arī's remarks point to is a felt need on the part of the theologians to find some basis for positing the real existence of that capacity (*istiṭā'a*) that is supposed to ground the human being's acquisition (*kasb*) of the acts that are associated

²⁹ A Rāfiḍite theologian by the name of Ṣāliḥ al-Ṣāliḥī draws the obvious epistemological conclusion that all knowledge is necessary knowledge in the final analysis, given how created beings have no capacity for doubting it when it is created in them. See Abrahamov (1993), 24.

³⁰ See Abrahamov (1989), Abrahamov (1993), 27–28.

³¹ *Kitāb al-luma'*, section 92, 41.16–17 McCarthy.

³² This difficult aspect of Ash'arite ontology – that is, a double agency of sorts combined with a single author of all acts – is discussed in Frank (1966), with the emphasis precisely on al-Ash'arī's treatise cited.

with her or his corporeal existence.³³ As pointed out by al-Ash'arī's imaginary opponent, the difference between involuntary and voluntary motion cannot readily be argued for on the basis of sense-perception. As a more modern example of a 'puppet master' might go, the senses would not be able to distinguish between an animatronic zombie's being pushed around the stage by remote-controlled gadgetry and an actor executing the same movements (besides which, on a mechanistic view of the material universe, one might question what the difference is supposed to amount to anyway). An appeal to direct introspection *qua* necessary knowledge neatly bridges this gap inasmuch as the grounds that it provides for regarding my actions as mine, and as belonging to an 'I', by definition stand in need of no further justification. If the raw impression that my actions are ascribable to me is as manifest to me as is the principle of non-contradiction, and if the same goes for the evidentiality of my own existence, then should not all three be treated on a par, as so many instances of necessary knowledge?

The *kalām* theologians' appeal to a necessary form of self-knowledge appears to constitute an occasional piece of reasoning, inasmuch as it was originally brought about by a specific need – that of showing how (blameworthy and laudable) acts are ascribable to human beings, whose ownership of the acts in question otherwise would be doubtful. But the self-same framework simultaneously limits the theory's explanatory scope. Beyond saying that a person will necessarily recognize her actions as being hers in some relevant sense, along with the equally necessary recognition that this entails the existence of a logical subject to go with the predication of the act, the theory has little if anything to say about how actions shape personhood, if in any way at all. The account is atomized in a manner befitting of an occasionalist metaphysics (which of course the *mutakallimūn* of the classical period endorsed), in that within the chosen mode of analysis, it is considered sufficient to see what can be said about human agency and identity at any one given moment. Altogether missing is the idea that a continuous consciousness would ground the enduring self – understandable, since in occasionalism, nothing does endure.

Sophia Vasalou has examined this facet of *kalām* anthropology in depth in her book on Mu'tazilite ethics.³⁴ In a section devoted to moral identity, Vasalou begins from the observation that whereas much of ancient and medieval ethics, as per Alasdair MacIntyre, was concerned with the evaluation of moral character, the starting point of Mu'tazilite ethics, and of Islamic theological writing thereafter, was strikingly different: it took upon itself the analysis and evaluation of individual acts.³⁵ Vasalou then cites Jan Peters, who had put it succinctly that in early Islamic theology, the basis for attributing qualities such as life, knowledge, will, etc. to humans in the first place was the need to make sense of the theological *dictum* that human beings are to be held accountable for their actions at the final judgement.³⁶

³³ In terms of grammar, as the *mutakallimūn* analyzed it, such acts are typically those assigned to the whole human being, meaning the whole composite body, rather than some part of it.

³⁴ Vasalou (2008), 132–148.

³⁵ Vasalou (2008), 136.

³⁶ See Peters (1976), 159.

As far as Peters and Vasalou can see, these characteristics do not become items of interest in their own right in the theological discussion. They are evoked only to the extent that – and insofar as – they can help alleviate worries about the distinction that according to the theologians exists between morally and legally culpable human beings and other, insensate products of God’s creation.

On this picture, Vasalou contends, “one may talk of the absence of any concern with the person as a moral and temporally extended being” in Mu’tazilite thought.³⁷ Vasalou perceives the materials pertaining to Mu’tazilism to denote nothing other than a “programmatic indifference to any concept of intrinsic moral characteristics attaching to persons or to the continuity of the moral person”.³⁸ *A fortiori* this would apply to Ash’arism, which excludes even individual moral acts from originating with the human agents to whom they are nonetheless ascribed. Thus, for the purposes of any psychological analysis that would place value on a continuity of moral consciousness, the theological analysis of the human self or soul should by rights appear severely hobbled from the start. So it would prove eventually, when Muslim writers interested in just such matters began to seek recourse elsewhere – ultimately, in Avicenna.

