

Self-awareness in Avicenna, Suhrawardī and Mullā ṣadrā: A synoptic account

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Abstract

This article sketches the development of a particular concept of self-awareness in Avicenna, Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā. Avicenna uses the concept in a very specific sense to refer to the fact that all human experience is given in a first-personal perspective. In his psychology self-awareness amounts to the existence of individual human souls, which he takes to be immaterial substances. Suhrawardī inherits the concept from Avicenna but uses it for different theoretical purposes. The concept figures in a crucial role in the definition of the concept of light or appearance with which Suhrawardī intends to replace the Peripatetic concept of substance as the foundation of all existence. Finally, the concept resurfaces in Mullā Ṣadrā, who does not differ from his predecessors regarding its applications, but does revise the related concept of self because of his commitment to the theories of cognitive identity and substantial motion.

Keywords: self-awareness, Selfhood, Soul, I, subject.

This research paper is an attempt to sketch the historical development of a particular definition of the phenomenon of self-awareness. More precisely, I will present the main outlines of the theoretical application of the phenomenon in Avicenna, Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā. I claim that the development of self-awareness in these three thinkers can be told as a story of a single phenomenon, a feature of experience which

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all three authors single out and define by largely the same empirical and argumentative means. Yet it is a genuine story, in that the three thinkers apply the phenomenon differently and to different theoretical purposes. Thus, the thread provided by the phenomenon connects fundamental divergences in theoretical aims and applications. And ultimately, these differences in aim and application will have an effect on how the phenomenon itself is understood.

I have cast these three authors as the protagonists of the story simply because I think they represent major moves in the discussion on self-awareness in medieval Islamic philosophy. I am not under the illusion that my casting will yield an exhaustive account of self-awareness in the period. Important supporting roles will have to be attributed to such figures as Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī, and especially Ibn ʿArabī with his cadre of philosophical commentators. However, I do think that in each of the three thinkers to be discussed something new comes to the fore *explicitly* for the first time, as far as our period is concerned, and I therefore think that the story will have some validity beyond mere acknowledgment of practical constraints.

Avicenna

In his psychology, Avicenna wants to be both a substance dualist and an orthodox Aristotelian. This forces him to address the problem of the individuation (*tashakhkhush*) of human souls. The commonplace Peripatetic account of individuation is based on spatiotemporal coordinates that are unique to each individual entity: one and only one entity at a time can exist in a given place. The problem is that this spatiotemporal location is due to matter, whereas the task Avicenna is faced with is to explain the individuation of an immaterial entity. Tackling the problem in *Shifā': al-nafs* V.3, Avicenna says that the emergence of a suitable body is a necessary condition for the emergence of an individual soul. Thus, the soul's individuality requires a relation to a body proper to it and it alone.

[Human souls] do not differ from one another by quiddity and form, because their form is one. Therefore, they differ from one another only in respect to what receives the quiddity or that to which the quiddity is properly related, and this is the body. Even if it were possible that the

soul exists without a body, it still wouldn't be possible that [one] soul differs from [another] soul numerically. This is absolute in every case: if things' being species, the essences of which are mere meanings (*ma'ānin faqāṭ*), has become many through their individuals, it has become many only through those that bear, receive, and are affected by it, or through some relation to them or to their times. Since [the souls] are separate to begin with, and not by what we have said, it is impossible that there is difference and multiplicity between them. Thus, it is false that the souls are numerically many of essence before arriving in bodies.¹

The problem with explaining the soul's individuality by recourse to a relation to a spatiotemporally individuated body is that a relation will cease at the corruption of one of the relata. Thus, the question of the soul's individuality reappears at the corruption of the body which the soul as an immaterial and hence incorruptible entity is supposed to survive. This forces Avicenna to conceive the relation to the body as a property of the soul, the property of "having-been-related-to-the-body" which will survive the actual relation. In other words, subsequent to the initial relation to the body, the soul is individuated by a property or a set of properties unique to it that are genetically dependent on the relation to the body but capable of subsisting without the actual relation. And in fact, Avicenna goes on to list a set of such properties.

After [the soul] has been individuated as singular, it and another, numerically [different] soul cannot be one essence – we have repeated the discussion on the impossibility of this in a number of places. But we are certain that [1] the soul can, when it comes to be with the coming to be of a temperament, afterwards come to have a configuration in rational actions and rational passions that as a whole are distinct from the corresponding configuration it would have in another, as two temperaments in two bodies are distinct; that [2] the acquired configuration, which is called an intellect in act, is also to a certain degree something by which [the soul] is distinguished from another soul; and that [3] an awareness of its particular self (*shu'ūrun bi dhātihā al-juz'iyya*) occurs to [the soul], and that awareness is also a certain configuration in it which is proper to it and to no other. It may be the case that [4] a proper configuration also comes to be in it in respect to bodily faculties. That configuration is connected to moral configurations, or is the same as them. There [may] also be [5] other properties unknown to us that are appended to souls when they come

to be and afterwards, just as similar [properties] are appended to individuals of corporeal species so that [the individuals] are distinguished by them for as long as they remain; similarly souls are distinguished by their properties in them, whether the bodies are there or not, whether we know those states or not, or know some of them.²

What Avicenna seems to suggest here is a variation of the so-called bundle theory of individuation. The crux of this type of theory is that individuality consists in the set, or bundle, of properties an individual has. While none of the properties need be unique to the individual in question, as a whole they are *de facto* capable of singling it out from among its kin. For example, the designation 'human being' is not sufficient to pick out Jari Kaukua from among all the things in the world. But according to the bundle theory of individuation, once we add further properties like 'native of Finland', 'born in August 1975', 'of pale complexion', 'rather short' and so forth, we will in the end have a description that despite being still in principle applicable to more than one individual, will *de facto* refer exclusively to Jari Kaukua.³

The problem is that in *Shifā': al-madkhal* I.12 Avicenna explicitly rejects the bundle theory of individuation.⁴ No set of properties of the immaterial soul will be sufficient to individuate it, precisely because without a unique spatiotemporal locus due to matter all properties are *in principle* attributable to more than one individual. As a result, none of the attributes in Avicenna's list – with the exception of self-awareness, as I will argue shortly – seem able to individuate an *immaterial* entity. If we examined each of them singly, it would be easy to see that there always remains the possibility to attribute the property to another individual, since nothing in it makes it exclusive to the soul whose attribute it is. As a bundle they may happen to be uniquely instantiated in only one soul, but this is only accidental, and therefore, according to Avicenna's explicit words, insufficient for individuation.

