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The Self (*nafs*)

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The Self (*nafs*)

Muhammad Faruque

This entry provides a comprehensive overview of the major themes, questions, and developments concerning the concept of the self in Islamic thought. Beginning with the Qur'an and then following the various streams of Islamic thought, such as theology (*kalām*), philosophy (*falsafa*), and Sufism, this study shows how Muslim thinkers reveal themselves to be fundamentally concerned with the problem of the human condition. Their manner of addressing this central issue from their differing perspectives devolves on the cultivation of what can be called both an anthropocentric and anthropocosmic understanding of the self that emphasizes self-knowledge, self-cultivation, and self-transformation on the one hand and a relational view of the self and the cosmos on the other.

A rapid survey of Islamic philosophical, theological, and mystical texts gives the impression that the question of selfhood occupies a central place, as evidenced by numerous treatises/book chapters bearing its title. In his *al-Mabda' wa-al-ma'ād* (The Origin and the Return), Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640), perhaps the most influential Islamic philosopher after Avicenna (d. 428/1037), goes as far as to claim that 'knowledge of the self is the mother of philosophy (*umm al-ḥikma*) and the root of happiness (*aṣl al-sa'āda*), and that if one fails to attain assured certainty of the immateriality (*tajarrud*) and subsistence (*baqā'*) of the self, one then fails to attain the rank of a philosopher'. 'And how is it possible', he asks rhetorically, 'to have any certainty concerning anything, if one did not have knowledge of one's self in the first place' (Mullā Ṣadrā 2002–2005: I.6)? He then goes on to aver that 'whoever knows himself becomes deified (*man 'arafa dhātahu ta'allaha*)', a saying that he attributes to ancient philosophers (Mullā Ṣadrā 2002–2005: I.7). In his *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ* (The Delight of the Spirits), Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī (d. c. 1288), one of the most important commentators of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī's (d. 587/1191) *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (Philosophy of Illumination), similarly claims that 'understanding his [Suhrawardī's] words and unravelling his writings and their mysteries are contingent upon knowing one's self (*bi-al-jumla, ma'rifat kalāmihi wa-ḥall kutubihī wa-rumūzatihī mutawaqqif 'alā ma'rifat al-nafs*)' (Shahrazūrī 1976–1977: 14). Similarly, Dimitri Gutas has recently argued that the lynchpin of Avicenna's philosophy is the 'metaphysics of the rational soul' (Gutas 2012: 417–425). Likewise, the Qur'an also contains hundreds of references to the word *nafs* (lit. self or soul) and its modalities, such as the blaming self (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*) or the tranquil self (*al-nafs al-muṭma'inna*).

Keywords: Self, Consciousness, Human flourishing, *nafs*, *fiṭra*, Self-knowledge

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1 The linguistic ambiguities of the self

Since in contemporary scholarly discourse the term ‘self’ evokes all sorts of connotations, the questions of ‘how one should use the word in Islamic discourse’ and ‘what are the ambiguities one must avoid while discussing self’ must be addressed first (for an in-depth analysis of all these theoretical issues, see Faruque 2021, which is the first book-length treatment of selfhood in pre-modern and modern Islam). One way to approach the issue would be to find common connotations between the various expressions of the self in Arabic and Persian in order to show that they all, in fact, belong to the same spectrum concept, which would then yield what the self might be for these Arabic and Persian texts. Let us suppose that we try to find the common connotations for terms such as *nafs* (self/soul), *rūḥ* (self/spirit), *nafs nāṭiqā* (rational self), *anānīya* (selfhood), *khūd* (self), *dhāt* (self), etc. in our texts. This will lead to one of the two possibilities: (a) we fail to find any such connotations; or (b) we succeed in discovering common connotations X, Y, and Z.

If (a) becomes the case, then there is no common notion of self in these texts; but even if (b) is arrived at, we might worry that we cannot be sure if it will lead us to a notion of self in the texts. How can I ascertain that these X, Y, and Z connotations do, in fact, correspond to a notion of self when any such exercise already presupposes that I know what a self should look like, if there is one? In other words, would not my claim that these connotations refer to some notion of the self already imply that I know what a self is, or what it is supposed to be like, because my understanding of the word ‘self’ might have been shaped (for instance) by my linguistic grounding in English or my familiarity with the literature on the self? Would not any attempt to establish a claim that says that ‘such and such is the notion of the self’ in Arabic texts be at best arbitrary (i.e. it may be right, wrong, or simply coincidental)? The situation is exacerbated by the fact that most, if not all, of the early texts are fragmentary, elusive, and unsystematic when it comes to their discussion of *nafs*, *rūḥ*, etc. So, we need to develop a strategy that would involve minimal assumptions.

In light of the above situation and the inevitability of operating with a prior notion of the self, let us adopt a new strategy and assume that we know nothing about the controversies regarding the self in English or in any other language. All I know is the word ‘self’, simpliciter. Moreover, I also know the basic lexical meanings of the English word ‘self’ in several Islamic languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. That is, I only know that the words in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu are *nafs*, *dhāt*, *khūd*, *khwīshān*, etc., and nothing about their philosophical or theological undertone. And I also know that sometimes these words are used simply in the reflexive sense, e.g. ‘Zayd himself’. Now I am ready to begin my investigation, and luckily, someone has just informed me about the problems within early *kalām* (Islamic theology) and Sufi texts and has pointed out that Mullā Ṣadrā is someone who has voluminous writings on these terms. So, I proceed to analyse all the relevant terms in Ṣadrā in the hope of producing a theory out of them (but I still do not

know if there would be anything like a theory of the self in the end). When I am done with my analysis, one of the following results would hold:

(1) All the thousands of instances in which Ṣadrā employs these words show that they have no philosophical import beyond their ordinary meaning, reflexive or otherwise.

Hence either there is no theory of self in Ṣadrā, or,

(2) All the thousands of instances in which Ṣadrā uses these words show that such words as *nafs* or *dhāt* produce clear statements, such as ‘the *nafs* is an immaterial entity’, ‘the *nafs* is the first actuality of an organic natural body’, ‘the *nafs* is a sacred substance (*jawhar qudsī*)’, ‘the *nafs* is other than the body’, ‘the *nafs* is all of the faculties’, ‘the *nafs* undergoes substantial motion’, ‘the *nafs* has many dimensions and states’, ‘the *nafs* is capable of self-knowledge through self-consciousness’, ‘the *nafs* is always present to itself’, and so on. Moreover, such statements are not disparate. Rather, they are systematically related to various arguments in relevant contexts and occur throughout Ṣadrā’s forty to forty-five works innumerable times. Furthermore, there are several compound words, such as *maʿrifat al-nafs* (self-knowledge) or *shuʿūr bi-al-dhāt* (self-consciousness), that also suggest technical usage.

If my analysis yields such an outcome, then I believe it would be sufficient to show that Ṣadrā, or any Muslim philosopher for that matter, has a theory of the *nafs* (self). However, someone can still object and say that whatever I said above rather corresponds to what we call ‘soul’ in English, and not ‘self’. They would indeed be right if, by using the term ‘soul’, we are able to refer to all such philosophical statements. However, as will be shown, the word ‘soul’ is ill-equipped to meaningfully refer to some of these statements, especially the ones involving a first-personal phenomenological stance. One may still artificially stretch the extension of the word ‘soul’ to include everything under the term *nafs*, but why do so when there is a candidate that can serve us better – that is, self – and when that sort of stretching might lead to a private language fallacy? Indeed, textual evidence from the Islamic intellectual tradition shows that very early on Muslim thinkers took stock of the opacity of the term *nafs*. In his *De Anima*, a constituent part of his larger *Kitāb al-Shifāʾ* (Book of Healing), as well as in other treatises, Avicenna clarifies how the word *nafs* might refer to both ‘soul’ and ‘self’ (Avicenna 1959: 4–6). For example, in his *Aḥwāl al-nafs* (The States and Conditions of the Soul), Avicenna explains that the term *nafs* is the very thing that each one of us would refer to as ‘I’ (Avicenna 1952: 183). He further elucidates his point by suggesting that the ‘I’ refers to one’s essence, while one’s bodily organs are denoted by ‘it’, which are distinct and separate from what is ‘I’ (Avicenna 1997: 73–76).

