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Varieties of Subjectivity in the Arabic and Latin Traditions: Introduction

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In his seminal *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Charles Taylor draws a historical sketch of the emergence of what he considers a peculiarly modern notion of self. The new self functions as a conceptual node in a complex network of psychological and ethical concerns, and in the end, it amounts to a first-personally grasped identity, which is narratively construed out of the evaluations of and commitments to the various possible courses and situations of human action in the world. The modern self is thus largely of our own construction, stubbornly resisting attempts to reduce it to more foundational concepts such as ‘humanity’ or ‘rationality’. That notwithstanding, the ethical dimension of selfhood has a solid psychological basis, as the rich possibilities in the self’s construction presuppose a foundational level of pure self-awareness. This narrow notion of self-awareness, which by the time of Descartes and Locke was allegedly stripped bare of the ancient and medieval residues of a human or rational soul, amounts to nothing but the barest form of the subject’s awareness of itself and entails no further inherent content.

Taylor’s story is attractive, because it makes a strikingly profound *and* historically substantiated philosophical claim. Thus, if it has solidified the claim that questions and debates related to the individual self are peculiarly modern, this is due to its genuine merits. But a quarter-century on from its initial publication, and

informed by an increasing number of studies of the self and self-awareness in various pre-modern authors and contexts,¹ we find ourselves in a position where questions of the self's historicity must be brought up for reconsideration. For instance, it now seems plausible to hold that a notion of bare self-awareness emerges centuries before Descartes and Locke, at least as early as in Avicenna and his Arabic followers.² The differences between the respective contexts invite questions of the diverse motivations that may have contributed to the emergence of concepts of bare self-awareness, and especially of the various theoretical functions and applications of those concepts. Is the emphasis on self-awareness necessarily in conflict with the essentialist understanding of the human being that goes back to ancient philosophy? Does the idea of bare self-awareness have obvious ethical implications, or can its relevance remain confined to exclusively theoretical pursuits in psychology and epistemology? On the other hand, it now seems that pre-modern thinkers did not simply fail to perceive the possibility of a wide range of different human selves or identities, although their evaluations of them may be in stark contrast to modern intuitions.³ Finally, once we pause to consider the distance between the two levels of subjectivity, those of bare self-awareness and the construed self, we are bound to address the question of the conceptual and phenomenal space between them: perhaps

¹ See, for instance, R. Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Chicago, 2006); R. Martin and J. Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York, 2006); P. Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford, 2003); P. Remes, *Plotinus on Self: The Philosophy of the 'We'* (Cambridge, 2007); T. Scarpelli Cory, *Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge, 2013).

² Cf., D. L. Black, 'Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows', in *The Unity of Science in the Arabic Tradition: Science, Logic, Epistemology and Their Interactions*, eds. S. Rahman, T. Street, and H. Tahiri (n.p., 2008), 63-87; D. L. Black, 'Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars', in *The Judeo-Christian-Islamic Heritage: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, eds. R. Taylor and I. Omar (Milwaukee, 2012), 255-281; J. Kaukua, 'I in the Light of God: Selfhood and Self-Awareness in Suhrawardī's *Hikmat al-ishrāq*', in *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth Century*, ed. P. Adamson (London and Turin, 2011), 141-157; J. Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond* (Cambridge, forthcoming); and L. Muehlethaler, 'Ibn Kammūna (d. 683/1284) on the Argument of the Flying Man in Avicenna's *Ishārāt* and al-Suhrawardī's *Taḥwīhāt*', *Avicenna and His Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Y. T. Langermann (Turnhout, 2009), 179-203.

³ For an extended case, see Remes, *Plotinus on Self*.

there are further levels of selfhood and self-awareness that historical authors distinguished, for reasons that call for articulation and explanation.

With questions like these, it soon dawns on us that we are scarcely in the position of relating a general history of human selfhood as such, or of *the* self. The various features we now consider relevant for a philosophical discussion on selfhood or self-awareness do not necessarily figure together. Instead, they can emerge in isolation or in various combinations, or make their contribution in wildly divergent conceptual frameworks and in service of articulating drastically different ideas. The very same phenomena that we are accustomed to encounter as psychological *explananda* may very well figure as *explanantia* in other contexts, for instance in metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics. When it comes to the self and its awareness, we can rely on few stable elements in terminology, doctrine, or approach.⁴

In more concrete terms, one of the most significant mediaeval discussions related to selfhood and self-awareness is the development of the Aristotelian concept of logical and metaphysical subject (Gr. *hypokeimenon*, Lat. *subiectum*) to the modern concept of subjectivity, or subject of experience. This has been recently analyzed at length by Alain de Libera who argues that this new concept of subjectivity arises out of a complex intertwining of Augustine's Platonic-Trinitarian notion of self-consciousness with Averroes' and the Latin Averroists' interpretation of the Aristotelian material intellect.⁵

⁴ For further discussion, see the introduction in *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy*, eds. S. Heinämaa, V. Lähteenmäki & P. Remes (Dordrecht, 2007), 1-26.