Sufi Self-Examination

It is quite impossible to say whether the *kalām* theological tradition, if left to unfold at its own pace and on its own terms, would have ended up developing home-grown alternatives to the corpuscularist and occasionalist mainstream in which even human existence and human cognitive states are to be analysed in terms of atoms and accidents. In any event, there was little chance of such splendid isolation being upheld over a period of time. Classical Arabic culture from the start developed at a cross-roads of influences. And while the theologians were still developing their distinctive vocabulary and modes of analysis, Muslim proponents of the Greek sciences – physicians, philosophers, and others – as well as Jewish and Christian spiritual authors had alternative social spaces in which to develop a different mode of discussing the soul, one that owed its basic characteristics to the synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian psychology effected in late antiquity.

Equally as important for our present purposes is that Muslim spirituality – what later came to be known as Sufism – early on settled on the importance of introspection and self-knowledge. The agenda was largely set by the early Muslim ascetic practitioners’ discourses on the term *nafs*, which in the Arabic denotes both the self in the reflexive sense and the soul as an object of knowledge. The central Qur’anic passages suggest that knowledge of one’s *nafs* and of its moral state is something laudable, perhaps even indispensable, but that it is also first and foremost the province of God. Q. 5:116 thus has Jesus entreating God, “You know what is in my

³⁷ Vasalou (2008), 157.

³⁸ Vasalou (2008), 133.

nafs”, while Q. 2:235 admonishes the listener: “Know that God knows what is in your *nufūs*: therefore beware Him.” There is also the tradition according to which God, upon witnessing how people forget Him, makes them forget themselves; and the converse Prophetic tradition, according to which whosoever knows himself, or his soul, thereby comes to know God.

Common to all these passages is that they make knowledge concerning the soul or self an aspirational ideal, rather than an innate possession of humankind. As a consequence, a kind of science of the soul took shape early on in Islamic asceticism that sought to tease out the esoteric meaning of the various references to *nafs* in the Scriptural materials and the Prophetic traditions and to sort out the characteristics, at times conflicting, ascribed to it. A yet richer vein of practical knowledge formed around the reformation of the human heart and its purging of the lower impulses of the *nafs*. This latter ascetic and self-scrutinizing tradition in fact forms the most salient strand in early Islamic spirituality, well before the nascent Sufi movement took a turn for the ‘mystical.’³⁹

The results would be systematized in slightly different fashion from one teacher to the next but eventually, a rough consensus formed around a fourfold classification found, e.g., in the works of al-Tirmidhī in the early fourth/tenth century. Presented in a developmental sequence, we have first (1) the *nafs* that incites evil (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi al-suʿ*, Q. 12:53); then (2) the inspired *nafs* (*al-nafs al-mulhama*, Q. 91:8), awakened to a higher calling by God; then (3) the reproaching *nafs* (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*, Q. 75:2) that urges moral reform; then finally (4) the *nafs* in repose (*al-nafs al-muṭmaʿinna*, Q. 81:27–28), which finds its lasting delight in the love of God. Presumably, these are all different dispositions of one and the same entity, first deprived of any divine insight, then gradually brought to the light of God and thus to existential satisfaction.

One can easily see how the Platonic theme of a lower and a higher (true) self might resonate with these early Sufi presentations, even without postulating any direct or indirect influence during the latter’s formative period. The distinction between the higher and the lower self would sometimes be presented in terms of the spirit (*rūḥ*), the heart (*qalb*), or the reasoning principle (*ʿaql*) as the access points for divine forces to do their work in the human being, while the *nafs* itself in its animal nature (*Ṭabʿ*), its appetite (*shahwa*), and its passions (*hawā*) represents everything that tempts the human being away from her Maker. For all this, justification was found in the Qurʾān, which speaks of each of these things in a manner that is undeniably poetic and allusive, yet lacking in systematicity.