At the same time, the lexical meanings of *nafs* in Arabic can include soul, self, spirit, mind, desire, and appetite, among others. However, it also denotes reflexivity, as in *nafsi* (myself) and *bi-nafsihi* (by himself). What is important to note, however, is that in mystical

and philosophical texts (unless it is used as a compound word), *nafs* normally connotes either self or soul. The issue of whether 'self' and 'soul' denote the same reality has been debated a great deal by scholars. For instance, Richard Sorabji argues that there is already a concept of self (*autos*) alongside soul (Greek *psyche*; Latin *anima*) in ancient and medieval philosophy (Sorabji 2006: 17ff.). This does not, however, mean ancient philosophers did not use the term *psyche* to talk about self. The sense of demarcation between 'self' and 'soul' is due to what some have called the Cartesian moment, that is, when Descartes formulated his radical dualism and others, such as Locke, began to respond to him. In the Islamic context, it is rather difficult to disambiguate whether *nafs* denotes self or soul. There are contexts in which only the 'reflexive' sense of the word, i.e. self, will make sense. Hence, although I have tried to be consistent with the translation of *nafs* as 'self', there are cases when the term is rendered 'soul'. However, it is to be noted that the concept of the soul in Islamic intellectual history is not altogether separable from that of the 'self', although there are instances when Islamic thinkers clearly have in mind the sense of first-person subjectivity.

In Islamic holistic thinking, there is no room for the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter, since the soul (*nafs*) is understood in relation to both the physical (body) and the spiritual (spirit). Nevertheless, the ordinary self (also called *nafs*) comprises human intelligence, behavioural inclinations, tendencies, drives, instincts, and impulses. It also represents human vulnerability to temptations and irrational thinking. In contrast, the real self is often understood in terms of the Qur'anic term *fiṭra*, which broadly means one's pristine, unadulterated nature, and connotes one's innate, God-given personality, which conforms to *tawḥīd*, or the oneness of God. In Islamic teachings, everyone is born with, and in principle always retains, an imprint of *fiṭra*, even if they gradually lose sight of it due to their immersion in the day-to-day businesses of the world.

Also, when it comes to Sufism, selfhood is seen as a phenomenon which is ultimately indefinable and unknowable (i.e. ultimately it involves an apophatic discourse). This is because for many Sufis selfhood is an on-going and ever-changing manifestation of the divine names (*al-asmā' al-ilahī*), which are infinite. Nevertheless, the basic sense of the self involves an ethical 'split' within itself in terms of its higher and lower nature – the higher nature being the state of spiritual perfection, the lower nature the site of negative thoughts and emotions. It is also helpful to view selfhood as both received and achieved. That is, a self is not something that we automatically are. Rather a self is something we must become. Thus, it is possible to describe the self (the received aspect of the self) in terms of scientific and social facts, but at the same time it is equally possible to articulate it in terms of aspirational ideals that are yet to be realized (i.e. the achieved aspect).

In addition, there are other philological difficulties when it comes to discussing selfhood in Sufism, although it is beyond the scope of the present endeavour to deal with them.

But at the very least, one should note that there is a cluster of terms, such as *nafs* (soul/self), *rūḥ* (spirit), *sirr* (secret core), *khafī* (hidden), *akhfā'* (most hidden), etc., that Sufi authors employ to talk about various dimensions of the self. Without discerning whether the connotations of these terms point to a *common referent*, one would not be able to discuss the self in Sufism (for a detailed discussion, see Faruque 2021: 24–26, 49–58). Some thinkers considered *rūḥ* and *nafs* to be synonymous, while others noted a difference between their meanings. For instance, it is not unusual for Muslim authors to talk about the ‘mineral spirit’ (*rūḥ ma‘danī*).

Sufis (and sometimes non-Sufis) also use *latīfa* to talk about the self, a word which is difficult to translate, but which means something akin to the ‘subtle field of consciousness’ (it can equally be conceived of as the ‘subtlety’ that characterizes the self). In fact, terms such as *nafs*, *qalb*, *rūḥ*, *sirr*, *khafī*, and *akhfā'* are conceived of as different *latā'if*, which have their corresponding equivalents in the macrocosm (Faruque 2023a). Muslim thinkers’ talk of the self is thus inseparable from a relational, holistic view of the cosmos, even though they often emphasize anthropocentric features, such as self-knowledge and self-cultivation. Such an ‘anthropocosmic’ vision of the self has far-reaching consequences for one’s ontology and epistemology. For instance, it challenges the compartmentalizing tendency within modern thought, which considers anthropology as a separate domain of inquiry unrelated to ontological or epistemological concerns (consider e.g. the modern idea of the ‘individual’). The contrast between modern and Islamic thought becomes clearer when we think of the existence-based epistemology that developed in later Islamic philosophy, particularly at the hands of Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) and Mullā Ṣadrā. From Ṣadrā’s point of view, the Cartesian division of reality into mind and matter is always haunted by the ghost of epistemic subjectivism that sees reality in terms of discrete, atomistic units, with human beings given an undue, privileged onto-epistemic status. In Ṣadrā’s onto-epistemology, reality is no longer an aggregate of isolated entities and a collection of independent objects set against the knowing subject which presides over them. It is rather the interconnectedness of being (*wujūd*), set against a gradational plane of being (*tashkīk al-wujūd*), that simultaneously discloses an aspect of being and determines the process of knowing. In this picture, the self already encounters the world laden with meanings and relations at the level of sense experience (Kalin 2010; Faruque 2017; 2023b). In a word, Islamic conceptions of the self are intertwined with the reality and necessity of being as their ontological ground.

2 Early conceptions of the self

2.1 The Qur’an

Early conceptions of the self (*nafs*) in Islam must begin with the Qur’an since it offers some of the earliest musings on the concept that were further elaborated upon by later thinkers. Linguistically, six different forms of the root *n-f-s* occur 298 times in the Qur’an:

tanaffasa (to breathe out) once, *yatanāfas* (to vie, to compete) once, *mutanāfisūn* (one aspiring) once, *nafs* (self) 140 times, *nufūs* (plural of *nafs*) twice, and *anfus* (themselves) 153 times (Badawi and Haleem 2008: 954–955; al-İşfahānī 2009: 818). At least four lexical meanings of *nafs* can be discerned in the Qur’an, namely: (1) ‘soul’, as in Q. 31:28; (2) an individual, a single human being, or a person, as in Q. 5:32; (3) ‘self’, as in Q. 3:30; and (4) the inner self, the heart, the essence of human nature, as in Q. 33:37, 39:53, 12:32, and 16:7 (Badawi and Haleem 2008: 954–955).

The *tafsīr* (Qur’anic commentarial) literature is quite eclectic and open-ended regarding various uses of *nafs* in the Qur’an. Sayyid Muḥammad Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1981), an influential contemporary Shī’a theologian/exegete, avers that whenever the term *nafs* occurs in the Qur’an, it is used in one of the following three senses (Ṭabāṭabā’ī 1997: 14: 286–289):

- (1) Reality of an entity or the thing-in-itself that encompasses soul, body, and even God. He adds, however, that the word *nafs* is not used to refer to God because of verse 42:11, which states that ‘there is nothing like Him’ (all translations of the Qur’an are from Pickthall 1996 with modifications).
- (2) Person/individual (*shakḥ al-insān*), the human being, the body-soul composite. In these and similar instances, *nafs* and its plurals do not appear to designate a spiritual substance or soul but rather aspects of human character, including selfishness, concupiscence, personal responsibility, and individual conscience. In other verses, however, *nafs* has a more general meaning as a living person or human life.
- (3) The immaterial entity that is distinct from the body, as in philosophy (*falsafa*).