⁵ The analysis is presented at length in A. de Libera, *Archéologie du sujet I: Naissance du sujet* (Paris, 2007). For a condensed account, see É. Balibar, B. Cassin & A. de Libera, 'Sujet', in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, eds. B. Cassin et al. (n.p., 2004), 1233-1254 (especially 1237-1243).

According to de Libera, the point of culmination of this process is an impugatory treatise written by Peter John Olivi in 1282.⁶ However, the question of just how unique Olivi's stance is can be debated; in any case, explicit attention to the closely related question of whether self-awareness is primitive or a product of the soul's reflexive act is much older. One of the first mediaeval defences of the primitivity of self-awareness must be that presented by Avicenna in an answer to the broadly Aristotelian claim that one first becomes aware of oneself when one pays attention to an earlier, and thereby unaware, act or mental state. In a strikingly modern move, Avicenna claims that without some kind of primitive familiarity with or awareness of oneself, one will fail to recognize the object of reflection as one's own act or state.⁷ Closer to Olivi, Thomas Aquinas put forth a theory of self-cognition that, in a consistently Aristotelian fashion, is based on the idea of reflexivity,⁸ and some decades later William Ockham introduced a radically new kind of reflection theory.⁹ Both theories were subjected to further critiques, and there seems to be no reason to assume that this debate should have ceased with later mediaeval thinkers. Interestingly enough, a parallel discussion took place in post-Avicennian Islamic

⁶ The text is edited by S. Piron in 'Petrus Iohannis Olivi. Impugnatio quorundam articulorum Arnaldi Galliardi, articulus 19', *Oliviana* 2 (2006), URL: <http://oliviana.revues.org/52>. For an extended discussion of self-awareness and subjectivity in Olivi, see S. Piron, 'L'Expérience subjective selon Pierre de Jean Olivi', in *Généalogies du sujet: De saint Anselme à Malebranche*, ed. O. Boulnois (Paris, 2007), 43-54; and S. Brower-Toland, 'Olivi on Consciousness and Self-Knowledge: The Phenomenology, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Mind's Reflexivity', *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 1 (2013), 136-171.

⁷ For an analysis of the argument and the concept of self-awareness involved in it, see J. Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy*, ch. 4.1. An influential contemporary articulation of the reflection critical argument is D. Henrich, 'Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht', in *Subjektivität und Metaphysik: Festschrift für Wolfgang Cramer*, eds. D. Henrich & H. Wagner (Frankfurt am Main, 1966), 188-232; for an English translation, see 'Fichte's Original Insight', in *Contemporary German Philosophy: Volume 1*, ed. D. E. Christensen (Philadelphia, 1982), 15-52.

⁸ For the treatment of self-cognition in Aquinas, see Cory, *Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge*. Concerning many early modern philosophers, it is a debated issue whether in their view self-awareness comes about as a result of a reflexive relation, higher or same-order, or whether it is an intrinsic feature of mental states. See, for instance, the special issue 'Consciousness in Early Modern Philosophy' of *Studia Leibnitiana* 2 (2011) for papers on Descartes and some Cartesians, Locke, Leibniz, and Reid and other British common sense philosophers.

⁹ See Sonja Schierbaum's contribution to the present volume.

philosophy, albeit largely dominated by the Avicennian theory of self-awareness as a primitive feature of the human soul.¹⁰

Apart from the attempts at explaining different types of self-cognition, the intuitions and phenomena related to it are applied for a variety of purposes. One prominent example is the sustained discussion of the human soul's incorporeality and independence of the human body, the paradigmatic argument for substance dualism being the Avicennian flying man.¹¹ Closely related to this were questions concerning the principles of the individuation and the identity of the incorporeal soul.¹² The unity of the subject of experience was also used as evidence for the corresponding unity of the soul by both Arabic and Latin thinkers.¹³ Quite unrelated to these metaphysical and psychological concerns, Augustine's analysis of the Trinity by means of the human soul's self-knowledge had already raised the theological stakes of the phenomenon, and self-knowledge and experience of personal identity had been perceived as relevant for eschatological questions at least as early as Gregory of

¹⁰ See Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy*.