This problem remains largely implicit in *Shifā': al-nafs*. Although Avicenna does hesitate slightly in listing the alleged individuating properties, with the exception of self-awareness which he says he is "certain" about, he seems to consider the case closed. However, I

would like to suggest that either Avicenna himself or one of his contemporary interlocutors perceived and raised the problem, and that related remarks in later works can be read as pointing toward a solution. Consider, for instance, the following passage from the *Taʿlīqāt*, a book which Dimitri Gutas has characterized as a compendium of questions and answers meant to be appended to the *Shifāʾ*.⁵

Self-awareness (*al-shuʿūru bi al-dhāt*) is essential to the soul, it is not acquired from outside. It is as if when the self/essence (*al-dhāt*) comes to be, awareness comes to be with it. [...]

Self-awareness is actual for the soul, and its awareness of itself is continuous. [...]

Our awareness of ourselves is our very existence. [...]

Self-awareness is innate to the self/essence, it is the very existence of the self/essence. *Thus, there is no need for anything external by which the self/essence is apprehended. Rather, the self/essence is that which apprehends itself.*⁶

Although the immediate context of the passage is not concerned with the problem of individuation, I suggest that we read this passage as the kind of pointer toward its solution that I have just referred to. Here self-awareness, one of the individuating properties listed in *Shifāʾ*: *al-naḥs* V.3, is presented as *the* mode of existence proper to an individual human soul. As a mode of existence it will have the same explanatory function as matter and material existence in the case of individual material entities: something immaterial can exist as an individual due to its unique awareness of itself, just as something material can exist as an individual due to its unique spatiotemporal coordinates afforded by matter. Thus, from a mere feature in a list of individuating properties, self-awareness has been promoted to the individual existence itself to which other properties can subsequently be attributed.

Now, there is nothing extraordinary in the claim that the existence of an immaterial entity consists of self-cognition. Indeed, Avicenna explicitly subscribes to the traditional thesis according to which immateriality entails intellectuality, and intellectual existence always consists of self-intellection.⁷ But the explanatory role he ascribes to self-awareness as a solution of the problem of individuation lands him

the considerable task of devising a description of a type of self-awareness that could plausibly fulfill the function. The problem is, of course, that most common-sense uses of the term 'self-awareness' tend to pick out phenomena that involve explicit self-consideration that require second-order reflective attention at oneself. As examples of such states, we can consider the awkwardly heightened sense of the deficiencies of one's person in an intimidating situation like being called to task about a crime, or the kind of thoughts about our own identity that we engage in when faced with decisions of long-term importance, such as pondering whether to accept an enticing job offer from an institution known to engage in suspect activities. What is common to such states and activities is that they are intermittent, something that we are not continuously engaged in. On the other hand, if self-awareness is tantamount to our very existence, it should be a state we will always find ourselves in. What kind of phenomenal plausibility could Avicenna possibly find for a concept of self-awareness that is able to fulfill such a loaded theoretical task?

Avicenna describes self-awareness in a number of contexts and from different aspects in his psychological works. In a comprehensive survey of the relevant passages, I would like to argue, a fairly determined concept of self-awareness begins to emerge. Here we will have to content ourselves with a brief look at two representative passages. Let us first consider a text from *al-Ishārāt wa al-tanbīhāt*, another late work, in which Avicenna argues against an essentially Aristotelian claim according to which self-awareness first comes to be through reflective attention at one's prior act.

Perhaps you say: I cannot affirm myself except by means of my action. Then it is necessary that you have an action that you affirm in the said premise, or a movement or something else. In our consideration of the said premise we have put those out of your reach.

When we regard the more general matter, if you have affirmed your action as action in the absolute sense, it is necessary that you affirm an agent of it in the absolute sense, not in a particular sense. [This agent] is your very self. If you have affirmed [your action] as your action, you do not affirm yourself through it. On the contrary, your self is part of the concept of your act insofar as it *your* act. The part is affirmed in the conception preceding it and it is not made any less by being with it but not through it. Thus, your self is not affirmed through [your

action].⁸

Avicenna's argument against such a reflection theory of self-awareness is quite straightforward: one cannot first become aware of oneself by reflecting on one's action or experience, since unless one is aware of oneself to begin with, there is no way of recognizing the action or experience as one's own. Although Avicenna's point here is not to define self-awareness, the way he addresses it gives a clue as to what he means by it: self-awareness is, if you like, a sense of ownership of one's action and experience, or a sense of being the first-personal subject of whatever one is aware of either bringing about or undergoing. As such it is a structural feature of any first-order experience, regardless of whether we pay explicit reflective attention to it or not.⁹

A similar description can be extrapolated from a passage in *Shifā' al-nafs* V.7, where Avicenna argues that since the soul is the unifying agent of all animate action, it cannot be identified with or located in any of the organs in the body.