It was therefore up to individual spiritual masters to forge something coherent and compelling out of these many and varied materials. In commenting on verse 49:9, “If two parties come to blows, you shall pacify them”, Sahl Ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 896), for instance, posits that

³⁹ There is an immense body of literature on the Sufi tradition, much of which also addresses Sufi treatments of the soul and the ideal of self-mortification in some way. Knysch (2000) presents a comprehensive overview; for the early period and al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857) in particular, see Picken (2011), Chaps. 4–5; for Qurʾānic uses of *nafs*, Picken (2011), 129–139.

The apparent meaning of the verse is what has been explicated by those who practice exegetics. The hidden aspect, however, refers to the spirit, intellect, and heart [on the one hand] and to nature, passion, and appetite [on the other]. If nature, passion, and appetite militate against intellect, spirit, and heart, then the servant must fight them with the swords of vigilance, the arrows of self-examination (*muṭālaʿa*), and the lights of abiding [by the Law]: thereby the spirit and the intellect become dominant and passion and appetite become that which is dominated.⁴⁰

For al-Tustarī, as for many authoritative Sufi masters, the historical circumstances of God's revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) were the province of the exegetes, while the Sufis themselves took aim at the timeless truth contained within God's words. In this instance, al-Tustarī identifies various forces operative within the human being, all of which it is important to recognize, given that these are the parties engaged in a constant struggle for the ultimate state of either grace or perdition faced by the individual on the Day of Judgement. Ceaseless vigilance and a questioning of one's motives therefore provide the key to any true self-knowledge worthy of the name. The process may eventually result in considerably recondite and esoteric unveilings when it comes to the true nature of the higher self or human essence (*dhār*) – al-Tustarī is notorious for the speculative and even cosmic character of his anthropology – but the bottom line is always provided by continual self-examination and the struggle for self-improvement.⁴¹

This kind of anthropology, however, and the character-based ethics of the Sufis – for that is what it is, incontrovertibly and indisputably – would sit uneasily with the theoretical analyses of the soul developed within classical *kalām*. The problem at hand is twofold, with roots in the twin dimensions of *kalāmī* atomism. The theologians' corpuscular theory in the first place leaves open the possibility of atomizing and localizing the different psychic events: 'heart', 'spirit', and 'soul' could then be taken to refer to different entities within the composite that is the overall human being. In the second place, the occasionalist framework, with its atomized understanding of the passage of time and the attendant continual recreation of embodied reality from nothingness, is itself none too conducive to examining the continual or continuous development of anything, much less a complex unity of the likes of moral character.

These limitations are made manifest in the *Epistle* of Abū al-Qāṣim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), who was a trained Ashʿarite theologian but whose greatest claim to fame lay in producing one of the definitive later exemplars of the classical Sufi manual. Al-Qushayrī, who writes in seeming isolation from the nascent trend towards Platonic-Aristotelian philosophizing within Muslim spiritual circles, provides a lengthy glossary of Sufi terminology in the second part of his *Epistle*. In explicating what *nafs* means, al-Qushayrī first concedes the reflexive use of the term: *fi nafsihi* in Arabic frequently means 'in itself', that is, 'in essence' or 'considered in its own right'. After this, he hones in on those lexical usages that seem more pertinent to him:

⁴⁰ Al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, 91.

⁴¹ On al-Tustarī's complex theory of the soul and self, see Böwering (1980), 185–261.

In linguistic terms, a thing's *nafs* is its being. However, in this context [=in Sufism] the expression *nafs* in itself denotes neither being nor an underlying body (*al-qālib al-mawḍūʿ*). [The Sufis] intend by *nafs* merely those human attributes which are unsound and those character traits and actions which are blameworthy [...]

Such character traits are treated through neglecting the *nafs* and shattering it to pieces. This is something best accomplished through hunger, thirst, sleepless nights and other similar [forms] of spiritual striving that lead to the waning of the power [of the *nafs*], and all this accordingly constitutes the neglect of the *nafs*.

So far, so familiar. In a Sufi context, *nafs* as self is intrinsically linked to selfishness, a desire to gratify one's own lower impulses instead of following God's rule for humankind. It is accordingly through acts of self-negation and a denial of personal gratification that one makes room for the love and knowledge of God to grow within. It is when al-Qushayrī applies his Ash'arite learning to explain the physiology underlying these dynamics that things begin to appear decidedly strange:

One may also allow that the *nafs* is a subtle thing deposited in the body, one that is the locus of the unsound character traits, in the same manner that the spirit is something subtle in the body that is a locus for the praiseworthy character traits. Some of these are made subject to others, and their sum total is one human being: thus, the spirit and the *nafs* are among the subtle bodies in a given form, similar to how the angels and demons are of a subtle character.