¹¹ For a close analysis of the argument, see M. Marmura, 'Avicenna's "Flying Man" in Context', *The Monist* 69 (1986), 383-395; and Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy*, ch. 2. The early stages of the argument's Latin reception are charted in D. N. Hasse, *Avicenna's De anima in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Theory of the Soul 1160-1300* (London and Turin, 2000), 80-92. The similarity between the flying man and the Cartesian *cogito* has been the subject of sustained attention; a sensible analysis is T.-A. Druart, 'The Soul and Body Problem: Avicenna and Descartes', in *Arabic Philosophy and the West: Continuity and Interaction*, ed. T.-A. Druart (Washington D.C., 1988), 27-48. For a meticulous examination of Descartes' argument for dualism, see M. Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

¹² For the question of individuation in Avicenna, see Black, 'Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars'; and Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy*, chs. 3-4. For a discussion of seventeenth century views of the individuality of the soul, see U. Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford, 2011), 35-93.

¹³ This is the so called "Achilles argument". For a preliminary account of its mediaeval fate, see H. Lagerlund, 'The Unity of the Soul and Contrary Appetites', in *The Achilles of Rationalist Psychology*, eds. T. M. Lennon & R. J. Stainton (Dordrecht, 2008), 75-91. The same volume also contains ample material on the early modern discussion of the argument. Note that while the Achilles argument concerns first and foremost the simplicity and unity of the soul, early modern philosophers often contrasted the unified soul with matter as a divisible substance and deployed the Achilles as an argument for substance dualism.

Nyssa.¹⁴ Finally, as Alain de Libera has shown, we can find extended discussions of the theological implications of empirical cases such as conjoined twins, which are of interest in the study of the concepts of selfhood and self-awareness in mediaeval thought.¹⁵

Despite this abundance of material, it remains a fact that mediaeval thinkers rarely discuss self-awareness, selfhood, and subjectivity in explicitly defined terms. Although some terms seem to be used in a quasi-technical way,¹⁶ there is no narrowly definable family of expressions that indicate self-awareness in all the different contexts. What is worse, some key terms are ambiguous in a particularly difficult manner; for a particularly prominent example, it is not easy to tell without considerable analysis whether a given instance of the Latin *conscientia* stands for consciousness or conscience.¹⁷ In both mediaeval and early modern contexts, interpretative rigour is required to chart the relations in which the concepts of self-awareness and selfhood stand to other concepts. It goes without saying that such relations are determined by the wider presuppositions and interests guiding our theoretical pursuits and that these are subject to variation.

¹⁴ See Martin & Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self*, 65-67. In the early modern context, the theological ramifications of Locke's arguably revolutionary view that personal identity is *constituted* by consciousness, i.e. the stream of experiential states, resulted in considerable critical discussion. For an informative study, see Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject*, 153ff.

¹⁵ A. de Libera, *Archéologie du sujet II: La Quête de l'identité* (Paris, 2008), ch. IV. Thought-experiments about transmigrating consciousnesses and one human hosting several persons, which Locke considers in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, incited discussions of selfhood in terms of fission examples where one consciousness divides into two contemporaneous and mutually independent consciousnesses. See, R. Martin & J. Barresi, *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2004)

¹⁶ For instance, the Avicennian phrase *shu 'ūr bi al-dhāt* clearly functions as a technical term, although it is never explicitly defined as such.

¹⁷ For an appreciation of this kind of difficulties, see Dominik Perler's contribution to the present volume. In early modern English philosophy, consciousness is commonly distinguished from conscience after 1678 when Cudworth puts 'consciousness' to a philosophically distinctive use. However, there seems to be several notions of consciousness in play, shaped to fulfil various philosophical tasks. As one indication, see Martine Pécharman's, Vili Lähtenmäki's, and Christian Barth's papers in this volume.

Of course, the more heterogeneous the historical material, the greater the requirement to justify the use of broad terms like ‘selfhood’ or ‘self-awareness’ to delineate a field of study in the history of pre-modern philosophy. Judging by examples like those quoted above, the intuition seems to be widely shared that a sufficiently strong common thread does run through the various historical discussions – and this is an intuition that may well be true. Nevertheless, it is one that we must be prepared to challenge, and this can only be done by emphasizing those features that are particular to the conceptual frameworks and contexts of discussion under investigation. We should be prepared to entertain the possibility of having to give up the idea of selfhood as an enduring object of historical discussion, and instead to investigate in isolation the various questions interwoven into the complex of the modern self.

Whatever the final verdict, in the present situation we lack the means for a definitive answer, which simply requires more detailed and historically rigorous data on as wide a range of discussions as possible. This is the foundation on which alone a systematic comparative assessment can take place. By the same token, it is important to keep the historical scope broad enough and not confine oneself to a narrowly defined preconceived period, for the broader scope not only helps in answering the big question but also allows us a better insight into what is peculiar to each particular context. Thus, even when focusing on mediaeval Latin philosophy, it is helpful to be also aware of the “post-classical” Islamic reception of those Arabic thinkers who through translations figured in a crucial role in the scholastic debates. The Arabic readers of Avicenna, for instance, had a considerably wider corpus at their disposal, and consequently read the shared works with a slightly different emphasis than their Latin peers. On the other hand, as is now widely recognized, in many questions it is extremely beneficial – and historically plausible – to extend the mediaeval tradition

far into the early modern period, or inversely, to conceive of early modern thought as being of mediaeval provenance.¹⁸

With this situation in mind, the guest editors of this volume have brought together scholars of Arabic, Latin and early modern philosophy to investigate questions of subjectivity in historical authors from three different contexts and without any predetermined concept of subjectivity or selfhood as a starting point. It is to be hoped that the volume as a whole succeeds in accentuating points of difference and shared ground in the three contexts and in providing some more ground for any future systematic attempt at a history of selfhood and self-awareness.