In his exegesis, Ṭabāṭabā’ī engages the great classical Sunnī theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) in a polemic, as the latter argued that the Qur’an rejects the philosophers’ immaterialist self. While Ṭabāṭabā’ī defends the philosophers’ view of the self, al-Rāzī, for his part, strikes a middle course by trying to reconcile Graeco-Islamic theories with the *kalām* physicalist self. Al-Rāzī’s interpretation of the self in the Qur’an, as presented in his *Mafāṭīḥ al-ghayb* (Keys to the Unseen), affirms its immateriality and divine origin while, at the same time, stating its capacity to be infused within the body (Rāzī 1980: 26.199; 24.124; cf. Jaffer 2015: 193–195). (For evidence of the soul/self being a body, rather than an accident, Abū Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī [d. c. 324/935] reportedly cited the standard expression, ‘the spirit departed [*kharaja*]’, and the Qur’anic verse, ‘When it [the spirit] reaches the throat’ [Q. 56:83], both of which indicate that the spirit can move in space: a feature that distinguishes atoms from accidents [see Ibn Fūrak 1987: 257; cf. Gimaret 1980: 127]).

The Qur’anic self is intimately associated with spiritual psychology in that it talks about human states through sensations, emotions, and perceptive feelings, all of which prompted Islamic thinkers to develop a paradigm for the transformation of the ordinary

self through various spiritual practices, such as self-examination, disciplining of desires, and introspection into a heightened state of spiritual awareness. For instance, the Qur'an states that the self is characterized by caprice (*al-hawā*), appetites (*al-shahwa*), jealousy (*al-ḥasad*), vanity (*al-kibr*), anxiety (*al-dīq*), distress (*al-ḥaraj*), regret (*al-nadm*), and grief (*al-taḥassur*), but also positive human traits such as patience (*al-ṣabr*), generosity (*al-jūd*), and God-wariness (*al-taqwā*). In addition to the above-mentioned emotions and character-traits, the Qur'an constructs a spectrum of the ethico-experiential aspect of self that can be outlined as follows (cf. Picken 2011: 129–138; Murata 1992: 254–282):

- (1) The evil-inciting self (*al-nafs al-ammara bi-al-sū'*)
- (2) The self-reproaching self (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*)
- (3) The inspired self (*al-nafs al-mulhama*)
- (4) The satisfied self (*al-nafs al-rāḍiya*)
- (5) The satisfying self (*al-nafs al-marḍiya*)
- (6) The tranquil self (*al-nafs al-muṭma'inna*)

The purpose of the above scheme is to explain the psycho-spiritual states that the self experiences because of its motives, actions, thoughts, deeds, and will. For example, the dimension of the self that inclines to bodily pleasure is the source of all blameworthy characteristics, such as greed, pride, arrogance, and envy. In this case, the *nafs* reflects a negative human trait (or the lower self, namely selfishness), against which the Qur'an warns: 'So be mindful of God as much as you can, listen and obey and spend on charity to help yourselves. For those who are saved from their selfish greed (*shuḥḥ nafsīhi*), they are the successful ones!' (Q. 64:16; cf. Q. 53:23; 59:9). This *nafs* corresponds to the appetitive faculties discussed in ancient and Hellenistic philosophies, especially in Plato. As such, the Qur'an links *nafs* (i.e. the lower self) with greed, envy, and lust (Homerin 2017). The next layer of selfhood that the Qur'an elucidates is called the self-reproaching self, which manages to elevate itself from the state of habitual heedlessness since, as soon as it performs a blameworthy action, it feels regretful for such actions. Similarly, the other dimensions of the self explain its further spiritual development, culminating in the highest level, which is called the tranquil self – a serene, illuminative state in which all the undesirable attributes of the lower self have been obliterated and the self attains paradisaal peace and tranquillity.

It should be noted that not all exegetes conform to the interpretation offered above. Rather, I have chosen to focus on those interpretations that have a more mystical resonance because of their historical influence. For instance, one can clearly see how such interpretations have influenced theologians such as Mīr Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 817/1414) (see Zamakhsharī 1998: 100; al-Jurjānī, *al-Ta'rifāt* n.d.: 204–205).

In addition to delineating the ethico-experiential self, the Qur'an also contains verses in which God speaks in the first person, e.g. 'and I breathed into him (i.e. the human self)

of My Spirit' (*wa-nafakhtu fīhī min rūḥī*) that bespeaks of divine and human identity (Q. 15:29; 38:72) (for a comprehensive analysis of the term *rūḥ* and its cognates in the Qur'an, see Tlili 2017: 1–21). To corroborate this metaphysical claim, Sufis who espouse such a view maintain that God sends each and every messenger with the message 'there is no god but I' (*lā ilāha illā anā*) (cf. Q. 16:2; 21:25) and, since this message affirms God's all-encompassing selfhood, it is the essence of all revelation. Thus, when the believer utters the first-personal pronoun 'I' with which God also addresses that individual in the Qur'an, the believer in essence refers to nothing but the divine selfhood that resides at the centre of their individual subjectivity (Cook 2017: 47–81).

2.2 Sufism

It is rather surprising that, despite an emphasis on the soul's spiritual development, early Sufi literature often presents a quasi-physicalist perspective, or a combination of physicalist-cum-immaterialist views, of the self. This might be due to the influence of *kalām* (theology) on Sufism or it may be due to figures who were both theologians and Sufis (recent scholarship also disagrees whether the label 'Sufi' is appropriate in relation to early mystical/ascetic figures). At any rate, early Sufis use a constellation of terms such as *rūḥ*, *nafs*, *sirr*, etc. to talk about different dimensions of the soul/self. For instance, in Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī's (d. 380/990) *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* (Introduction to Sufism), we are told that, according to the Sufi Abū 'Abdallāh al-Nibajī (c. ninth century), the soul/self (*rūḥ*) is a body which is too subtle to be perceived and too great to be touched, so that it cannot be expressed in any other way than as being an existent (*mawjūd*) (Kalābādhī 1994: 40). Another (unnamed) Sufi says the soul/self is a subtle essence materializing in a dense body, just as sight, which is a subtle essence, materializes in a dense body. Yet another unnamed Sufi says the soul/self is a light, fragrant breath through which 'life' subsists, while the soul/self (*nafs*) is a hot wind through which the motions and desires exist. According to al-Kalābādhī, most Sufis of his time held that the spirit (*rūḥ*) is a meaning (*ma'nā*) through which the body lives (Kalābādhī 1994: 40). Other early Sufis who developed notable conceptions of the self include al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/837), Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907), and al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. between 295/905 and 300/910).

In addition, early Sufis such as Bāyazīd al-Bastāmī (d. 261/874–875 or 234/848–849) also articulated a theory of identity between the human and divine 'I' through statements like, 'My I is not the human I; since my I is He, I am "he is He"' (Ernst 1985: 26; cf. Bastāmī 2004: 47). In saying my selfhood does not consist of the human 'I' (or consciousness) with which we ordinarily identify ourselves, Bāyazīd was not referring to his empirical self, which is conditioned by human situatedness in a given socio-cultural milieu. Rather, he is alluding to the ultimate stage of spiritual realization, in which the human 'I' realizes its essential identity with the divine 'I' through a process of spiritual transformation. As

Bāyazīd himself asserts: 'I shed my self (*nafsī*) as a snake sheds its skin, then I looked at myself, and behold! I was He (*anā huwa*)' (Ernst 1985: 27). The same conception of the fundamental identity between the human and divine self is also found in Maṣū' al-Ḥallāj (d. 310/922), 'Ayn al-Quḍat al-Ḥamadhānī (d. 525/1131), and Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 606/1209), before finally reaching its most systematic expression in the school of Ibn 'Arabī, which affirms how human subjectivity is subsumed by divine subjectivity through God's utterance of the 'I'. This can be seen in the eighteenth-century Indian Sufi Shāh Walī Allāh's (d. 1176/1762) metaphysics of the self. Regarding the Supreme Self, Walī Allāh wrote:

The distinctive feature of the Supreme Self (*dhāt-i baḥt*) is that on the one hand it remains engrossed in the simplitude of Its Self-Identity (*bi-ṣirāfat-i huwīyat-i khvud*), while, on the other, despite its simplitude (*baḥtīyat*), it descends (*tanazzul farmāyad*) or projects outward. However, in the course of Its descent it loses none of its simplitude—unlike other things the simplitude of which opposes such a descent. Or, it could be said that when the gnostic turns his gaze upon himself (*naẓar-i khūd bi-khūd uftad*) and plunges deep into the contemplation of the ultimate source of his origin (*aṣl-i uṣūl-i khvudash khawḍ namāyad*), then the utmost limit of his vision is that essential shining point (*muntahī-yi naẓarash nuḡṭa-yi sha' sha' āniya-yi dhātīya būd*). He conceives of this point as the centre of his own self (*dar miyān-i rūḥ-i vay ast*) whereas it dwells, in its unalloyed simplitude (*bisāṭat-i khvud*), in an eminent place. (Walī Allāh 1964: 119)

The Supreme Selfhood of divinity is a state of utter simplitude which is devoid of any duality. In other words, it is a state of absolute oneness. In contrast to many Sufis and theologians, who argue that the human self can never attain the Supreme Self of God because of Its utter transcendence, Walī Allāh asserts that when the gnostic turns their gaze upon themselves and plunges deep into the contemplation of their ultimate origin, they come to recognize the immanent divinity within themselves, which is like a shining point that resides at the centre of their own self. It is noteworthy that Walī Allāh chooses the metaphor of 'point', which is a mathematical abstraction with no one-to-one correspondence in external reality. That is to say, to describe such a reality or the experience of it, which is ineffable or lies beyond the beyond (*warā' al-warā'*), one reaches the bounds of language. The passage, nonetheless, does not fail to underscore that the Divine 'I' lies at the deepest core of one's selfhood, which is beyond words, yet attainable through annihilation (*fanā'*).