It is by the senses, by hearing, and by experience that I know that I have a heart and a brain, not because I know that I am I. Thus, that organ in itself is not the thing of which I am aware that it is me by essence, rather it is me only accidentally. What is intended when I know about me that I am me – what I mean when I say 'I sensed, intellected, acted, and combined these descriptions' – is something else which I call 'I'.¹⁰

Earlier in the chapter, Avicenna has stated as obvious that once we learn the psychological definition of the soul as the agent of all animate actions in a living body, we realize that what each of us is aware of as him/herself is a soul. Here, the repeated emphasis on the first-personal subject that subsists unchanged in its various acts is based on that remark. The self that each of us is aware of and that is discussed as soul in psychology first appears to each of us as an I, as the first-personal subject we identify ourselves with. Thus, self-awareness is awareness of being such an I, the unchanging first-personal subject of all actions one performs and all experiences one undergoes.

Self-awareness in this sense is not an ordinary act of intellection. First of all, its object – if indeed an object is involved – is not universal. I can of course reflectively consider my first-personality, and thereby grasp it as an instance of a universal such as 'subject of experience', or indeed, 'first-personality', but the first-order awareness that is then reflectively considered remains individual and unique to me. On the other hand, as I argued before, self-awareness in this non-reflective sense has to be continuous, unlike other acts of intellection. Indeed, in a striking passage in the *Ishārāt*, Avicenna claims that even persons in profound sleep or drunkenness, i.e. in paradigmatically unaware states, are aware of themselves.¹¹ Thus, self-awareness as first-personality is not dependent on any explicit cognitive act or any object of cognition. This, of course, is what the well-known thought-experiment of the flying man was designed to argue for as well.¹² As a structural feature of all cognition, self-awareness persists whether or not we are aware of anything else, and especially, regardless of whether we pay explicit attention to it or not. In fact, Avicenna seems to consider self-awareness similar to the first intelligibles in that it is so obvious and familiar to us that we usually fail to pay any attention to it. For this reason, special argumentative strategies like the flying man are needed to alert us to its presence.¹³ Finally, though Avicenna does not develop the difference between self-awareness and intellection, we can find a remark in the *Mubāḥathāt*, another late compilation of correspondence, that perhaps self-awareness is not intellection at all.¹⁴

To sum up, Avicenna introduces self-awareness as a solution to a vexing question in his psychology: the self-awareness unique to each human soul is its singular existence, and thereby also the factor that ultimately explains the soul's individuality. The kind of self-awareness primitive enough to function in this role is then found by defining first-personality, being an I, as a feature of experience that is self-subsistent and independent of all other contents of experience.

Suhrawardī

In *al-Talwīḥāt*, Suhrawardī reports that during the course of his philosophical investigations he had arrived at a dead end concerning the question of knowledge. Having completely exhausted himself over

the problem, he fell into a sleeplike state, particularly receptive to mystical intuitions. During this state, Aristotle appears to Suhrawardī with an urge for him to simply "consult [his] self, and [the problem] will be solved". Aristotle then goes on to recount the main outlines of the way in which self-awareness can provide the epistemological and metaphysical foundation for Suhrawardī's illuminationist project.¹⁵

Although the passage remains, as parables often do, somewhat allusive, I believe its central point can be seen in action in the *Hikma al-ishrāq*, the work in which Suhrawardī most explicitly puts forth his own philosophical system as a critical alternative to traditional Peripatetic philosophy. In any case, self-awareness can be shown to have a foundational role in this seminal illuminationist text. One of Suhrawardī's most important moves is to replace Peripatetic ontology based on the notion of substance as the primary type of being, with a metaphysics founded on the notion of appearance (*zuhūr*). In his definition of appearance, Suhrawardī relies heavily on Avicenna's description of self-awareness. But because of the differences in his application of the phenomenon, he is led to criticize Avicenna in a number of key points.

First of all, it is rather obvious that Suhrawardī borrows the phenomenon from Avicenna. He describes self-awareness by largely the same means as his predecessor, and relies on the same arguments and data to establish its existence. Let us consider two characteristic passages.

The thing that is self-subsistent and apprehends itself does not know itself by an image of itself in itself. For if its knowledge were by an image, and if the image of I-ness is not [I-ness], [the image] would be an it in relation to the [I-ness]. In that case, what is apprehended would be the image. Thus, it follows that while the apprehension of I-ness is precisely the apprehension of what [the thing itself] is, the apprehension of its self would be the apprehension of something else – which is absurd. This is not the case with externals, since the image and what it is [an image] of are each an it. Moreover, if [the thing's apprehension of itself] were by an image and it did not know that this was an image of itself, it would not know itself. If it did know that this was an image of itself, it must have already known itself without an image. How could something be conceived to know itself by something superadded to itself – something that would be an attribute

of it? If it were to judge that every attribute added to its self, be it knowledge or something else, belonged to its self, it would have to have known its self prior to and apart from any attributes. It would therefore not have known its self through the superadded attributes.¹⁶

Here we can see Suhrawardī argue against reflection theories of self-awareness along the very same lines as Avicenna: if self-awareness is to result from a reflective attention at any object of awareness, then it must be explained how that object is to be recognized as oneself. Since no non-arbitrary means of recognition seem to be forthcoming, we must postulate a cognitively primitive self-awareness at the basis. Interestingly, Suhrawardī also introduces a new technical term, 'I-ness' (*anā'iyya*), which is particularly apposite to characterize the notion of first-personality I have just argued Avicenna's concept of self-awareness amounts to. This I-ness, the first-personal subject pole of experience, is contrasted with anything that can be an it, i.e. anything that can figure as an object, which the first-personal subject can refer to in the third person.

In another passage, Suhrawardī argues for the constant presence of self-awareness.