As it is correct [to posit] that the eye is the locus of vision, the ear the locus of hearing, the nose the locus of smell, the mouth the locus of tasting, and so on, while the one who hears, sees, smells, and tastes is simply that whole which is the human being, so also the locus of the praiseworthy character traits is the heart and the spirit, while the locus of the blameworthy character traits is the *nafs*. The *nafs* forms part of this whole, and the heart forms part of this whole, and the determinate [entity] and the name both revert to the whole.⁴²

From this passage, we may glean both what the initial promise was of grafting an Ash'arite ontology onto Sufi precepts, and what the limitations of such a project might end up being. Judged solely in terms of saving the phenomena – the various Qur'ānic and Prophetic proclamations as well as the sayings of the early Sufi masters, etc. – the atomist and corpuscular theory succeeds: one need only stipulate a fully realist and materialist reading of the materials, so that the different psychic principles become so many mass nouns. On this picture, each of the cited terms ('soul,' 'spirit,' etc.) refers to some real physical entity, yet does so *en masse*, with the assumption being that in each instance where, e.g., *nafs* is evoked, it stands for some indeterminate quantity of soul-atoms.⁴³ In this manner, the boundaries of regular Ash'arite physics and metaphysics are observed every step of the way.

But then it appears that the balance of the good (or praiseworthy) and the bad (or blameworthy) in the individual human being merely amounts to different quantities of active soul, spirit, and heart particles contained therein. Or perhaps the last two – spirit and heart – are to be equated, given how both carry positive connotations – both are bearers of praiseworthy qualities? Perhaps not: a few entries down,

⁴² Al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 86–87.

⁴³ On Ash'arite atomist premises, there may be a discrete number of atoms corresponding to each evocation of *nafs*, *rūḥ*, etc., but we remain ignorant of the number.

al-Qushayrī explains the notion of “the secret” (*al-sirr*) in equivalent terms, and in the course of his deliberations lets the reader know that the spirit and the heart each act as carriers for different kinds of dispositions towards God. One is involved with affective desire, the other with cognition, and consequently, each is to be treated as a distinct kind of atomic entity. Nor is that all:

[...] One may also allow that the secrets are subtle things deposited in the human body, similar to spirits. Their [the Sufis’] principles stipulate that these constitute the loci for witnessing (*mushāhada*), just as the spirits constitute the loci for love (*muḥabba*) and the hearts the loci for acts of intimate understanding (*ma’ārif*) [...] their principles also stipulate that the secret is more subtle than the spirit, and the spirit nobler than the heart.⁴⁴

By now the problem with the Ash‘arite mode of analysis should be obvious. It runs the risk of boundless fragmentation while offering few incentives for modelling psychic integration, interaction, or dynamism of any kind. What we get from the passage is that there is an ascending order of “subtlety” when it comes to the different kinds of bodies postulated within the theory (heart – spirit – secret) and that this order mirrors the rise in degree of nobility of the kinds of spiritual states that the human being gets to enjoy (understanding – love – direct witness). But we have little to go on when it comes to explaining what role the suppression of the soul/self (*nafs*) is supposed to play in promoting these different positive dispositions, or what – beyond the grace of God – governs the passage from one state to another.

Even taking the diachronic dimension out of the equation for the moment and focussing on the synchronic picture, we are left with questions, e.g., about how the mereology between parts and wholes is supposed to work, given that the dispositions that mark the presence of distinct types of simple bodies are supposed to be ascribable to the whole human being, while the particles themselves nonetheless constitute only parts of the composite body (and coexist to boot). The seemingly *ad hoc* nature of al-Qushayrī’s explanations cannot but limit their utility in constructing a well-rounded moral psychology, at the same time that his comments fail to connect up with the *kalāmī* tradition regarding our immediate self-knowledge. There is, after all, nothing beyond (a *kalāmī* interpretation of) the scriptural witness to recommend ascribing an understanding of God to heart particles, the love of God to spirit-atoms, etc. These are certainly not intuited immediately and obviously in the manner of necessary knowledge; to the contrary, what necessary knowledge discloses is how the dispositions qualify the entire human being. We are thus left with tensions and unresolved puzzles, whichever way we turn.

