Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows

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Abstract One of the most well-known elements of Avicenna's philosophy is the famous thought experiment known as the "Flying Man." The Flying Man argument attempts to show that the soul possesses innate awareness of itself, and it has often been viewed as forerunner to the Cartesian *cogito*. But Avicenna's reflections on the nature of self-awareness and self-consciousness are by no means confined to the various versions of the Flying Man. Two of Avicenna's latest works, the *Investigations* and the *Notes*, contain numerous discussions of the soul's awareness of itself. From an examination of these works I show that Avicenna recognizes two distinct levels of self-knowledge: (1) primitive self-awareness, which is illustrated by the Flying Man; and (2) reflexive self-awareness, which comes from our awareness of cognizing some object other than ourselves. While Avicenna assigns primitive self-awareness a central role in ensuring the unity of the soul's operations, he encounters a number of difficulties in his efforts to explicate the relation of primitive self-awareness to the reflexive varieties of self-knowledge that he inherits from the Aristotelian tradition.

It is a commonplace in the history of philosophy that issues surrounding self-awareness, consciousness, and self-knowledge do not become prominent until the early modern period. For medieval philosophers, particularly those in the Aristotelian tradition, the nature of self-knowledge plays only an ancillary role in psychology and epistemology. This is a natural consequence of Aristotle's characterization of the intellect as a pure capacity that has no nature of its own: "Thus that in the soul which is called mind ... is, before it thinks, not actually any real thing."[1] Until the intellect has been actualized by some object, there is nothing for it to reflect upon; hence self-knowledge for Aristotle—at least in the case of human knowers—is derivative upon knowledge of other things: "Thought is itself thinkable in exactly the same way as its objects are."[2]

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Like all historical generalizations, of course, this truism admits of striking individual exceptions. The most obvious and well-known exception in the medieval Islamic tradition is Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, 980–1037), whose famous thought experiment known as the "Flying Man" centres on the human soul's awareness of itself. But Avicenna's reflections on the problems of awareness and consciousness are by no means confined to the various versions of the Flying Man.[3] In particular, two of Avicenna's latest works, the *Investigations* and the *Notes*—both of which are in the form of remarks compiled by Avicenna's students[4]—contain a wealth of tantalizing and often problematic reflections on the soul's awareness of itself (*shu'ūr bi-al-dhāt*).[5] The purpose of the present study is to consider the account of self-awareness that emerges from these works against the backdrop of Avicenna's Flying Man. I will show that Avicenna recognizes two distinct levels of self-knowledge, the most basic of which is exemplified in the experience of the Flying Man, which I will label "primitive self-awareness."[6] Primitive self-awareness violates many of the strictures placed on self-knowledge by the Aristotelian principles rehearsed above, and Avicenna differentiates it from the reflexive awareness of oneself via one's awareness of an object that is characteristic of Aristotelianism. He also distinguishes primitive self-awareness from our knowledge of our bodies and psychological faculties and from our scientific understanding of our essential natures as humans; and he explicitly recognizes the capacity for "knowing that we know" as a distinctive form of self-knowledge. Primitive self-awareness plays a central role in ensuring the unity of the soul's operations, especially its cognitive ones, and Avicenna appears to have seen the absence of such a unifying centre of awareness as a major lacuna within Aristotelian psychology. But in the end it remains unclear whether Avicenna is able to provide a coherent account of the relations among primitive self-awareness and the other varieties of self-knowledge that he inherits from the Aristotelian tradition.

1 The Flying Man: A Sketch

The broad contours of the Flying Man are generally well-known, so I will merely summarize the salient points here. To set up the thought experiment, Avicenna admonishes the reader to imagine herself in a state in which all forms of sensible perception are impossible, and he identifies two fundamental sources of sense knowledge to be bracketed: (1) everything previously acquired from experience, that is, all knowledge anchored in memory and imagination; and (2) any occurrent sensations. In order to accomplish this, she is supposed to imagine herself: (1′) in a pristine, newly-created state, but fully mature (*kāmilan*);[7] this allows her to disregard all empirical knowledge, while presupposing an intellect with full rational capacities; and (2′) suspended in a void so that her limbs do not touch one another and she can neither see, hear, touch, smell, nor taste anything. This prevents her both from feeling her own body and from sensing external objects.[8] Avicenna then asks whether self-awareness would be absent in such a state. Would a person, while deprived of all sensory experience, be entirely lacking in self-awareness? Avicenna believes that no one "endowed with insight" would deny that her awareness of herself would remain stable even in these conditions.[9] He is confident that

even under these extreme conditions, the subject would continue to affirm "the existence of his self" (*wujūd dhāti-hi*).[10] Assuming that we share his intuition on this point, Avicenna points out that this affirmation takes place despite the fact that all sense perception, both internal and external, is cut off. We remain aware of the existence of our selves, but under the state hypothesized in the Flying Man we are entirely oblivious to the existence of our bodies; hence this affirmation of our existence cannot be dependent upon the experience of having a body. Avicenna thus concludes that since "it is not possible for the thing of which one is aware and not aware to be one in any respect," it follows that the self cannot be either the whole body nor any one of its parts.[11]