You are never absent from your self and your apprehension of it. Since the apprehension cannot be by a form or by something superadded, you need nothing to apprehend your self save that self, which is manifest to itself, or not absent from itself. Therefore, it must apprehend its self as it is in itself, and you can never be absent from your self or any part of your self. That from which your self can be absent – organs such as heart, liver, or brain, and all the dark and luminous barriers and states – does not belong to that in you which apprehends. Thus, that in you which apprehends is not an organ or anything to do with a barrier, since otherwise you would always be aware of these as you are always and unceasingly aware of your self.¹⁷

As we can evidently see, Suhrawardī resorts to the kind of methodological abstraction familiar from a number of arguments in the *Shifā': al-nafs*,¹⁸ precisely in order to separate self-awareness from any awareness of objects, including the awareness of one's own body. Anything that can be absent from one's experience, cannot be part of one's self. And since any particular object can be abstracted from one's experience without thereby losing one's self-awareness, Suhrawardī,

like Avicenna, concludes that self-awareness is distinct and independent from awareness of anything else.

But although Suhrawardī's characterization of the phenomenon seems to be of Avicennian descent, he is overtly critical of Avicenna's central inference on its basis. As we saw, for Avicenna self-awareness had a crucial role in the defence of substance dualism, when it was argued to be the existence of the immaterial human substance. Now, the following passage from the *Hikma al-ishrāq* is as flat a denial of the validity of that inference as one can get.

If substantiality is understood as the perfection of the quiddity of [the self], or to mean that it does not [depend on] a substrate or subject, it is not an independent thing that your self could be. If substantiality is taken to be something unknown and if you apprehend your self continually and not by something additional, then this substantiality, which is not present for you, can be neither the whole of your self nor any part of your self. If you examine [this matter] closely, you will find that you exist only through something which apprehends itself: this is your 'I-ness'. Anything else that apprehends its self and I-ness has this in common with you. Apprehension, therefore, occurs neither by an attribute nor by something superadded, of whatever sort. It is not a part of your I-ness, since the other part would still remain unknown so long as it remained beyond apprehension and awareness; it would be unknown and would not belong to your self, whose awareness is nothing additional to it. It is thereby obvious that thingness is not superadded to the awareness either, so that it is manifest to itself and by itself. There is no other property with it, such that manifestation could be a state belonging to it. It is simply the manifest itself – nothing more. Therefore, it is light in itself, and it is thus pure light.¹⁹

Interestingly, Suhrawardī does subscribe to Avicenna's central claim: the existence of the individual human being *is* her self-awareness. But he immediately goes on to qualify that this existence should not be understood as the existence *of some thing*, or *of a substance*. Self-awareness can be called substantial in the sense that the existence in question amounts to a certain first perfection and subsists independently. But at the same time there is *no thing* that is thereby perfected or made subsistent. Self-awareness is self-awareness, period.

I believe that this potentially upsetting claim is motivated by Suhrawardī's general departure from traditional Peripatetic substance ontology that I just mentioned. Instead of building a hierarchy of different types of being and founding it upon one primary mode of being, Suhrawardī prefers to speak of different types of appearance. Thus, all there is, are acts of appearance: individual appearances of humanity, tableness, horseness, and so forth. We may believe that behind the appearances there is something like substances, which the appearances are appearances of and which even cause the appearances in one way or another. But our having the belief does not change the fact, Suhrawardī maintains, that the belief is not warranted by the appearances, which are epistemically and metaphysically primary. All we have are the appearances, substances are *merely* our suppositions.

All being appearance, Suhrawardī then makes a fundamental distinction between two types of appearance: appearance to another and appearance to self. Appearance to another is secondary and always presupposes an appearance to a self that is capable of apprehending the appearance to another.²⁰ Zayd cannot appear to ʿAmr unless ʿAmr already appears to himself. Moreover, whatever appears to another is in itself appearance to oneself. While this may be obvious in the case of Zayd, Suhrawardī thinks it is by no means exclusive to human beings. Any object we perceive as an other that appears to us is the outward appearance of a separate Platonic form, which in itself is appearance to itself.

Now, where does self-awareness come into play? Let us return to Suhrawardī's text.

Nothing that has a self of which it is not unconscious is dusky, for its self is evident to it. It cannot be a dark state in something else, since even the luminous state is not a self-subsistent light, let alone the dark state. Therefore, it is a nonspatial pure incorporeal light.²¹

Suhrawardī here defines the notion of appearance to self, of which he uses the technical term 'incorporeal light', by means of self-awareness. Indeed, appearance to self *is* self-awareness. Therefore, given the foundational role of the notion of incorporeal light as appearance to self, for Suhrawardī self-awareness becomes the very

foundation of all reality, quite literally the stuff reality is made of. In a striking departure from Avicenna, the central field of application of self-awareness changes from psychology to the very core of metaphysics. Instead of a cornerstone for psychological substance dualism, self-awareness now furnishes the basis of an entire metaphysics!

This move becomes even more emphatic when Suhrawardī moves on to discuss God as the specific object of metaphysics. Even God, the Light of lights, is said to be self-awareness in exactly the same sense as we are, only to a greater extent or more intensely:

It has been shown that your I-ness is an incorporeal light which apprehends itself, and that incorporeal lights do not differ in their true natures. Thus, every [incorporeal light] must apprehend itself, since that which is necessary for something is also necessary for that which shares the same true nature with it.²²

It is thus established that the Light of lights is separate from all else and nothing is joined to it. Nothing is conceivably more splendidous than it! Since something's coming to know itself depends on its being manifest to itself, and since the Light of lights is pure luminosity whose manifestation is not by another, the life and self-knowledge of the Light of lights are not additional to its self. You have already seen the proof of this for every incorporeal light.²³

There is a sense in which Avicenna would have been able to subscribe to the idea of a fundamental similarity between God's existence and our own, for in the very context of the *Ta' līqāt* in which he identifies human self-awareness with the existence of the immaterial human soul, he also describes God's existence as self-intellection. However, for Avicenna there is a crucial difference between God's understanding of Himself and human self-awareness. God's intellection encompasses the entire universe through His understanding of Himself as its origin and goal, and therefore the traditional idea that all intellection is self-intellection is unqualifiedly true of God. But in the case of human beings, self-awareness has a very narrow content, and whatever else we are intellectually aware of, is present to us as something different from ourselves,²⁴ or to use Suhrawardī's terms, as an it related to our I-ness.