2.3 Theology (kalām)

As for early theologians, their conception of the soul/self was based on the notion of a subtle body (*jism laṭīf*) intermingled in gross bodies (*al-ajsām al-kathīfa*). It might appear rather startling to consider that early *kalām* views on life and the soul are closer to the spirit of modern neuroscience than to Islam's sacred scripture because of their physicalist overtones. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that beyond the similarity of propounding

a 'physical self', the methods and objectives of *kalām* and modern neuroscience are hardly comparable. Certain conclusions about their theory of the self are strikingly similar, however, despite each having a very different notion of what an 'atom' or particle is. Also, Ayman Shihadeh notes how the numerous references to the 'spirit' in the Qur'an and Hadith make it difficult for theologians to do away with an immaterial self. Thus, they reduce the 'spirit' to an attribute of life, or explain it away as the mysterious air that flows through the nostrils and mouth (Shihadeh 2012: 475). Nonetheless, as will be seen, in contrast to the philosophers, theologians did not embrace a soul/self that is immaterial or incorporeal; nor did they treat it as having an internal unity within itself. There is nothing like the 'unity of consciousness' (or even consciousness, *shu'ūr*) in the early *kalām* view of the self. Given all this, one might wonder how the *mutakallimūn* (theologians) came to accept such a view, which poses a threat to key religious doctrines, such as resurrection (*ma'ād*) and issues pertaining to ethics and morality. The answer seems not too far-fetched once one takes into account the *kalām* physicalism that forms the background of their philosophy of the self.

In response to the ontological question 'what are the ultimate constituents that make up the universe or all that exists', early *kalām* proponents affirmed that all of reality is comprised of God, atoms (*jawāhir*), and accidents (*a'rāḍ*). This implies that all the phenomena of the universe, be it physical or psychological, as well as the relationships between such phenomena, for instance the relationship of cause and effect, must be explained by recourse to the three aforementioned categories (Dhanani 1994: 8ff.). Although most theologians would not go as far as to argue that even God is a physical entity, they would nonetheless consider everything else in the world to be physical. In fact, when one surveys early theological texts, one invariably observes the dominance of cosmology and epistemology rather than psychology. All of this demonstrates that the theologians embraced a physicalist self by the internal logic of their materialist ontology (atoms and accidents populating the cosmos), which left no room for consciousness or immaterial minds. It is thus not surprising that we do not find any systematic exposition of the self in early or classical *kalām* until perhaps Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), although the situation changes with later *kalām*, which begins to have more frequent polemical exchanges with the rival traditions of *falsafa* and 'philosophical Sufism'. The rather unsystematic and often sporadic remarks that one encounters in early theology present a self which is often treated synonymously with the human being (*insān*) or the spirit (*rūḥ*).

For the vast majority of theologians who remained loyal to a cosmology of atoms and accidents, in which atoms, when combined with one another, form bodies that occupy space, and accidents, including life, colour, weight, and other similar phenomena, inhere in bodies, the self is either a kind of body (or one of its atoms) or an accident inhering in the

body. In what follows, I examine a broad selection of texts that describe the early *kalām* view of the self and life.

The theologian, Bishr b. al-Mu‘tamir (d. between 210/825 and 225/840), who belonged to the Baghdad school of the Mu‘tazila, defines the human being as ‘a compound of body and soul (*jasad wa-rūḥ*) and a subject of bodily acts (*af‘āl*)’, while the pioneer of Basran Mu‘tazilism, Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (d. 225–235/840–850), states that ‘the soul/self (*nafs*) is not made of hair, nails and the like’, and is also not ‘the body itself’. Rather, Hudhayl continues, ‘the self is other than the life of the body’ (al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmīyīn wa-ikhtilāf al-musallīn*, 1980: 329). He also recognizes that the soul is other than the spirit or *rūḥ* (al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmīyīn wa-ikhtilāf al-musallīn*, 1980: 337). As can be seen, it is very difficult to draw a definite conclusion from such negative definitions. However, even when these theologians use ‘spirit’ to refer to the *nafs*, they do not have in mind anything like the immaterial self. Hudhayl’s student, Abū Iṣḥāq Naẓẓām (d. between. 220/835 and 230/845), develops an early influential view of the soul that equates it with the human being and the spirit. Naẓẓām claims that ‘the soul is a subtle body (*jism laṭīf*) that penetrates the dense body (*jism kathīf*) [...], while the spirit is life infused (*mushābik*) with the body’. He also goes on to assert that the soul is a unique atom (*jawhar wāḥid*) that does not have contraries (*mutaḍād*) (al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayn al-firaq*, n.d.: 122). Moreover, according to Naẓẓām, the body is a defect (*āfa*) that constrains the self’s freedom. The Mu‘tazilite Ja‘far b. Ḥarb (d. 236/850) states that ‘the soul/self is an accident,’ while pre-Mu‘tazilites, such as Abū Bakr Aṣamm (d. 200–201/816–817), claimed that ‘the soul/self by its essence is this body but it flows throughout the body’. Finally, Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā‘ī (d. 321/933), the teacher of al-Ash‘arī, opines that ‘the soul/self is a body, and it is other than life because life is an accident’ (Ash‘arī 1980: 333–334).

The Ash‘arite view of the self does not differ from that of the Mu‘tazilites in any significant detail because, in essence, they also subscribe to the physicalist ontology which entails that all human attributes and activities are to be explained by a range of accidents that inhere in the atoms of the body-composite (*jumla*), including mental events or states. Also, just as the Mu‘tazilites present a variety of opinions on the self, the Ash‘arites also offer a spectrum of views on the nature of the soul/self as spirit.

2.4 Classical period

Classical Ash‘arites affirm that *nafs*, *rūḥ*, and *insān* are terms that can be used interchangeably. Al-Ash‘arī and Ibn Furāk (d. 406/1015) believed that the spirit (*rūḥ*) refers to the wind (*rīḥ*), while Ibn al-Qalānisī (fl. c. second half of third/ninth century) referred to it as the accident of life (Shihadeh 2012: 466). Al-Ash‘arī also maintained that the spirit is a subtle body – a body made up of sparsely-dispersed atoms, in contrast to dense bodies (*ajsām kathīf*) – that go in and out of the cavities of the human body (*mutaraddid fī tajāwīf*

a'ḍā' al-insān). In addition, al-Ash'arī asserted that the spirit atoms can be either living, because of the inherence of the accident of life within them, or inert (Shihadeh 2012: 469). The idea of the soul as a subtle body gained wide currency when influential theologians such as Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) began to uphold it. In his *Kitāb al-Irshād* (Book of Guidance), al-Juwaynī says:

If it is said, 'Explain the *nafs* and its meaning, since disagreement concerning it is evident'. We would respond: The clearest position on this matter is that the *nafs* consists of subtle bodies enmeshed with the sensible bodies (*ajsām laṭīfa mushābika lil-ajsām al-maḥsūsa*). God has made it the habit that, whenever it departs (*fāraqtahā*) from the body, death will follow life in the continuation of the habit (*yu'qib al-mawt al-ḥayā fī istimrār al-'āda*). (Juwaynī 1950: 377)

However, al-Juwaynī does not clarify how exactly the spirit is intermingled with the body because, in his own words, two composite bodies cannot interpenetrate each other (*tadākhul*), and hence, cannot be co-located. But it should be noted that this physical principle does not apply to subtle bodies because, in al-Juwaynī's view, as found in his *al-Shāmil fī uṣūl al-dīn* (The General Principles of Religion), non-human creatures such as *jinn* can actually interpenetrate (*dākhala*) human bodies (Juwaynī 1969: 160–162).