Compare the picture al-Qushayrī presents with what al-Ghazālī (1056–1111) has to say on the same subject, a mere two generations down the line. In his book on *The Marvels of the Heart*, which forms the central pole around which al-Ghazālī’s masterwork *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* pivots, al-Ghazālī acknowledges that both scripture and the prevailing scholarly culture speak intermittently of the spirit, soul, heart, and intellect. Al-Ghazālī, however, avows that all these varied expressions

⁴⁴ Al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 88.

carry the same “meaning” (*maʿnā*): the principle that is receptive to divine influence is one and the same across all the various scriptural contexts and constitutes the higher, true self (*dhāt*) for which al-Ghazālī privileges the term ‘heart’ (*qalb*).⁴⁵ There is no mistaking that al-Ghazālī’s ‘heart’ equals Avicenna’s human intellect, freshly retooled for the purposes of making intellectual sense of the Sufi promise that the sincere spiritual seeker’s afterlife can pleasurably be spent in the rapt contemplation of God.

Nor can one mistake al-Ghazālī’s reinterpreting the Sufi programme of self-examination and self-improvement in light of Platonic and Peripatetic virtue ethics. Even if al-Ghazālī, over the course of the second half of his *Revival*, is content to reproduce large swathes of Sufi moralizing intact in its original form, the way he frames his whole investigation is suffused with the ethical writing of Arabic Peripatetics such as Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī (d. 974) and Miskawayh (d. 1030).⁴⁶ Al-Ghazālī explicitly underlines the stable yet malleable nature of moral character,⁴⁷ and his many paeans to constant self-examination and vigilance tend to cash out as precisely the kind of Aristotelian recalibration that is meant to result in an aptitude for discerning the virtuous mean. In fact, as I have tried to show in a series of interlocking articles and as other scholars have demonstrated from multiple angles, al-Ghazālī deliberately recasts Sufi piety in the light of Avicennan faculty psychology, both in the cognitive and the moral dimensions.⁴⁸ Even when al-Ghazālī dutifully retains the traditional *kalāmī* language of subtle substances (*laṭīfa*) acting as substrates for the various types of psychic acts, this looks to be merely a way of reinscribing in more religious terms the physiological processes that accompany psychic events according to the medical and philosophical traditions. All this adds up to a picture of al-Ghazālī opting for an Avicennan model for explaining psychic events and psychic growth, precisely in order to circumvent the many problems inherent in the atomist and fragmented atomist framework of classical *kalām*. With a Platonic-Aristotelian theory of the psychic faculties firmly in place, the continual improvement of one’s moral character begins to look more like a viable project, at the same time that admonitions to polish the mirror of the soul can successfully and intrinsically be tied to the possibility of divine realities becoming disclosed in that self-same soul.

Still, for all that the available evidence points incontrovertibly to an extensive Avicennan appropriation on al-Ghazālī’s part, the role played by the self and self-knowledge in the latter’s works is quite distinctive and in some respects far removed

⁴⁵ See *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 5:13–20 (XXI, *bayān* 1).

⁴⁶ The one clear precedent to al-Ghazālī in this regard is the work of his near-contemporary al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108), whom al-Ghazālī indeed follows in his approach, as shown by Madelung (1974), Janssens (2008), Mohamed (2011).

⁴⁷ See *Iḥyā’*, 5:199–207 (XXII, *bayān* 3).

⁴⁸ See Kukkonen (2008), Kukkonen (2012), Kukkonen (2015a); the weightiest contribution on al-Ghazālī’s cognitive psychology is Treiger (2012), while Sherif (1975) canvasses moral psychology; to these one may add individual studies by Jules Janssens, Frank Griffel, M. Afifi al-Akiti, and others.

from what we find in Avicenna. Taking his cues from a simile offered by Avicenna according to which we are all Janus-faced in a sense, with one aspect of our being turned downwards to the care of the body and the sensible world while the other, higher part looks to receive the intelligibles from on high,⁴⁹ al-Ghazālī intimates that it is the governance and regulation of our lower selves that constitutes our first and foremost duty. Because our lower instincts are indisputably *ours* personally, and also because the practical intellect can engage actively with the unique circumstances of one's own embodied life, the way to self-improvement and self-discovery runs through self-examination and a renouncement of the self. In our communion with higher realities, by contrast, we remain essentially passive and therefore reliant on God's grace. In emphasizing the role of virtuous habit and an ethics-based self-examination as the key to true self-knowledge, al-Ghazālī develops and underscores a theme virtually absent in Avicenna.⁵⁰ The latter paints pre-philosophical ethical training as being at best a necessary preliminary to the pronouncedly superior activity of philosophical theorization, which constitutes the proper perfection of our humanity.⁵¹