On the other hand, the idea of gradation of self-awareness, the claim that self-awareness comes in degrees, which is entailed by the idea that God's self-awareness is more intense than ours, would have been, if not outrightly denied, at least deeply problematic for Avicenna. If self-awareness is the first perfection of human souls, as the account on individuation in the *Shifā'* suggests, then it seems very difficult to conceive how it could come in degrees. Rather, it provides the foundation for the development of the self-aware human being towards the goal of her proper second perfection by way of acquiring knowledge. While ensuring that the acquired knowledge is in each case uniquely *mine*, for Avicenna self-awareness plays no role whatsoever in determining the degree of second perfection respective to the knowledge acquired by each soul.

To sum up, Suhrawardī takes on the phenomenon of self-awareness largely as it was descriptively defined by Avicenna. However, he rejects Avicenna's central psychological conclusion, i.e. his substance dualism, transferring instead the primary application of self-awareness from the field of psychology to the very center of metaphysics. This is achieved by Suhrawardī's definition of the foundational concept of appearance to self by means of self-awareness. As a result, Suhrawardī ends up describing God as a more intense self-awareness in comparison to our own. While it is left somewhat unclear how precisely we should understand the entailed gradation of self-awareness and the prospect of development *in* self-awareness that this gives rise to,²⁵ we can see that it was an idea Mullā Ṣadrā took heed of.

Mullā Ṣadrā

By Mullā Ṣadrā's time, the phenomenon of self-awareness seems to have become a firm part of the tradition. Evidence is plenty that Ṣadrā is thoroughly familiar with both Avicenna's and Suhrawardī's descriptive remarks on the phenomenon. Let us consider three examples.

No one can say: my knowledge of myself is due to a medium, which is my act, I gain information of myself from my act. For this is not possible, [irrespective of] whether I gain information of myself from an absolute act or from an act, which originates from myself to

myself. If I gain information from an absolute act, the absolute act only requires an absolute agent, and only an absolute agent can be established by means of it, not an agent that would be me. If I gain information of myself through my own act, I can only know my act after I [have] already [come to] know myself. Thus, if I can only know myself after I [have come to] know myself, a circle results, and that is false. Thus, this indicates that a human being's knowledge of himself is not by means of his act.²⁶

Here we can see Ṣadrā criticizing reflection theories of self-awareness along very familiar lines. In fact, his wording is almost a quote from the *Ishārāt*. Another text shows Ṣadrā following in Suhrawardī's argumentative steps:

Whatever is like that [i.e. an individual conceived under some universal description] is in relation to us an it, and it cannot be referred to by means of 'I'. We know intuitively that when we apprehend our self we are unaware of all concepts and universal signs, let alone the concept 'substance' or 'rational', or other such. Whatever we know of these things, we do not refer to it as 'I', and from this it is known that all is hidden from us except our simple itness, and no doubt that simple itness is existence and nothing else.²⁷

I would like to point out two things about this passage. First, Ṣadrā makes the distinction we are already familiar with between the subject and the object of awareness as respectively an I and an it. We have seen Suhrawardī apply this distinction in his argument against explanations of self-awareness by means of the mediation of a special object. But secondly, and in my opinion more interestingly, the passage also suggests that Ṣadrā subscribes to Suhrawardī's critique of Avicenna's inference of the soul's substantiality from self-awareness. Ṣadrā explicitly says that no concepts are involved at the most foundational level of self-awareness. Self-awareness is our concrete existence pure and simple. This is a crucial point, to which we will have due reason to return in a moment.

As a third and last example of Ṣadrā's adherence to his predecessors' discussion of self-awareness, let us look at the very Avicennian argument in the following passage.

Hylic souls are distinguished from each other by appendices that occur to them because of matter, for when souls come about, they are

corporeal, and are to be judged as material forms and natures that are multiple because of corporeal distinctions. *Then results the individuation of each of them by an individual existence which is their very awareness of themselves, and that persists firmly while [undergoing] a kind of existential renewal.* Thus, the distinction between [souls] certainly remains eternally even if existential diversity occurs to each of them because of their substantiation from the beginning of their being until the end of their substantial perfection.²⁸

The Avicennian claim here is that self-awareness individuates human beings as mental entities,²⁹ i.e. as entities whose existence amounts to mental operations and experiences. Such an existence always comes endowed with a first-personal perspective which individuates it just as irreducibly and primitively as the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of matter do in the case of material entities. Admittedly, Ṣadrā's understanding of the human soul's original material existence does seem to differ from the role Avicenna ascribes to the body in the soul's individuation. Where Avicenna conceives of the body as merely a necessary condition for the soul's individual existence, which in itself is immaterial from the very beginning, Ṣadrā allows a phase of genuinely material existence in the soul's substantial development. But as regards immaterial existence, the two authors agree that its individuality hinges on self-awareness. The formulation in the above passage does, however, give lie to an important difference, when Ṣadrā says that self-awareness is subject to "a kind of existential renewal", something that Avicenna's static concept of self-awareness would have little room for.

