

HPPH7013
THE SELF: EAST AND WEST

Assignment 2 – Essay
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Prompt:
Formulate your own essay title / question

Is the flying man threatened by the masked man?
On ibn Sīnā's argument and its (supposed) fallacy

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0. Introduction

Persian philosopher and physician Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abdallāh ibn Sīnā (Latin: Avicenna, c. 980-1037) is widely acknowledged as one of the most important world thinkers, and a central intellectual figure in the history of the Arabic-Islamic philosophy (Inati 2007; Adamson 2023). Part of ibn Sīnā's fame is due to his formulation of a challenging argument, that contemporary scholars label as argument of the "flying man".¹ Through such an argument, which is based upon an ingenious thought experiment, ibn Sīnā intends to indicate that our soul (*nafs*) – or better, our self (*dāht*) – is different from our body.

The argument, along with its supporting thought experiment, has been received and discussed since the initial stages of medieval philosophy (Hasse 2000, 87-92; Brown 2001; Toivanen 2015; Kaukua 2021). Recent scholarship has produced several interpretations of the argument motivated by so many questions that it is almost inevitable to approach it from a specific, selected viewpoint (Alpina 2018, 202-208; Regnier 2023, 112-116). Despite this variety of readings, some scholars agree on having detected a decisive logical mistake in the argument: the so-called "masked man fallacy." If this fallacy were proven successful, it would be fatal to the soundness of the argument: that our self is different from our body would not follow from the premises.

The guiding question of this essay is whether the masked man fallacy invalidates the flying man argument proposed by ibn Sīnā. The first paragraph provides an overview of the argument which highlights its focal points. The second paragraph introduces the fallacy in its formal aspects, before showing how it has been applied to (a reasonable version of) the argument. The third paragraph argues for a (hopefully more charitable) reformulation of the argument, which is immune from the fallacy. In summary, if we rephrase the argument in a way that is both accurate and not prone to the fallacy, we can secure the conclusion intended by ibn Sīnā.

¹ Perhaps more accurately "floating man" (Wisnovsky 2005, 102-104; Alwishah 2013) or "suspended man" (El-Bizri 2000, 149-163; Falsafi 2020; Shidanshid & Shirvani 2024).

1. Presenting the flying man

The flying man argument occurs several times with slight variations throughout ibn Sīnā's oeuvre (Marmura 1986; Hasse 2000; Alwishah 2013), but the most complete and discussed version – which this essay refers to – is that included at the end of the first chapter of *The Book of Soul* (*Kitāb al-Nafs*) in *The Book of Healing* (*Kitāb al-Shifā'*).² It has been noted that, in this work, ibn Sīnā's argument constitutes a transition from an inquiry on the existence of the soul as the fundament of every bodily process to an investigation into the essence of the soul itself (Alpina 2018, 187-190; Kaukua 2015, 31-33; Kaukua 2020, 286-290).

What exactly the argument is meant to prove has been a matter of academic debate, even due to the ambiguity of some terms in the original text (Hertogh 2013, 64-68; Kaukua 2015, 38-41; Alpina 2018, 202-206). Some scholars read the argument as a proof of the immateriality and hence immortality of the soul or "self" (Marmura 1986, 383-385), whereas others as an indication of its independence from the body (Hasse 2000, 84-86). For this essay's purposes, we can assume that the bare minimum granted by the argument is that the self is something (presumably incorporeal) different from the body. Instead, what the argument does not immediately seem to prove is the independence of the self from the body and its substantiality: these topics, which anyway presuppose the difference between self and body, are treated by ibn Sīnā after the argument, because they rely upon its results (Muehlethaler 2009, 202-203; Alpina 2018, 206).

The flying man argument can be divided into three logical steps. The first step is the renowned thought experiment, which is articulated into two parts. In the first part, ibn Sīnā outlines the following scenario for the reader:

[O]ne of us must imagine himself as if he is created all at once and perfect, but his sight has been impeded from observing external things, and [as if] he is created floating in the air or in the void in such a way that the air resistance does not hit him in a manner that compels [him] to sense [it], and with his limbs separated from each other so that they neither meet nor touch.