The Ash'arites also deny that the soul possesses any kind of unity, which lends more credence to their theory of *kasb* (acquisition) and divine omnipotence. While the Mu'tazilites asserted that the aggregate atoms in the body-composite (*jumla*) are given a unified structure by composition or *ta'līf*, the Ash'arites consider this unity to be only figurative, since properties such as knowledge, life, and will inhere in individual atoms and not in the entire composite. They also refute the Mu'tazilite thesis that the soul behaves in an integral manner by the activity of both the animal spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ḥaywānī*) that originates in the heart and the natural spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ṭabī'ī*) that originates in the liver, and which run throughout the entire body via the nerves and the veins. But, as Shihadeh points out, the Ash'arite doctrine of the subtle body only exacerbates the fragmentary conception of the soul/self because the latter is therein made distinct from the human body and has no association with either the heart or any of the human being's mental properties (Shihadeh 2012: 475). The subtle body conception of the soul makes it particularly difficult for the Ash'arites to explain its postmortem experiences in a non-physical medium, where parts of the body are subjected, independently of the spirit, to an interrogation and possible punishment in the grave.

The Mu'tazilites, in contrast, accept the soul/self's structural unity, but fall into the same difficulty when it comes to maintaining its identity through the interim period between death and resurrection. In an excellent study, Sophia Vasalou examines the topic at length and shows that the physicalist ontology of atoms and accidents adopted by the Mu'tazilite theologians prevented them from providing a satisfactory response to moral agents and

their deserts (Vasalou 2008: 157ff.). To explain fully, let us first analyze how classical Mu‘tazilites such as Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024) defined the self or the human being (terms that are used synonymously). In ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s view (as expressed in his *al-Mughnī* [The Enricher]), the human self possesses a material unity, which means that it is not a combination of corporeal and incorporeal units. There is nothing either inside or outside the human body that can be called immaterial. Rather the body or the physical frame that can be observed from the outside is the domain of the self, proper (Jabbār 1961–1974: 11.358). For ‘Abd al-Jabbār, the word *nafs* indicates the human frame or the body-composite (*jumla*), although at times he identifies it with the heart (*qalb*) (Jabbār 1961–1974: 8.14–20). By *qalb* (unlike the Sufis) ‘Abd al-Jabbār has in mind the accidents such as knowledge, will, and perception that inhere in the heart atoms. But this is not to say that the heart is something like an immaterial entity which has mental capacities. Rather the heart possesses the required structure (*binya*) in which mental atoms and accidents such as knowledge can inhere, and when a person knows or uses his will, it is their entire bodily composite that knows or wills, and not the heart alone (Jabbār 1961–1974: 11.329). It is interesting to note that there are many parallels between the *kalām* physicalist self and the materialist conception of the mind that became prevalent in eighteenth-century Europe in the wake of the Scientific Revolution (for more information, see Yolton 1983: 90–126; Martin and Barresi 2000: 30–48; Reed 1997: 16–58).

In any event, concerning the *kalām* physicalist view, it thus becomes very challenging to provide a consistent account of ‘moral deserts’— an immensely significant religious concept that tackles the issue of identifying various actions performed by an individual whose self ceases to exist upon their physical death (i.e. if one claims that there is nothing more than their material body). More specifically, if there is no immaterial self, where may one locate an enduring moral identity on the basis of which one would receive one’s deserts? Like the Ash‘arites, the Mu‘tazilites also fail to determine whether the person who lived and acted in this world is the same as the one who will be either rewarded or punished upon resurrection. Vasalou provides us with a striking image of the Mu‘tazilite resurrected self, describing it as part of ‘a robotic army of generic human beings summoned out of nothingness to undergo experiences of pleasure and pain’. Commenting on later theologians’ response to the issue of personal identity, Vasalou argues that despite having a philosophical horizon, they rely on divine intervention when securing the identity of persons no less than the Mu‘tazilites did. Short of an enunciated ontology for non-existent selves, one thus faces a primitive notion of God’s knowledge that keeps track of one’s identity-bearing material parts (Vasalou 2008: 174). Vasalou also notes how, in making the criterion of personal identity dependent on a mere agglomeration of atoms and accidents, the Basran Mu‘tazilite account contrasts sharply with the account that begins to prevail among later theologians once the philosophers’ immaterialist self infiltrates *kalām* from the

eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards, bringing with it a psychology that challenges the physicalist foundation of *kalām* ontology.

For instance, al-Rāzī is explicit in his acceptance of the immaterialist self, although he does not completely abandon the *kalām* view of the self as a subtle body, which he accepts regarding the body-soul relationship. In his *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqīya fī ‘ilm al-ilāhīyāt wa-l-ṭabī‘īyāt* (Eastern Matters on Metaphysics and Physics), al-Rāzī asserts the immateriality of the self by reasoning that anyone who apprehends a thing possesses the quiddity of that thing, and since we apprehend our self, and since our self is directly present to us, we possess a self (al-Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqīya* n.d.: 2.345–346; cf. *al-Maṭālib al-‘ālīya*, 1987: 7.57ff., where he presents his more matured views). The important thing to note in the above is that unlike the *kalām* physicalist view, this account begins with self-awareness and self-intellection, which have a long-standing history in Avicenna’s and Suhrawardī’s philosophies. Similarly, later influential theologians such as ‘Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī (d. 766/1365), Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 792/1390), and al-Jurjānī incorporate important insights from the *falsafa* tradition while at the same time trying to chart a middle course between the materialist and immaterialist conception of the self (see e.g. al-Ījī, *al-Mawāqif fī ‘ilm al-kalām*, n.d.: 241–260). Al-Taftāzānī, for example, seems to be acutely aware of the philosophers’ self but nonetheless defends a physicalist view by arguing that the soul/self’s actions and perceptions originate in the body. Thus, it is correct, in his view, to say that the soul/self is material insofar as its attachments are concerned but not with regards to its essence (Taftāzānī 1998: 3.299). Al-Jurjānī, for his part, acknowledges that the immaterialist view of the self is accepted by Muslim thinkers such as al-Ghazālī and Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 501/1108), as well as various Sufi groups. In his *Sharḥ Kitāb al-Mawāqif* (Commentary on the Book of Stopping Points), he also engages with the Sufis regarding the nature of the self, but ultimately defends a corporeal view, though he grants that the self can be a rational being (Jurjānī 1997: 7.254; *al-Ta‘rīfāt*, n.d.: 204–205). According to al-Jurjānī, the soul/self is a subtle, vaporized substance with the properties of life, knowledge, perception, and so on. On the whole, even though theologians advocate a physicalist self, one nonetheless discerns a stream of interrelated views within this spectrum.

3 Selfhood and the problem of self-knowledge

Due to the limitations of space, I have refrained from presenting the philosophers’ views on the self in a separate section. But as we shall see, when dealing with issues such as self-knowledge, reflexivity, consciousness, and self-cultivation, their perspectives on the self come to the fore. In general, Islamic philosophers affirm a holistic view of the self in which life, soul, and consciousness are interrelated. For instance, al-Kindī (d. c. 256/870) follows the Aristotelian tradition by defining life as the principle that animates the body and makes it a living body. For al-Kindī, the soul/self (*nafs*) is the essence of life in the

body. In his *Rasāʿil* (Treatises), al-Kindī further reasons that the body must possess life only accidentally, since when the soul leaves the body, its corporeality remains intact although the living entity itself is destroyed. This is to say that ‘it is through our souls that we are what we are’ (*fa-innā bi-anfusinā naḥnu mā naḥnu*), and not through our bodies, because what all bodies have in common is corporeality, whereas every living thing has life in common, and this is through the existence of their soul (Al-Kindī 1950–1953: 1.266; 1.11). Avicenna’s definition of the soul follows a similar course (as in *al-Shifāʿ* DA 12):

The soul is the first perfection (*kamāl awwal*) of a natural body possessed of organs that performs the activities of life. (Cited in McGinnis and Reisman 2007: 178)

After explaining the differences between the first and second perfection, Avicenna asserts that the soul is what makes living things alive, whereas in classical Islamic theology, ‘life’ is often thought of as an attribute or accident that causes one to be qualified with knowing, willing, etc.