Thus, although Ṣadrā takes aboard the phenomenon of self-awareness as well as much of its theoretical applications from his predecessors, he subjects it to important changes. In my estimation, these changes to which we will now turn, are largely due to two overarching metaphysical ideas that are loaded with psychological entailments. First of these is a broad interpretation of the identity theory of cognition, i.e. the thesis that the subject and the object of cognition are identical, or interdependent constituents of a single cognitive act, which can be distinguished in conceptual analysis but are never really distinct. The theory, of course, has an ancient basis, which was recognized by both its proponents and opponents among the Islamic philosophers. However, I will not go into the details of

either the historical development of the theory or the precise relations of its Sadrian version to earlier representatives. Suffice it to say that Ṣadrā held it to be true of every type of cognition, including the most elementary levels of sense-perception.³⁰

The second theory with fundamental consequences for Ṣadrā's discussion of self-awareness is what is often referred to as the theory of substantial change (*haraka jawhariyya*). Roughly, the idea attacks the Peripatetic understanding of change as variation of attributes upon an immutable substantial basis. For a Peripatetic, a person remains unaltered in his/her humanity throughout the course of her life, despite the fluctuation of most, if not all, of his/her other attributes. The only kind of change we can attribute to substances is their coming and ceasing to exist. This, however, cannot properly be called a change of the entity in question. For Ṣadrā, on the contrary, the person's course of life involves change in his/her very substance, in the very humanity of that person. If, for instance, he/she manages to acquire knowledge, his/her very substance is thereby perfected, his/her humanity intensified, and he/she comes to exist more fully as a human being. He/she will literally be more human than he/she was as an infant, not just endowed with superior attributes. As a consequence, everything there is, substantial essences of things included, is subject to constant development.

How then, do these theoretical concerns affect Ṣadrā's concept of self-awareness? We have seen that both Avicenna and Suhrawardī discussed self-awareness in the very narrow sense of first-personality abstracted from whatever one has a first-personal access to. This first-personality, subjectivity in the psychological sense, then functioned as a subject in the ontological sense, the bearer of attributes proper to and individuated by it. Or as in Suhrawardī, it took on the function of an epistemic subject that was a condition of possibility for the appearance of other attributes or contents of experience. But for both thinkers this first-personality was either essentially immutable, as in Avicenna, or the potential for development inherent in it was overshadowed by a focus on its more static aspects, and left largely undeveloped and unexplained, as in Suhrawardī. Now on the contrary, Ṣadrā situates the ideas of gradation and development of self-awareness at the very center of his conception of it.

First of all, as the passage we have just examined shows, the existence of an individual human soul has phases during which the soul is not individuated by its self-awareness but by being enmattered. The development from a material to an immaterial being is one aspect of Ṣadrā's theory of substantial change, and signals a departure from his predecessors.³¹ But what is more, although Ṣadrā too takes self-awareness to be the individuating factor and the mode of existence proper to an individual human being after her separation from matter, he subjects it to substantial motion towards the properly human perfection through the acquisition of knowledge. When the self-aware human being, in the course of this perfection, becomes qualified by whatever she knows, *she changes in herself*, coming to exist more fully in the manner proper to her. This, on the other hand, is a direct result of the theory of cognitive identity. The subject and its objects of knowledge, although conceptually distinguishable, are in reality interdependent constituents of one act of existence unique to that subject and those objects. Ṣadrā is explicit about this:

When being a knower and being known is realized between two things, there is no doubt about an essential connection between them with regard to existence, and so a unifying connection or an existential bond of one knowing the other is realized between the two things. [...] That connection requires the occurrence of one of them to the other and its being revealed to [the other]. It may take place between the very essence of what is known according to its concrete existence and the self of the knower, like in the soul's knowledge of itself, its attributes, its faculties, and the forms established on the tablets of its awareness, and it may be between a form which occurs from what is known and is additional to its essence and the self of the knower, like in the soul's knowledge of what is external to its self and to the self of its faculties and its awareness, and it is called 'occurrent knowledge' or 'emergent knowledge'. What is really known is also here the very form that is present, not what is external to it. When it is said of the external that it is known, this is in a secondary sense.³²

Ṣadrā here considers the identity theory in regard to two types of cognitive objects. The first concerns those objects for which the knowing soul provides the obvious metaphysical foundation. This case does not seem particularly problematic to Ṣadrā. It is, however, an altogether different claim to say that the theory of the identity of the

cognitive subject and object holds even in acts of sense perception, which according to most common-sense accounts have external and mind-independent objects. Ṣadrā's reply is that even here the forms that are believed to be caused by objects external to the subject that knows them, are first and foremost *forms that are known*, i.e. constituents of the unified act of cognition, and can only subsequently, or secondarily, be believed to exist external to the act of cognition and the subject knowing them, or independent of both.

This could be understood as a variation of Suhrawardī's argument that substances behind appearances are nothing but our own suppositions, which never appear as such in our experience. But if we follow this reasoning in light of Ṣadrā's commitment to the broad concept of cognitive identity, we have to conclude that the same is true of the subject of experience as well. Although I may believe that I exist independent of whatever objects I am aware of, this is a secondary belief appended to the unified act of existence aware of these particular objects here and now, and as such no more warranted or foundational than the supposition about the substantiality or the mind-independence of the objects of awareness. From this point of view there is also a rather obvious fallacy in Avicenna's and Suhrawardī's argument for the independence of self-awareness of all objective content. As we recall, the argument hinged on the fact that no particular object is necessary for self-awareness; there is nothing that will always figure in our awareness except the fact that whatever we are aware of, we are aware of from a first-personal perspective. However, this does not warrant us to conclude that self-awareness could ever really exist in distinction from any object at all. All we can conclude is that no particular object will always be needed, not that we can do without any object absolutely.

To further characterize the difference between Ṣadrā and his predecessors, we can say that for Ṣadrā mental states are unified acts of existence to which a variety of concepts can be applied, for instance the concepts 'subject of awareness' or 'first-personality'. Thus, although I can abstract my first-personality by means of arguments such as Avicenna's flying man, or the argument that no single particular object is a necessary condition for the existence of the subject, this does not change the fact that to begin with, I am always

aware of myself as an I caught in the act of doing, perceiving, knowing, or desiring something. In other words, I am not primarily aware of myself simply as an I detached from all qualifications. According to Ṣadrā, such an outward orientation to action and cognition follows from my very essence.

Thus, by necessity the soul's first knowledge is its knowledge of itself, and then its knowledge of its powers and instruments which are the external and the internal senses. These two knowledges are presential knowledge.