Although devoid of memories because "suddenly created," the flying man is "perfect" – namely, a human being exactly as the reader is, except for one fundamental difference: he cannot

² All quotes are taken from ibn Sīnā 2021, 205-206, which is based on the text edited by Fazlur Rahman in 1959.

have any access to his body or other objects due to the lack of any internal and external input. All his sense organs exist, but they are completely disabled by the privation of sensory stimuli. Hence, the flying man is totally unaware of his whole body as well as its singular parts, internal corporeal states, and environment. In short, ibn Sīnā pushes the reader to imagine herself in that weird condition: deprived of what, in modern terms, is called proprioception, interoception, and exteroception (Gallagher 2023, 2-3). Yet, the reader might wonder whether the flying man can be aware of anything due to this complete sensory obliteration. In the second part of the experiment, ibn Sīnā provides an answer:

Then, he considers whether he will affirm that he exists. He will not have doubts about whether or not to do so. However, he will not affirm [the existence of] any of his limbs, any of his internal organs, [his] heart, [his] brain, or any external thing. Rather, he affirms [the existence of] himself, though he does not affirm his having height, breadth, and depth. If, in that [aforementioned] state, he were able to imagine a hand or some other limb, he would imagine it neither as part of himself nor as condition for [the existence of] himself.

Ibn Sīnā is confident that anyone would admit that, despite this absence of bodily awareness, what remains is self-awareness: albeit unaware of his body, its parts and qualities, the flying man is immediately aware of his own existence, or equivalently the existence of his self (El-Bizri 2000, 158-163; Kaukua & Kukkonen 2007, 107-108; Alwishah 2013, 53-54; Kukkonen 2016, 39-41). According to ibn Sīnā, that the flying man is aware of his self without being aware of his corporeality is an evident truth – a sort of tacit knowledge independent from, but presupposed by, every conscious thought of ours – which nonetheless even the uneducated but perspicacious reader would acknowledge if properly guided to it (Black 2008, 65-69; Kaukua 2015, 34-37; Zarepour 2022, 9; Black 2024, 821-823; Shidanshid & Shirvani 2024). Granted the conceivability of this scenario and its result, ibn Sīnā continues with the second argumentative step:

You know that what is affirmed is different from what is not affirmed, and what is acknowledged is different from what is not acknowledged.

This passage marks a crucial move for ibn Sīnā's argumentation because it expresses a general principle (interpretable as "what one is aware of is different from what one is unaware of") which constitutes another premise of the argument (Toivanen 2015, 68-69; Almotahari 2025, §4). Finally, by applying the general

principle to the result of the imaginary experiment, ibn Sīnā can reach his third argumentative step – the conclusion about the difference between self and body:

Hence, the self, whose existence [this human being] has affirmed as something proper to him because this [self] is [identical to] himself, is different from his body and his limbs whose existence has not been affirmed.

The next passage, apparently a parenthetical remark, indicates the methodological relevance of the thought experiment for ibn Sīnā. The experiment works as a “pointer” to a hidden aspect of our everyday experience (our primitive awareness of ourselves), which the reader must be focused on, because it goes unnoticed against the overwhelming flow of sensory data:

Hence, the recipient of the pointing has a way to be alerted to the existence of the soul as something other than the body, indeed other than body, and [a way] to be directly acquainted with it and aware of it.

Therefore, according to ibn Sīnā, the experiment does not merely indicate a fanciful characteristic of the flying man as a condition of an impossible scenario. On the contrary, it points to self-awareness as a phenomenon that does belong to our earthly existence, a real feature of our experience which any insightful reader would recognise once guided to an imaginative bracketing of her sensations (Kaukua 2015, 35-36; Kaukua 2020, 295; Almotahari 2025, §5). Having detected this phenomenon thanks to the experiment, the intelligent reader should be able to argue the intended conclusion by herself.³

Based on this and other textual passages, some scholars have argued that the thought experiment, being a pointer, is not properly an argument; and therefore, not being an argument, it cannot be affected by fallacies (Marmura 1986, 392-393; Hasse 2000, 86-87; Wisnovsky 2005, 102-104). This interpretation is corroborated by the text, since ibn Sīnā does use the experiment as a pointer (Kaukua 2015, 33-34; Alpina 2018, 207-208). Nevertheless, in my opinion, this should not be overly emphasised, because it would underestimate the fact that ibn Sīnā’s thought experiment is *part of* his argument – indeed, it provides material for the premises (Muehlethaler 2009, 181,

³ To my view, ibn Sīnā’s conclusion that the self is different from the body may be suggested also by some everyday practices. For example, when someone claims that Stefano is in love with Roberta, arguably the speaker does not mean that Stefano’s *body* is in love, but that Stefano *himself* is. On the role of imagination in ibn Sīnā’s thought experiments, see Black 1993. On his pioneering use of them, see Kukkonen 2014.