Be that as it may, Islamic philosophical writings often emphasize the importance of self-knowledge. For instance, al-Kindī broaches self-knowledge when talking about the self and calls attention to the human being’s place in nature:

Philosophy consists in the human being’s knowledge of himself. This statement is both noble and profound. For instance, I agree that entities are either corporeal or incorporeal, while what is incorporeal is either substance or accident. Human beings are a combination of body, soul, and accidents, while the self (*nafs*) is an incorporeal substance. If human beings know themselves, they come to know the body and its accidents [...] and the substance which is incorporeal. Hence if human beings know all of this, they know everything. For this reason, the wise called the human beings the microcosm. (Al-Kindī 1950–1953: 173)

In the above, al-Kindī first asserts that the self/soul is an incorporeal substance. He then draws attention to self-knowledge and contends that by knowing oneself one comes to know the universe, since the human self, as microcosm, reflects the macrocosm or the greater world. Al-Kindī further explains the nature of the self in the following:

[The] self (*nafs*) is separate and distinct from this body, and that its substance is divine and spiritual, as we can see from its noble nature and its opposition to the desires and anger that affect the body. This is because the irascible faculty incites a human at times, and urges him to commit a serious transgression. But this self opposes it, and prevents the anger from carrying out its action, or from committing an act of rage and wrongdoing; the self restrains it [...] This is a clear proof that the faculty by which the human becomes angry is not this self which prevents the anger from attaining what it desires; for the thing which prevents something is doubtlessly not that which is prohibited, since one and the same thing is not opposed to itself. (Al-Kindī 1950–1953: 273; translated by Adamson and Pormann 2012: 113, modified)

Notwithstanding the ethical implications, Islamic philosophers also talk about the epistemological problem of self-knowledge. Thus, Mullā Ṣadrā contends that philosophy begins with the desire for self-knowledge, since for him the project of philosophy itself is motivated by the question of finding the true nature of the self. Still, this should not be misunderstood as ‘going inward’ in the Cartesian sense, so that what we end up finding, as we turn our gaze on ourselves, is some kind of a ‘ghost in the machine’, as Gilbert Ryle has famously observed (Ryle 2009: 5–43). In fact, for Ṣadrā, our self is never absent from itself since the core of the self is constituted by consciousness, which is continuous, presential, and never-interrupting (this argument goes back to Avicenna and Suhrawardī; for an historical overview of its development, see Faruque 2021: ch. 2). Consequently, any sort of introspective Cartesian dive into the self only results in a representation or an objectified image of the self, which is not the self itself, since it is always a subject in relation to a knowing object. This also explains why Ṣadrā launches a relentless attack on various theories of knowledge in Islamic philosophy that operate on the basis of a subject-object dichotomy (Kalin 2010: 118–134). In the third volume of his magnum opus, *Asfār al-Ḥikma al-muta‘āliya fī al-asfār al-‘aqliya al-arba‘a* (The Transcendent Philosophy concerning the Four Intellectual Journeys), Ṣadrā addresses theories that variously attempt to explain perception/knowledge through abstraction (*tajrīd*), representation (*irtisām*), relation (*iḍāfa*), or by an accident (*‘araḍ*) subsisting in the mind (Mullā Ṣadrā 2001–2005 [vol. 3]). Ṣadrā grants that these theories possess some explanatory power, but they are utterly helpless when it comes to the all-important question of self-knowledge.

For Ṣadrā, self-knowledge, or the fact that I know that I am ‘me’ (that is, the subject that has the minimum knowledge of itself as itself), is prior to even self-perception. For this reason, he forcefully asserts that one cannot have knowledge of one’s self as a bare ‘I’ by means of one’s mental actions, such as thinking. That is to say, if knowledge of my action functions as a cause of my knowledge of myself, it will lead to circular reasoning because knowledge of my self is already implied in and serves as the cause of the knowledge of my very action. This happens the moment I try to infer existence or knowledge of myself through a perceptual act such as thinking, because I will notice that it will not be possible for me to know my act of thinking, except after having knowledge of myself. And if I did not know myself except after knowing myself, it would result in a vicious circle. Therefore, no matter how I try to infer my knowledge of myself through thinking, it is bound to fail, since such performative actions already presuppose an underlying subject that makes thinking possible in the first place. The only way to avoid this vicious circle would be to argue that I am already acquainted with myself in some pre-theoretical fashion, which is existentially identical with the very being of the reality of myself. In other words, I know myself directly through my consciousness, which is the very nature of the self, because the essence of myself at its most basic level is this very consciousness (Faruque 2021). In light of this argument, it is easy to see that the most basic form of self-knowledge transcends the

subject-object dichotomy, including objectivized knowledge of the self in the mind, which involves the polarity of the subject that knows and the object that is known.

4 Selfhood and reflexivity

Modern philosophers such as Charles Taylor have claimed that selfhood is a distinctly modern phenomenon associated with inwardness, inner depths, and creativity (Faruque 2022a). In this conception, selfhood is defined in terms of 'radical reflexivity', which saw its emergence with the likes of Descartes. Thus, according to Taylor, it is only with modern people that we see the appearance of selfhood and subjectivity, whereas premoderns or nonmoderns did not have a notion of the self because they lacked the essential conceptions of inwardness and reflexivity.

Of course, from one point of view, one may simply question Taylor's valorization of inwardness, i.e. radical reflexivity, as the hallmark of modern subjectivity, especially in light of the similarities between mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and the modern self. Many have criticized the modern obsession with inwardness because of its correlation with hyper reflexivity, hyper subjectivity, the loss of a unified self, etc., as they lead to a hyper mental life with all sorts of abnormalities (for a critical account, see Sass 2017). In other words, the 'inwardness' of the modern self that Taylor and others are at pains to elevate and approve of is not so desirable after all. But for now, let us agree with Taylor's view. The 'radical reflexivity criterion' that Taylor suggests can be explained at the simplest level in the form of reflexive statements such as 'I am aware that I am aware of myself'. Or it can be explained in terms of 'turning one's gaze upon oneself' or using introspective awareness to talk about the experiences of the self and its inner states or objectifying one's mental and spiritual states or simply the content of one's consciousness (Taylor 1989). But it must be noted that all of these variegated forms of radical reflexivity are different from simply using the first-person pronoun to make narrative statements about the world. In other words, the reflexive statements must explicitly be about the self and its inner states.

When we turn to the Islamic philosophical tradition, we find that Avicenna and others emphasize reflexivity as a core feature of the self (it is important to note that the self of the Islamic philosophers is also marked by what I have called 'non-reflective consciousness', see Faruque 2021). Although Avicenna is read in some circles as a forerunner of Cartesianism and a proponent of substance-dualism because of his sharp distinction between the body and the soul, in reality Avicenna's philosophy of self is much more nuanced in that it begins with a concept of the self that must be reflexively discerned by turning to the self as a self. Below is a representative passage from the *Ishārāt wa-al-tanbīhāt* (Pointers and Admonitions) that fleshes out this idea:

Return to your self (*nafsika*) and reflect (*ta'ammul*). If you are healthy, or rather in some states of yours other than health such that you discern a thing accurately, do you ignore the existence of yourself and not affirm it? To me this [ignoring and not affirming] does not befit one who has intellectual vision. One's self does not escape even the one asleep in his sleep and the intoxicated in his intoxication, even though its representation to oneself is not fixed in memory. (Avicenna, *al-Ishārāt wa-al-tanbīhāt*, 2: 343, translated by S. Inati, modified in 2014: 94)