Then after these two knowledges there originates from the soul's self to itself the use of instruments without a conception of this act, i.e. [without *both*] the use of instruments *and* assent of its usefulness, like in other voluntary acts which originate from us outside the body. Thus, this is a different type of volition, not by means of intent and consideration even though it is not separate from knowledge of it. For volition is here the very knowledge, whereas in other voluntary acts originating from the soul there is [something] that precedes knowledge of them and assent of their usefulness.

*As regards this act, which is like the soul's employment of powers, senses and the like, it originates from itself, not from its consideration. Its self by itself causes the employment of instruments, not by an additional volition or additional knowledge. But the soul in the very beginning of its creation knows itself, loves itself and its action by a love born from the self, and it is forced to employ the instruments over which nothing but it has power.*³³

The soul proceeds to action simply by itself, with no need for a decision or anything added to its awareness of itself. Therefore, the soul's awareness of itself entails its awareness of its action, and thereby awareness of the corresponding objects that the soul acts upon. In none of this, however, are we aware of the distinction between ourselves, our acts, and the objects we act upon. Rather, the self-aware state of existence is a unified whole of these structural constituents, which can be distinguished in conceptual analysis but are not distinct in reality.

It is important to note here that the possibility of analytical distinction between the constituents of self-aware existence entails second-order reflective attention at the first-order self-aware state *and*

its subsumption under a given universal. Thus, from a Sadrian point of view the kind of narrow notion of first-personality put forth by Avicenna and Suhrawardī is a result of reflective abstraction, an act of explicit conceptualization in relation to the immediate unity of self-aware existence. Such conceptualization is of course quite legitimate in itself, and often turns out to be necessary in our pursuit of knowledge about the world and ourselves. However, if I take this abstracted first-personality – particularly if I believe it to be something immutable, as we saw Avicenna do – to be all that constitutes me, I will have confused a universal quiddity abstracted from a singular act of existence with that existence itself, a confusion of which Ṣadrā is fond of criticizing his predecessors. Instead of understanding that the basis for abstraction is always concrete existence, I have come to believe that the quiddity resulting from the abstraction is something self-subsistent to which this existence can then be attributed. Instead of realizing that I am irreducibly intertwined with my concrete existence of past and present actions and passions, I believe that they are mere accidental appendices to my I-ness, the first-personal core of my being that is really separable from them.

So, just as Avicenna and Suhrawardī, Ṣadrā takes self-awareness to be primitive in the sense that it cannot be reduced to any more fundamental type of objective awareness. Yet notwithstanding all that, for Ṣadrā it is still inseparable in reality from its objective content: at the level of mental existence, what is real is always a unified whole of an I aware of an it. These objects qualify the subject while they in turn come to exist through the subject's awareness of them.

This view of the radical interdependence of the subjective and objective constituent of self-aware existence provides the framework for understanding the Suhrawardian idea according to which self-awareness comes in degrees and allows for a dimension of development. If I am always an "I aware of an it", and if intellectual existence is superior to merely perceptual existence, I will become a superior I when I actualize and expand my inherent cognitive capacities. When the object I am aware of, say the pine facing my office window, suddenly appears in an intellectual light so that I fully grasp its essence, I am changed at the very core of my being. Pines will never be the same for me again, and in this sense I will not be the

same subject either.

We have seen that Ṣadrā subscribes to the phenomenon defined by his predecessors. He even applies it to similar theoretical purposes, when he makes it the mode of existence proper to human beings separate from matter, and conceives of all immaterial existence, up to and including God, on its basis. Yet we have also seen that he differs from Avicenna and Suhrawardī in an important respect. Although he believes that we are individuated as singular first-personal perspectives, and that by paying reflective second-order attention at them we can legitimately conceptualize and speak of them in abstraction from the content they are perspectives to, he denies that they are thus abstract in themselves. Rather, we are qualified by what we are aware of and live through down to the core of our being.

Conclusion

To sum up, I have argued that Avicenna, Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā all approach self-awareness by very similar means of description and definition. Both of the two later thinkers follow Avicenna, sometimes to the word, in singling out our first-personal perspective to whatever we experience as an irreducible and constant feature of all experience. However, despite this similarity in the phenomenal basis, there are considerable differences in its theoretical application, which ultimately has consequences for how the phenomenon itself is understood.

I think this development from Avicenna to Mullā Ṣadrā appears particularly interesting, if we pay heed to the similarities between the remarks of these medieval Islamic philosophers and contemporary concerns in the philosophy of mind. The analytical attention at varieties of self-awareness, its connection to psychological argumentation, and the phenomenological wrestling with the correct delimitation of the most foundational type of self-awareness, are all pursuits familiar to contemporary philosophers. In fact, the familiarity is sometimes so great that a conscientious historian of philosophy must ask himself whether the interpretation he presents is to blame, whether the sources are made to speak a too familiar language because of anachronistic suppositions about the conceptual means and the phenomenal data available to the historical thinkers under discussion.