202-203). Consequently, although the experiment cannot be fallacious (because thought experiments in themselves are not full-blown arguments), the argument itself can.

2. *Here comes the masked man*

Like almost all philosophical arguments in history, even the flying man argument has not been free of criticism. Most recent scholarship believes to have detected some types of logical errors affecting distinct aspects of the argument with various degrees of gravity (Adamson 2023, 43-48). For example, one objection is that of inconceivability: some scholars object that the thought experiment which the argument is based upon would simply be unimaginable, because it seems impossible to conceive ourselves from the viewpoint of the flying man without presupposing any corporeal image or a minimum bodily awareness (El-Bizri 2000, 163; Falsafi 2020, 79-80; Gallager 2023, 4-6). Yet, some contend to have found possible replies within ibn Sīnā's works (Black 1993, 236-239, 241; Alwishah 2013, 57-61).

Other scholars accuse the argument of a wrong logical move from a conjectural scenario: even though the experiment is conceivable, the argument draws a categorical conclusion from hypothetical premises (Marmura 1986, 388-392). This objection has received two responses. Firstly, it might not be the case that the premises are hypothetical: some scholars argue they are categorical (Almotahari 2025, §5). Secondly, the hypothetical-categorical shift is not necessarily fallacious, but this is generally how thought experiments are supposed to work (Hertogh 2013, 68-71; Kaukua 2015, 38, n. 29; Adamson & Benevich 2018, 150-151).

Nevertheless, apart from these criticism and responses, there is one frequent objection which, according to some scholars, is lethal to the logical validity of the argument: the argument would be affected by the "masked man fallacy." Such a fallacy (formally known as epistemic or intensional fallacy) is a mistake in reasoning committed by violating rules of formal logic (Taliaferro 2019). Particularly, the mistake is an invalid inference from premises expressing what one knows, believes, desires, etc. to a conclusion stating how things are. In other words, the fallacy immediately derives a conclusion about objects from premises about one's propositional attitudes towards objects. The fallacy is exemplified by this argument with two premises [P1, P2] and one conclusion [C]:

[P1] Roberta believes that a masked man attended the masquerade.

[P2] Roberta does not believe that Stefano attended the masquerade.

[C] The masked man is not Stefano.

This would be equivalent to arguing that, since Roberta believes something of the masked man without believing something of Stefano, the masked man cannot be Stefano (Blackburn 2016). However, the conclusion does not follow from the premises because, unbeknown to Roberta, the masked man might be Stefano dressed up in a costume. After all, what Roberta *believes* about Stefano does not concern *him* at all. Therefore, the inference from premises to conclusion is fallacious. More generally, the fallacy is instantiated by arguments of the form below (where S is the subject; α is a propositional verb like to know, believe, desire, etc.; x and y are two objects; and P is a property):

[P1] S does α that x is P.

[P2] S does not α that y is P.

[C] x is not y.

The basic mistake exposed by this fallacy is an illicit application of the principle of indiscernibility of identicals. According to this principle, two identical things are indiscernible: if x and y are identical, then x and y share all their properties. Hence, if x does have a certain property that y does not have, or vice versa, then x and y cannot be identical (Sanford 1999). However, what one thinks or believes of an object is not a property of the object itself, so the principle cannot correctly be applied in this context (which is what the fallacy does). Many other fallacious examples can be sketched by substituting x and y with, for instance, 'water' and 'H₂O' or 'Clark Kent' and 'Superman' (Taliaferro 2019; Adamson 2023, 46).