In a sort of mirror image of this, al-Ghazālī does not appear that invested in Avicenna's signature doctrine of us being continually aware of ourselves and of such self-awareness constituting the grounds for our existence as self-identical individuals despite the changes both in our material circumstances and our cognitive states. In the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazālī actively repudiates some of Avicenna's alleged proofs for the soul's immateriality that are based on a person's identity throughout a multitude of bodily changes. His professed stance is that although revealed religion does testify to the human individual's immortality, and although there is nothing offensive to religion in the view that the soul is a self-subsistent substance either, this must ultimately be a matter that rests with God, instead of it being a dictate of natural reason.⁵²

Accordingly, the only place I know of in al-Ghazālī's undisputed authorship where he refers to one's unshakeable conviction in one's own existence (excepting for the moment disputed treatises such as the *Jerusalem Ascent*, on which see below) is in the introductory section to al-Ghazālī's major Persian work *The Alchemy of Happiness*. In this treatise, which is an extensive reworking of the themes of the *Revival*, the theme of self-knowledge is foregrounded right at the outset. Yet despite this, and despite the fact that al-Ghazālī quickly runs through Peripatetic faculty psychology in a presentation that clearly bears an Avicennan stamp, what ends up missing from the *Alchemy* is the Flying Man argument and all that goes with it. The most that al-Ghazālī says is what we can find in any *kalām* manual – that none of us

⁴⁹ *Al-Shifā'*: *al-Nafs* I.5, 47 Rahman.

⁵⁰ See Kukkonen (2008).

⁵¹ *Al-Shifā'*: *al-Nafs* I.5, 46–47 Rahman and V.1, 207–209 Rahman. Avicenna's weightiest contribution on ethics, a short treatise *On Governance*, is translated in McGinnis and Reisman (2007), 224–237, but even here it is remarkable how little space is given over to introspection.

⁵² See *Tahāfut* XVIII. 11–12 Marmura; Marmura (1988).

are able to doubt our own existence.⁵³ This may be because, again, al-Ghazālī felt that in pointing to the intrinsic immortality of human consciousness, the Flying Man thought experiment and Avicenna's overall argument from self-awareness purports to prove altogether too much.

If this is so, however, then al-Ghazālī is curiously at odds with the later *kalām* tradition, where it was precisely the Flying Man thought experiment and its epistemological consequences that received the lion's share of scholars' attentions. This, plus the way that al-Ghazālī's remarks line up against al-Qushayrī's, indicate that the main body of his work is to be read in the light of the Sufi tradition, where the emphasis was on moralistic self-examination rather than the epistemic privileges afforded by our immediate access to our own mental states. Al-Ghazālī's preference for discussing the ins and outs of moral psychology, along with his penchant for portraying the ontology of the rational soul as a mysterious matter best left alone, may help to explain why al-Ghazālī, despite his overwhelming importance for Muslim intellectual culture as a whole, does not figure larger in the *kalām* discussions of human psychology in the first post-Avicennan centuries. His interests were simply too different from those of the *kalām* authors.

Concluding Questions

What I have sketched out is a thumbnail history of early Islamic speculation regarding the self that could explain some of Avicenna's success. To recapitulate in the briefest of terms: (a) *Kalām* models of explanation, being atomist and occasionalist, may well have fulfilled the immediate purposes for which they were developed and indeed gone on to enjoy considerable theoretical sophistication and analytical acumen, yet they largely lacked the means to explain persuasively either vertical psychic integration (how our different perceptions cohere into a single experience) or diachronic continuity.⁵⁴ The one idea they may have had to offer to Avicenna – an appeal to immediate and indisputable self-knowledge – provided the means for later *kalām* authors to take on board Avicennan psychological theory; and this is what appears to happen from the sixth/twelfth century onwards. (b) Sufi speculation concerning the soul, the spirit, and the intellect was likewise in search of a solid theoretical framework; the movement's earlier theorists, for all their fascinating and baroque constructions regarding spiritual entities, did not offer much by way of integration between the mundane and the supernal realms, while attempts to wed Ash'arite ontology with Sufi concerns foundered on a basic incommensurability of explanatory aims. (c) In al-Ghazālī, we see the beginnings of a shift in the theological culture from a materialist framework to an Avicennan dualist one. But because al-Ghazālī's own project was so particular and peculiar, with weight placed more on

⁵³ *Kāmiyā-yi sa'adat*, 1:16.