Susan Brower-Toland's article opens the volume by investigating a problem inherent in William Ockham's higher-order theoretical account of consciousness, namely, that it seems to give rise to an infinite series of higher-order acts in any given mental state. Reconstructing Ockham's solution in relation to Walter Chatton's explicit critique, Brower-Toland shows that although he may never have presented a sufficient solution to the dilemma, Ockham refined his position during his career.

In her contribution, Sonja Schierbaum explicates Ockham's explanation of self-consciousness in the framework of his theories of intuition and mental language. She shows that for Ockham, unlike many of his contemporaries, self-consciousness is not a primitive fact of the mental or the intellectual, but can rather be reductively explained by means of more primitive epistemological and ontological concepts. Complementing the discussion in Brower-Toland's paper, Schierbaum thus

¹⁸ This focus on the ramifications of the ancient Greek philosophical tradition is not intended to deny the value of distinctly non-Western traditions of investigation for the question of the historicity of the human self. On the contrary, their intrinsic value is attested by the way in which Hindu and Buddhist discussions on the existence (or non-existence) of the self figure in contemporary philosophy of mind.

substantiates the claim that Ockham is able to present a coherent higher-order theory of self-consciousness.

Dominik Perler's article is a study of Francisco Suárez' late scholastic theory of human consciousness. He shows that Suárez distinguishes consistently between phenomenal consciousness as a feature of all experience, the intellectual capacity of reflective consciousness, and a more developed type of self-consciousness resulting from the scientific study of the soul. As a result of expounding Suárez' detailed analysis of various forms of consciousness, both on the sensory and the intellectual level, Perler's contribution yields the broader argument that statements according to which the explicit discussion of consciousness is an exclusive prerogative of modern philosophy must be reassessed.

In his contribution, Jari Kaukua takes up a dilemma in the eschatology of the 17th century philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā. By Ṣadrā's time, the Avicennian concept of self-awareness highlighted in the flying man was a fixed part of the Arabic psychological tradition. Among other things, this concept implied that each human being is constantly aware of herself, a claim that Ṣadrā explicitly endorses. This, however, is in tension with his eschatological reliance on the Qur'ānic *topos* of the soul's first being revealed to itself on the final day. Kaukua suggests that Ṣadrā can consistently subscribe to the two views, but not without important revisions to the Avicennian concepts of self and self-awareness.

Martine Pécharman's study of Ralph Cudworth shows that the Cambridge Platonist maintained an elaborate theory of degrees of consciousness ranging from animal sensation to full-fledged human personality, and that according to this theory, all degrees of consciousness should be understood as corresponding degrees of *self*-consciousness. Thus, instead of confining self-consciousness to a rational subject's

various relations to herself, Cudworth regards the self-perception entailed by all animal perception as a form of self-consciousness. According to Pécharman, Cudworth substantiated this idea with a still more refined distinction between different types of self-consciousness: although animal perception is in essence self-perception, certain mental states require for their explanation a specific “to-oneself” form of consciousness, which results in an awareness *that* a given mental state is the result of the mind’s own activity.

Vili Lähteenmäki investigates the early 18th century debate between Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins over the possibility of thinking matter. He argues that Collins is committed to the Lockean distinction according to which the power of thinking and the act of thinking are conceptually distinct from one another. As a subjective phenomenon, consciousness does not tell us anything about the nature of the subject it inheres in. However, Collins accepts Clarke’s claim that since consciousness is a unity, its subject must be unified too. From these starting points, instead of attempting to account for how consciousness can be related to a material subject, Collins attempts to make acceptable the idea that a sufficiently unified power, such as the power to think, can result from a joint contribution of parts of a material system.

Finally, Christian Barth investigates Leibniz’ view of the acts of mind and argues that he maintains a first-order conception of phenomenal consciousness. Barth’s reading draws on Leibniz’ discussions of a specific type of attention, memory, and distinctness of perception. By expounding Leibniz’ account of why a phenomenally conscious sensation is phenomenally conscious (rather than unconscious), Barth arrives at the striking conclusion that Leibniz took the

phenomenal character of conscious states to rest on the confusing effect of imperfect acts of attention directed towards representational contents.

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