Some scholars have maintained that the flying man argument patently commits the masked man fallacy, so that the inference somehow needs to be secured from this objection (Black 2008, 65; Kaukua 2015, 37-38; Toivanen 2015, 68-69; Adamson 2016; Adamson & Benevich 2018, 151-152; Kaukua 2020, 292-296; Adamson 2023, 46-47). Generally, the version of the argument which the fallacy is applied to is expressed thus: «If the flying man is aware that his self exists without being aware that his body exists, then his self cannot be the same as his body». This interpretation of ibn Sīnā's argument can be formalised as follows:

- [P1] The flying man is aware that his self is something existing.
[P2] The flying man is not aware that his body is something existing.
[C] His self is not his body.

The two premises are reasonably consistent with the thought experiment proposed by ibn Sīnā. Unfortunately, the argument instantiates the pattern of the fallacy by violating the indiscernibility of identicals: what the flying man is (un)aware of is not a property belonging to things themselves. Therefore, the conclusion may still be false. The objection runs thus: «That the flying man is aware of his self without being aware of his body does not entail that his self is different from his body. They can just be the same thing. Simply, the flying man may occupy an unfavourable position (like he does according to the thought experiment) – a position from where, unable to detect the existence of his body, he cannot even presume that his self may be identical to (part of) his body».

If the inference really embodied the fallacy, and hence the objection hit the target, then the conclusion would not be consequential. Accordingly, the argument would fail to prove that the self is different from the body, thus opening a “logical gap” within ibn Sīnā’s argumentative path: the step from the self/body difference to the self/body separation would be unsteady, because the former has not been posed on a solid ground. And yet, is it possible that one of the most brilliant philosophers and logicians has committed such a naïve fallacy? Well, of course it is. Nonetheless, the principle of charity urges us not to jump to hasty conclusions. It might be the case that the above-mentioned interpretation of the argument, albeit clearly fallacious, is not so charitable. Indeed, in my opinion, it does not seem to account for some significant aspects that should be considered because embedded in, or inferable from, the original text.

3. *Facing the masked man*

Recent scholarship has attempted to defend the flying man from the masked man by adopting various theoretical strategies and devices. For instance, some scholars have tried to disable the fallacy by interpreting the argument in a purely epistemological way (Black 2005, 309-310; Black 2008, 72-73), but this move might not fit the original ontological purpose of the argument very well (Toivanen 2015, 64-69). Others have preferred an essentialist interpretation, according to which the flying man

would grasp his essence (with its full set of properties including the property of 'not being connected to a body') rather than the bare existence of himself (Hasse 2000, 80-84; Adamson & Benevich 2018, 158-161), but this seems to weigh down the argument with unnecessary theoretical assumptions (Kaukua 2020, 292-294). Further approaches emphasise that the flying man is transparent to himself rather than opaque as assumed by the fallacy (Kaukua 2020, 294-295) or that his attitudes should be interpreted as objectual attitudes, whereas the fallacy would work only against propositional ones (Almotahari 2025).

Setting aside the details of these numerous readings, they may all be originated from the question that a charitable interpreter would ask: «Is it possible (and how) to elaborate a version of the flying man argument which is respectful of ibn Sīnā's alleged intentions over textual fidelity, and at the same time does not incorporate the masked man fallacy?».

In my opinion, the previous version of the argument is undoubtedly affected by the fallacy. Yet, that version might not be a charitable interpretation of the argument. Perhaps, a different version can secure the argument from the fallacy by showing that the flawed version fails to appreciate a relevant aspect emerging from ibn Sīnā's text: the distinction between the perspective of the reader adopting the limited flying man's viewpoint, and the perspective of the reader *qua* real person, whose faculties are no longer limited by the stipulated constraints of the experiment (e.g., imagined sensory deprivation). This distinction marks a difference between what the reader can claim based only on the thought experiment, and what the reader can entail from the experiment plus her own experience (e.g., of her body) and logical principles (Hertogh 2013, 70-71; Kaukua 2015, 38, n. 29).

Based on the combination of these perspectives, some elements can be highlighted as essential for the reconstruction of a more charitable version of the argument. Firstly, thanks to the imagined experiment, the reader can be pointed to the flying man's awareness of his bare existence (self-awareness) regardless of bodily awareness. As already noted, this is ibn Sīnā's invitation to the reader to pay attention to an actual but barely detectable phenomenon which is common to our experience: the direct awareness of our own selves. However, the charitable reader should not derive conclusions from the flying man's position alone, because this move would suddenly expose ibn Sīnā's argument to the fallacy. Analogously to Roberta's case, from the viewpoint of whom she is not justified

in believing that Stefano is not the masked man, the reader as a flying man is not justified in believing that her own self is different from her body. A further step is required to establish the conclusion: the experience of the reader as a real person.