⁵⁴ I make the case for why Peripatetic faculty psychology in general proved attractive to later *kalām* authors in Kukkonen (2015b).

moral than on cognitive psychology, his efforts ended up being more of an outlier than a true harbinger for the future. That future ended up belonging to increasingly elaborate meditations on the Flying Man, which served as launching points to detailed and sophisticated investigations into the philosophy of mind, epistemology, even metaphysics. Al-Ghazālī's principal influence was felt elsewhere, his ruminations on the self reverberating in ethical contexts and in works of popular piety.

All of what I have said is tentative in the utmost and subject to revision by later scholars – it is meant as a heuristic tool and a modest suggestion. Rather than affect an unearned certitude or unassailable conviction in the narrative tentatively just outlined, it is therefore appropriate to close this kind of exploratory essay with further questions.

- (1) Firstly, Avicenna. In his many treatments of the evident nature of our affirming our own existence and the mine-ness of our raw mental states, does Avicenna exhibit an awareness of the longstanding *kalām* discussion, or any desire to mimic its preferred figures of speech? One possible example is how in the *Pointers and Reminders*, Avicenna adds to his list of self-evident sensory premises (*maḥsūsāt*) one's knowledge of oneself and one's own mental states.⁵⁵ Are there other similar instances, and do they carry systematic weight? On the other side, the fact that Avicenna places the Flying Man thought experiment in the estimative faculty would appear to put it on uneven footing with purely logical principles such as the principle of non-contradiction, and thus to bespeak a desire on Avicenna's part to pry apart the two types of necessary knowledge that run together in *kalāmī* epistemology. In broadly Kantian terms, items such as the principle of non-contradiction have to do with the structure of all possible experience, whereas the pointer (*ishāra*) Avicenna gives for us accepting our continual awareness of ourselves – viz. the Flying Man – appears tied to a very particular sort of experience. And the fact that the Flying Man affirms his existence or being (*annīya*), rather than any specific concept of what his being consists in, similarly drives a wedge between the immediate results of the thought experiment and what Avicenna elsewhere describes as “primary concepts”. The matter may nonetheless bear further investigation.
- (2) Second, as regards al-Ghazālī: I have noted al-Ghazālī's reluctance to rely on Avicenna's argument from self-awareness for the incorporeal nature of the soul. Yet in one psychological treatise attributed to al-Ghazālī, the so-called *Jerusalem Ascent*, the Flying Man argument is adduced for this very purpose, along with a bevy of other Avicennan materials which, when put together, add up to an entirely Avicennan presentation of cognitive psychology and the ontology of the rational soul. If the *Jerusalem Ascent* is a genuine work by al-Ghazālī, as I believe to be the case, then a question arises as to why there should be such a large gap between this and al-Ghazālī's other presentations of the soul. Did al-Ghazālī in actuality subscribe to the thesis of the soul's essential immortality? And was he willing to disclose this belief to close associates – but only to

⁵⁵ *Ishārāt*, 56; I owe the reference to Jari Kaukua.

them? And if all of the above turns out to be true, as for instance Timothy Gianotti and Afifi al-Akiti have argued in recent years, then what does this tell us about the relative standing of ethics and naturalistic psychology in al-Ghazālī's hierarchy of knowledge?

- (3) Third and most important, as regards *kalām*: in early post-Avicennan *kalāmī* literature, what were the general trends when it came to the placement of the Flying Man argument and where was the discussion taken from there? Was it in service of the metaphysics of the soul that the Flying Man was primarily explored, or in order to establish some basic epistemological principles, or each in turn? Which way did the discussions turn at which points in history? And where does that leave outlier treatises such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Book on the Soul and the Spirit and an Exposition of Their Powers*, which moves seamlessly from these themes to the kinds of questions regarding character reformation that so vexed al-Ghazālī?⁵⁶ Questions of genre, presentation, and positioning matter here, in addition to a continually heightened appreciation for how a single argument in its many permutations may serve multiple purposes. Pinning down the Flying Man may yet give us much to do.

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