The injunctions 'return to your self' (*irja' ilā nafsika*) and 'reflect' (*ta'ammul*) make Avicenna's affirmation of radical reflexivity-cum-inwardness plain. He further argues that one never ceases to be aware of oneself, even during sleep or in a state of drunkenness, a theme which Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī elaborates on further (as we shall see shortly) because any human action, conscious or subconscious, presupposes the existence of a background self or subject that must be there to experience it (e.g. to experience the state of intoxication). Suhrawardī, the founder of Illuminationist Philosophy, like Avicenna, underscores the significance of a reflexive, phenomenological approach when it comes to investigating the basic nature of the self:

Know that when you know yourself, you do not do so because of a form of thou-in-thou, because knowing your thou-ness by a representation can be in only of two ways: either you know that the representation of your thou-ness is equal to thou or you do not. If you do not know that the representation is the same as your thou-ness, then you would not know your self, while we are here assuming that you do know it. If you do know that representation of your thou-ness is equal to thou, then you would have known yourself with the representation of your thou-ness so as to know that it is equal to your thou. Therefore, your knowledge of yourself is not by the representation. It can only be that your self is a self-subsistent entity, free from corporeality and always self-conscious. (Suhrawardī, *Partū Nāma*, modified translation from 1998: 39)

This highly dense and dialectical (also reflexive) argument concerning the self states that knowledge of the self cannot be through a mental representation, because one either knows that the representation is identical to one's self or one does not. However, if one says that one does not know oneself, it implies a contradiction because it is still a form of cognition, and hence implies knowledge. So, this is ruled out. If, on the other hand, one knows that one's representation is 'identical' to oneself, then one knows that it is 'identical' to oneself. However, the twist in the argument, according to Suhrawardī, lies in the second-order awareness because 'I come to know that my "I" is identical with its representation', i.e. 'I know that the "I" is equal to its representation', which is enough to show that the 'I' is other than 'its representation'. This argument shows again how 'by turning our self upon itself', we can come to a measure of self-knowledge.

Suhrawardī also argues that we know ourselves directly through our consciousness, which is the very nature of the self. This means I cannot be absent from my self because my reality is ever-present through the uninterrupted self-awareness that is indistinguishable from my ‘mineness’. Suhrawardī writes:

Know that you are never absent from your self and never unaware of it. Even though you may be in a state of wild intoxication, and forget yourself and become unaware of your limbs, yet you know that you exist and your self too exists [...] every now and then your flesh and skin changes but your ‘thou-ness’ does not. In like manner, the knowledge of your parts, limbs, heart, brain and whatever is inside can only be obtained through dissection, without which you are hardly aware of their states. However, you become aware of yourself through self-perception. This shows that your reality lies beyond your bodily organs and your thou-ness cannot be found in your body. Your self cannot be found in something of which you are sometimes aware and sometimes forgetful. Know that what is indicated by your ‘self’ is called ‘I’, and whatever lies in the material world belongs to the realm of ‘it’ (Suhrawardī, *Būstān al-qulūb in Majmū‘ah-yi muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Ishrāq*, 1976: 3.363–364).

While much more can be said about the above passage, for our purposes it is sufficient to point out that Suhrawardī’s insights about self-knowledge and consciousness are directly emanating from attending to the self’s inner and mental states by using introspective awareness (see also Faruque 2022b).

5 Selfhood, consciousness, and modern thought

To better appreciate the insights Islamic philosophers have had concerning reflexivity and consciousness, let us consider how modern philosophers and scientists treat ‘consciousness’. In contemporary thought, consciousness is seen as another scientific problem to be solved scientifically. But it is a mistake to think of consciousness as a ‘problem’, since doing so ‘objectifies’ it, whereas consciousness is always a subject characterized by an absolute immediacy that transcends all objectifiable experiences, as seen in the previous section. Moreover, once it is assumed that everything, including consciousness, must be proven as an object of proof in the same sense in which, for instance, the table or the tree is proven, there is no room left for consciousness not to be taken as one object among other objects, at which point any talk about consciousness being the unobjectifiable ground of experience would look like a futile attempt to prove what does not exist at all. In addition, there is no reason to think that consciousness comes into existence only when there is an ‘I-consciousness’ in relation to an external object, since our logical sense demands that consciousness must exist first in order that it may become self-conscious by the knowledge of objects with which it contrasts itself. One can go on to produce more elaborate proofs demonstrating that consciousness must be the underlying subject in all of our experiences, meaning it must be more fundamental than both our reflective and intersubjective experiences. But for our purposes here it

is sufficient to note that consciousness is a multimodal phenomenon possessing non-reflective, reflective, and intersubjective modes (a detailed analysis of this can be found in Faruque 2021: 111–120). With this background in mind, let us look at John Searle's definition of consciousness, which is widely discussed by many experts in various fields. Searle writes:

Consciousness consists of inner, qualitative, subjective states and processes of sentience or awareness. Consciousness, so defined, begins when we wake in the morning from a dreamless sleep – and continues until we fall asleep again, die, go into a coma, or otherwise become 'unconscious.' It includes all of the enormous variety of the awareness that we think of as characteristic of our waking life. It includes everything from feeling a pain, to perceiving objects visually, to states of anxiety and depression, to working out cross word puzzles, playing chess, trying to remember your aunt's phone number, arguing about politics, or to just wishing you were somewhere else. Dreams on this definition are a form of consciousness, though of course they are in many respects quite different from waking consciousness. (Searle 2000: 559)

The first thing one observes in the above definition is that it is nearly tautological. Searle had to use the word 'awareness' a couple of times to define consciousness. It is similar to the problem of defining being in that one cannot undertake to define *being* without beginning in this way, 'It is...', and hence employ the word to be defined in its definition. The same happens with the term 'consciousness', which cannot be defined inasmuch as it is the ultimate ground of all knowable objects. Whatever is known as an object must be presented to consciousness, and in this sense, it is both the reflective and non-reflective ground of all things and of all intersubjective relations. In order to be defined, consciousness, much like *being*, would have to be brought under a higher genus, while at the same time differentiated from entities other than itself belonging to the same genus. However, this would violate the premise that it is the ultimate knowing subject of all known objects.

More importantly, Searle's definition neglects the multi-modal structure of consciousness that comprises reflective, non-reflective, and intersubjective modes – the multimodal structure which poses the greatest threat to the computational-reductionist paradigm that seeks to explain consciousness in terms of sentience or functional properties of the mind (see e.g. Minsky 1998; 2006). This paradigm prompts scientists to transfer all mental characteristics to consciousness and analyse it in terms of specific mental events or states. It is thus no wonder that, according to Searle, consciousness 'begins' when we start our day from a dreamless sleep until we fall asleep again, i.e. consciousness is a subset of the wakeful state. Hence, consciousness is excluded from non-reflective phenomena such as dreamless sleep, coma, or intoxication, as discussed by Islamic philosophers. Consequently, scientific literature shows that 'dreamless sleep' lacks

mentation, whereas traditional philosophies consider it an instance of peaceful, non-intentional, and non-conceptual awareness (Thompson 2015: 19–20).

The concept of ‘non-reflective consciousness’ brings into the open the furthest limit of the purely empirical approach to the study of consciousness. This is because consciousness is a first-person phenomenon, and such phenomena are irreducible to the third-person objectivist stance that characterizes various computational/functional theories of consciousness. Moreover, since consciousness is the very essence of human subjectivity, there is no way to step outside consciousness in order to peek into it, as it were. In other words, since the starting point of empirical science is reflective judgement, it already presupposes the subject-object structure as well as non-reflective consciousness at the most foundational epistemic level. And as alluded to earlier, it is ‘non-reflective consciousness’ that grounds reflexivity, and not vice versa. All of this leads to the question that if consciousness is multi-modal and has a non-reflective ground, how are we to analyse it empirically through scientific instruments? The non-reflectivity of consciousness implies that the moment we try to grasp it through our mind we will find an objectified (as in the ‘I-it’ distinction in Suhrawardī) image of our consciousness rather than consciousness itself. Hence no process of reflection or introspection will ever succeed in zeroing in on consciousness itself (Faruque 2021).