This is an all the more serious issue, since there are eminent scholars who have questioned the conceptual possibility for the existence of subjectivity as an object of philosophical discussion before the modern era in European philosophy.³⁴

I have tried to present a general argument against the exaggeration of such worries elsewhere,³⁵ and I do believe that the texts I've introduced provide ample support for the view that the *shu'ūr bi al-dhāt* of Avicenna, Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā is not too distant from our intuitions concerning self-awareness, informed as they may be by contemporary philosophical commitments. However, I have set completely aside the question, largely because I do not know the answer, whether there is something in the shared heritage of the medieval Islamic philosophers and early modern European philosophers that prompts the emergence of an extended discussion on self-awareness at one historical point or another, or whether the similarities are entirely fortuitous. Even in the latter case, it will be interesting to consider how the different contexts, which generate explicit attention at self-awareness, determine that attention through their respective theoretical interests and concerns. And if the resulting divergences are indeed as important as the historically conscious scholars suggest a rigorous systematic comparison of them will yield us better insight into the demarcation between the ahistorical or universal and the historically contingent aspects of our understanding of self-awareness. In this sense I believe that Islamic philosophy, including the Iranian tradition subsequent to Mullā Ṣadrā, has a genuine contribution to offer to contemporary philosophy of mind.³⁶

Notes

1. Avicenna, *Shifā': al-naḥs* V.3; 223-224 Rahman.
2. Avicenna, *Shifā': al-naḥs* V.3; 226-227 Rahman.
3. For bundle theory in Avicenna, see Bäck 1994.
4. Cf. Avicenna, *Shifā': al-madkhal* I.12, 70 Madkour *et al.* To my knowledge, Deborah Black in her forthcoming paper was the first to point out the potential incoherence between the psychology and *al-madkhal* of *Shifā'*. Avicenna's theory of the individuation of human soul is also found problematic by Druart 2000, see

especially 266-267, 273.

5. See Gutas 1988, 141-144.

6. Avicenna, *Ta'liqāt*, 160-161 Badawī. Dr Seyyed Hossein Mousavian has kindly shared his upcoming critical edition of the *Ta'liqāt* with me, thus enabling me to emend quite a few of Badawī's readings. In the present passage, I have indicated the deviations from Badawī's edition by italics.

7. Cf., for instance, Avicenna, *Ishārāt*, 146 Forget. On this traditional idea in Avicenna, see now Adamson 2011.

8. Avicenna, *Ishārāt*, 120 Forget.

9 This point is explicated in *Ta'liqāt*, 160-161 Badawī.

10. Avicenna, *Shifā': al-nafs* V.7, 256 Rahman; emphasis added.

11. Avicenna, *Ishārāt*, 119 Forget.

12. This is particularly true of the instance featured in Avicenna, *Shifā': al-nafs* I.1, 16 Rahman. For other instances of the flying man, see Marmura 1986 and Hasse 2000, 81-82.

13. See Avicenna *Shifā': al-nafs* V.7, 257 Rahman, and cf. Avicenna, *Shifā': al-ilāhiyyāt* I.5, 23 Marmura. This similarity between self-awareness and first intelligible is also pointed out in *Ta'liqāt*, 160-161 Badawī.

14. Avicenna, *Mubāḥathāt* 373, 209 Badawī: "It may be that 'intellection' [in the sense of that] which grasps the intelligibles is not applicable to the purity of the complete self-awareness but comes after that. That is worth thinking about."

15. Suhrawardī, *Talwīḥāt*, 70-72 Corbin.

16. Suhrawardī, *Hikma al-ishrāq*, II.1.5, 115-116 Walbridge & Ziai; translation modified.

17. Suhrawardī, *Hikma al-ishrāq* II.1.5, 115-116 Walbridge & Ziai; translation modified.

18. The same method is used in the flying man as well. The flying man is explicitly cited in the *Talwīḥāt*; see the text, with Ibn Kammūnā's comments, in Ziai & Alwishah, 337-340.

19. Suhrawardī, *Hikma al-ishrāq* II.1.5, 116 Walbridge & Ziai; translation modified.

20. Suhrawardī, *Hikma al-ishrāq* II.1.3, 109 Walbridge & Ziai.

21. Suhrawardī, *Hikma al-ishrāq* II.1.5, 114 Walbridge & Ziai; translation modified.

22. Suhrawardī, *Hikma al-ishrāq* II.1.8, 127 Walbridge & Ziai; translation modified.

23. Suhrawardī, *Hikma al-ishrāq* II.1.9, 134 Walbridge & Ziai; translation modified.

24. See Avicenna, *Shifā': al-nafs*, V.6, 239-240 Rahman.

25. For one suggestion of how to interpret this idea, see Kaukua 2011.

26. Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* II.4; vol. III, 505-506 Khamene'i.

27. Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* III.1.3.1; vol. VI, 150 Khamene'i.

28. Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* IV.7.2; vol. VIII, 395 Khamene'i.

29. In fact, Ṣadrā thinks this is not exclusive to human beings, since he explicitly claims that animals, and possibly even plants, exist as immaterial souls individuated as the unique awareness each has of itself. A most striking consequence of this idea is Ṣadrā's rendering of the flying man as a flying animal in *Aṣfār* IV.2.2, vol. VIII, 47 Khamene'i.

30. For an extensive study of this thesis in Ṣadrā, see now Kalin 2010.
31. Let it be said that al-Fārābī may have held the view that the human soul develops from a material form to an immaterial substance through the acquisition of knowledge. For this, see the highly condensed discussion in *al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya*, 36 Najjār. Robert Wisnovsky has also suggested that a similar theory can be found in Avicenna (Wisnovsky 2003, 139-140), but I think this is quite unlikely, given that such key passages as the flying man seem to unconditionally argue for the possibility of self-awareness, and hence existence as an immaterial substance, prior to any cognitive development whatsoever. In any case, whatever al-Fārābī's and Avicenna's final position turns out to be, it is clear that Ṣadrā situates the change from a material to an immaterial substance earlier in the soul's development. For him, the soul must be an immaterial substance in order to be capable of acquiring knowledge in the first place.
32. Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* III.1.3.1; vol. VI, 154-155 Khamene'i; emphasis added.
33. Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* III.1.3.1; vol. VI, 152-153 Khamene'i; emphasis added.
34. Cf. Everson 1991 and Baker & Morris 1996. In fact, Baker and Morris make an even stronger claim according to which not even Descartes, who is often given the credit (or indeed, blame) for inventing the kind of subject-object divide characteristic of much modern philosophy, had the conceptual means to make the distinction.
35. Kaukua & Lähtenmäki 2010.
36. This article is the result of research funded by the Academy of Finland and the European Research Council.

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