Thanks to her bodily experience, the reader occupies a vantage point compared to the flying man's standpoint, who cannot deduce anything about his body (not even its existence) because of his silenced corporeality. Having familiarity with her body, the reader as a concrete person can detect properties which she as a flying man cannot. For instance, she can recognise of not being directly aware of her own body (if bodies can be accessed only via sensory stimulation). Therefore, the reader as a real person, being in a better position than the flying man's, is justified to distinguish between the property (possessed by her own self) of being directly accessible to her from the property (possessed by her own body) of not being directly accessible to her. From the combined results of thought experiment and concrete experience, the reader can justifiably infer that self and body do not share all their properties. A person's self has the property of being directly accessible to the person herself, whereas a person's body has not such a property. Conversely, a person's body must be accessed through the mediation of internal or external sense organs; and this property is not shared with a person's self.

Lastly, from the application of the principle of indiscernibility of identicals, the reader can infer the difference between her own self (which existence she can be directly aware of) and her own body (which existence she can only be indirectly aware of). These focal elements may help to propose a new interpretation of the flying man argument:

[P1] My self is directly accessible to me.

[P2] My body is not directly accessible to me.

[C1] My self and my body do not share all properties.

[P3] If my self is my body, then they share all properties.

[C2] My self is not my body.

The formulation of [P1] is justified by the result of the thought experiment that the reader applies to herself. This premise is true if we assume the conceivability of the experiment and its application to anybody, which ibn Sīnā would gladly concede. The formulation of [P2] is justified by the result of the reader's reflection on her personal experience. This premise is true if we grant the impossibility of the direct perception of one's own body, which ibn Sīnā would agree upon (Toivanen 2015, 68-69). [C1] logically flows from the two premises through a

comparison between the flying man's condition in the experiment and the reader's own experience. Finally, [C2] is justified by applying *modus tollens* to the connection between [C1] and [P3], the principle of indiscernibility of identicals.⁴ Formally, this new version of the argument exhibits the following structure:

- [P1] x is P.
- [P2] y is not P.
- [C] x is not y.

To my understanding, this version is deductively valid – i.e., it does not embody any formal fallacy, and *a fortiori* it does not incorporate the masked man fallacy (at least not as obviously as the previous version). The validity of the inference from premises to conclusion is warranted by the correct application of the indiscernibility of identicals. On this version, the inference designed by ibn Sīnā is truth-preserving. Thus, if the premises are true, the truth of the conclusion is granted as well. Furthermore, the proposed reconstruction of the argument is founded on a textual interpretation which arguably ibn Sīnā would approve. Indeed, this version seems coherent with his philosophical agenda, since it shows that self and body are different but still not necessarily separated or independent – an argumentative step that, as initially noted, ibn Sīnā will take in a subsequent section. Overall, it might be that the objections based on the application of the masked man fallacy are not targeted to a charitable version of the argument: they have turned the flying man into a “straw man.”

4. Conclusion

This essay has shown that the flying man argument is not necessarily affected by the masked man fallacy, if we can provide a version of it that is more charitable than the version attacked by the fallacy. Nevertheless, the fact that the former does not (manifestly) commit the fallacy does not entail that the argument is not mistaken or dubious in any way. It simply means that, if the argument is mistaken, it is not due to that fallacy. However, once dismissed the fallacy by granting the formal validity of the argument, the next step would be to investigate its soundness by assessing the truth of its premises.

⁴ For other formalisations of the argument based on different views, see e.g., Alwishah 2013, 52-53; Hertogh 2013, 55-63; Toivanen 2015, 66-69; Kaukua 2020, 294-295.

Are our selves really something which we can access immediately without any detour through our bodies, actions, or environment, or instead do they reveal themselves only by means of that mediation? Are our bodies really something only indirectly accessible to us like any other physical objects, or instead do they have a kind of “special status” among objects, because they are so “close” (albeit possibly not identical) to ourselves that they are ineliminable constituents of our worldly existence? Reasonable answers to these questions require investigations going well beyond the limits of this essay.

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