One thus wonders how it would be possible to grasp the nature of consciousness through scientific instrumentation when it is not even possible to grasp it through one’s mind. Thus it is that the computational and neuroscientific theories of consciousness objectify consciousness twice: first when it conceives consciousness in the mind as an object of scientific investigation, and second when it seeks to demystify it by observing and then theorizing various psycho-physical states, which are but manifestations of consciousness rather than consciousness itself. The conceptual difficulty besetting the empirical approach lies precisely in its inability to see the multi-modal structure of consciousness, which persists as a continuum despite its reflective and inter-subjective modes. It is also not productive simply to deny this multimodal structure because, whenever we try to deny non-reflective consciousness, we are inevitably employing reflective consciousness to do so – which shows, in a way, that the refutation of consciousness as the underlying ground of subjectivity already presupposes its very reality.

6 Selfhood, God, and human flourishing

In his magnum opus, *Hujjat Allāh al-bāligha* (The Conclusive Proof of God), Shāh Wali Allāh describes how one attains ultimate flourishing, which takes place when one is able to overcome one’s base animal nature or the ordinary, lower self. In his view, this can be attained by turning complete attention to what lies beyond the physical world, to the spiritual realm. This state brings about a pleasure that is different from the

familiar pleasures of ordinary life. When this happens, the person no longer socializes unnecessarily, desires what others desire, or fears what others fear, since this person is far removed from the activities of everyday life. Walī Allāh states that this is the happiness realized by the transcendent philosophers (*muta'allihūn min al-ḥukamā'*) and the ecstatic Sufis (*majdhūbūn*) (Walī Allāh 1995: 1.100).

Yet, this idea of overcoming and transforming the ordinary self is found across several genres of Islamic thought. As alluded to earlier, in Islamic thinking generally there is a distinction between the ordinary and the real self, which is crucial to any ethics of human flourishing. According to the Qur'an, human beings possess a primordial nature, i.e. *fiṭra* (Q. 30:30), which is further corroborated by a hadith that says that God created human beings in His image (*ṣūra*) (*Bukhārī, kitāb isti'dhān*, 8:74, no. 246, available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6227>). The ethical and ontological implications of such a view of human nature cannot be more significant as Islamic metaphysics describes God as the absolute unconditioned being (*al-wujūd al-lā-bisharṭ maqṣamī*), beyond any thought, imagination, and conceptual categories (al-Qayṣarī, *Muqaddima*, 2008; Mullā Ṣadrā 2001–2005). Being created in God's image, human nature (or selfhood) in the final analysis defies having any fixed essence, since God cannot be defined through a specific image or form. Put another way, human nature in its primordial purity and original constitution is a state of non-determination, as it is made in the form of the formless – formless because the absolute and infinite nature of God ultimately transcends any form. Now, human flourishing involves a process of transformation from human nature-as-it-is (i.e. the ordinary, given self) to human nature-as-it-ought-to-be (i.e. the real self). More particularly, human flourishing implies an effort on the part of the human subject to recover their *fiṭra* or actualize the potential to attain likeness to the divine form. But since the 'form' of the divine self ultimately implies the formlessness of the infinite reality of God, the possibilities of being a self are also limitless. This is why we see so much variation and diversity when it comes to being a particular self/individual in this life. People carve their selfhood into a particular shape based on their preferences, intentionality, education, social environment, gender, race, and other factors. It is thus no surprise that Islamic ethicists such as Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), al-Ījī, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī (d. 908/1502), and Ṭaṣḳöpüzāda (d. 968/1561) consider human character to be malleable. For instance, Miskawayh sees human beings as having different innate potentials and inclinations that are not static, and hence can be reformed through appropriate moral actions. For these thinkers, the malleable character of the self implies that it is not solidified into some unchangeable nature (Zargar 2017: 86–91; Khalil 2018: 158–160; Salem 2021; 2022; Faruque 2024).

Indeed, the self – as the subject of experience – has the potential to conceive of anything as its object, including itself. That is, it has the capacity to objectify and eventually reconstitute and recreate itself into a desired self/person. But ultimately, being made in

God's image, and coupled with the fact that God taught Adam (i.e. the primordial human being) all the names or the essences of all things (Q. 2:31), human beings can attain self-actualization in God. Islamic metaphysics articulates such self-actualization through the concept of the Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*), which represents the pinnacle of human selfhood. The great Sufi metaphysician Ibn 'Arabī identifies the station of the Perfect Human as 'the station of no station' (*maqām lā maqām*), meaning thereby that perfection is achieved only by those who avoid defining the self in essentialist terms (Chittick 2002). In other words, the Perfect Human, as the mirror image of the divine, can reflect her/his reality through the countless divine names and attributes. Which is to say that in Islamic anthropology, the meaning of being human hinges on attaining the perfection of all the divine names and qualities. As Ibn 'Arabī says in his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya* (The Meccan Openings):

In this voyage I attained the meanings of all the divine names. I found that they all go back to One Named Object, One Essence (*musammā wāḥid wa-'ayn wāḥida*). That Named Object was what I was witnessing, and that Essence was my own *wujūd*. Thus, my voyage had been but in myself, and pointed to none but me (*illā fīya wa-dalālatī illā 'alaya*). (Ibn 'Arabī 1997: 6.65)

But some Islamic thinkers, including from within the school of Ibn 'Arabī, talk about how each human identity exists as a particular object of God's knowledge, which suggests that, although human beings are created in the image of the imageless, each of them possesses a particular 'ayn or unique reality under the wings of a given matrix of divine attributes (Qayṣarī 2008). This explains why human beings actualize various ontological, aesthetic, and psychological potentialities in never-repeating combinations. On the one hand, being made in God's image, human beings have sufficient freedom to discover, realize, harmonize, and unify every possibility of being, while on the other, their particular 'ayn allows them to develop a unique subjectivity by following a particular life-trajectory. Hence, some people lean towards the universality and goodness of the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), while others perceive reality as dissonance, disequilibrium, and devoid of meaning. Regardless, the self at the level of the Perfect Human, where human consciousness is reintegrated into the divine, transcends any particular definition, while it continues to function as a given person in the lived world. It is also important to note that, although I have focused on the spiritual aspect of the self so far, the above framework is fully compatible with aesthetic self-creation and expressivity, provided that it is grounded in the Spirit. It is thus not accidental that things such as 'imagination' and 'creativity' are highly regarded in Muslim culture, as attested to by the incredible richness of Islamic art and architecture, music, and Sufi poetry.

However, it would be a mistake to think that the pursuit of human flourishing is an overly individualistic concern in Islam. Beginning with Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) and

continuing with numerous ethicists throughout the classical and post-classical periods, Islamic philosophers have approached the question of human flourishing as both an individual and a communal pursuit. This is because, following Aristotle, they defined the human being as a political animal. Al-Fārābī thus links the concept of human perfection with the way people live in societies and how these societies serve a specific purpose, beyond the mere allocation of daily needs, such as food, shelter, and protection (al-Fārābī 1962). In al-Fārābī's view, societies have the natural goal of guiding their members towards their end, which is true felicity and flourishing. This is explained through his famous distinction between the virtuous city (*al-madīna al-fāḍila*) and the ignorant city (*al-madīna al-jāhiliya*). Al-Fārābī's virtuous city is one in which there is genuine cooperation between people to attain human flourishing (Al-Fārābī 1985: V, 15, 3: 231; Germann 2021). Later thinkers, such as al-Ījī, write that city life is facilitated by the need for individuals to cooperate with one another in order to survive, a saying his commentator, Ṭaṣköprüzāda, expands upon by explaining that, since human beings have different skills and different levels of wealth, each person within a community can benefit from a process of mutual interdependence (Salem 2022). Similarly, Mullā Şadrā talks about a just society (*al-jāmi'a al-ādila*) in which each member of the community is subject to the interests of the whole, thereby collectively promoting human flourishing (Toussi 2020). These ethical concepts are in line with the famous Qur'anic maxim, 'commanding right and forbidding wrong' (*al-amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar*), according to which the individual pursuit of felicity, happiness, and flourishing is inseparable from its communal aspects (for a comprehensive treatment of this maxim within various trends of Islamic thought, see Cook 2010). The connection between individual and communal aspects of flourishing is not difficult to gauge when considering virtues such as friendship, chivalry (*futuwwa*), and justice.

In a nutshell, notwithstanding the rich diversity of various accounts of selfhood in Islamic thought (from a physicalist to a quasi-physicalist to an immaterialist notion of the self), they never fail to show an overarching concern regarding human flourishing.

Attributions

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