This last move in the Flying Man, which is repeated in all of its versions, is of course problematic, since it seems to contain the obviously fallacious inference pattern, "If I know *x* but I do not know *y*, then *x* cannot be the same as *y*." The question of whether Avicenna explicitly or implicitly commits this fallacy—a charge often laid against the Cartesian *cogito* as well—has been much discussed. It is not a question that I plan to take up here for its own sake, however, since it is primarily of relevance to the question of Avicennian dualism. It is noteworthy, however, that while the Flying Man argument focuses primarily on the impossibility that self-awareness is a mode of sense perception, the primitive character of the experience exemplified in the Flying Man poses parallel and equal difficulties for the claim that it could be a mode of intellectual understanding as well, as we will see below.[12]

2 Primitive Self-Awareness

The scenario imagined in the Flying Man is designed to show that self-awareness is always present in the human soul, independently of our awareness of other objects, in particular the objects of sense faculties. In the *Notes* and *Discussions,* Avicenna attempts to provide a more systematic account of the epistemic primitiveness of self-awareness over all other forms of knowledge by employing the fundamental epistemological distinction between innate and acquired knowledge.[13] Self-awareness is placed in the realm of innate knowledge, and comparisons are drawn between self-awareness and other paradigmatic cases of innate knowledge:

> Self-awareness is essential to the soul (*al-shu'ūr bi-al-dhāt dhātī li-l-nafs*), it is not acquired from outside. It is as if, when the self comes to be, awareness comes to be along with it. Nor are we aware of [the self] through an instrument, but rather, we are aware of it through itself and from itself. And our awareness is an awareness without qualification, that is, there is no condition for it in any way; and it is always aware, not at one time and not another.[14]

A bit later in this passage, he makes this same assertion in even more striking terms, identifying self-awareness with the soul's very existence:

> Our awareness of ourselves is our very existence (*shu'ūr-nā bi-dhāt-nā huwa nafs wujūd-nā*). ... Self-awareness is natural (*gharīzah*) to the self, for it is its existence itself, so there is no need of anything external by which we perceive the self. Rather, the self is that by which we perceive the self.[15]

We can isolate a number of claims made in these passages regarding the nature of primitive self-awareness and what it means to say that it is "innate" or "natural":

1. It is essential to the soul; nothing could be a (human) soul if it did not possess self-awareness;
2. There is no cause outside the soul from which it acquires awareness of itself;
3. No instrument or medium is required in order to become self-aware; we perceive the self "through itself";
4. Self-awareness is direct and unconditioned;
5. It is present in the soul from the beginning of its existence;
6. It is continual, not intermittent and episodic; and
7. The self *just is* awareness: for the self to *exist* at all is for it to be aware of itself.

These points are closely interrelated and can be further reduced to two groups: 1, 5, 6, and 7 all articulate the basic thesis that the self-awareness is an essential attribute of human existence, constitutive of the very fabric of our being; 2, 3, and 4 express the principal consequence of this basic thesis, namely, that self-awareness cannot be causally dependent upon anything at all outside the soul. Self-awareness is direct and unmediated in any way.

It seems obvious that such a view is entirely at odds with the Aristotelian thesis that the human soul can only have knowledge of itself concomitant with its awareness of an object. Indeed, the points that Avicenna emphasizes in these passages seem deliberately formulated so as to invoke and at the same time to reject the Aristotelian claim that self-awareness is a derivative psychological state. But what are the grounds which entitle Avicenna to make this claim? If Avicenna is correct that self-awareness is indeed innate, not acquired, then it will have the epistemic status of a self-evident principle or axiom which need not and cannot be demonstrated on the basis of prior principles. Yet even self-evident principles can become subject to doubt, and in such cases they will require something in the way of argumentative support. Thought experiments are one technique that can be called upon in such circumstances, so we might expect Avicenna to appeal to the experience of the Flying Man to confirm the primitiveness of self-awareness. Yet the Flying Man, colourful though it may be, does not go far enough towards establishing the primitiveness thesis, since it merely prescinds from all sensory awareness. The claim made here is a stronger one epistemologically, since it asserts that self-awareness is not merely prior to and independent of corporeality and sensibility, but of all forms of cognitive awareness of other objects. Hence, Avicenna still needs to show that self-awareness is absolutely primitive in every respect, in the sense that it is *presupposed* by our capacity to understand anything at all. As evidence for this claim, Avicenna offers the following analysis of the conditions under which awareness of other objects is possible:

> My apprehension (*idrāk-ī*) of myself is something which subsists in me, it does not arise in me from the consideration of something else. For if I say: "I did this," I express my apprehension of myself even if I am heedless of my awareness of it. But from where could I know that I did this, unless I had first considered my self? Therefore I first considered my self, not its activity, nor did I consider anything by which I apprehended myself.[16]

A bit later, Avicenna repeats the same point:

> Whenever we know something, there is in our knowledge of our apprehension of it an awareness of ourselves, though we do not know that our selves apprehended it. For we are aware primarily of ourselves. Otherwise when would we know that we had apprehended it if we had not first been aware of ourselves? This is as it were evidence (*bayyinah*), not a demonstration (*burhān*), that the soul is aware of itself.[17]

Self-awareness is innate to the soul and cognitively primary because only if I first know my self can I: (1) know anything else about myself; and (2) become aware of other things. Self-awareness is presupposed by any attribution of properties or actions to myself, since such attributions presume the existence of a subject for those attributes; and self-awareness is equally implicit in all the soul's acts of knowing other things, since it is a condition for the recognition of these objects *as* objects distinct from ourselves. Though Avicenna does not explicitly say so here, his position seems to allow that one can be aware of oneself without being concomitantly aware of any object. Self-awareness seems to be an exception to the general rule that all thinking is in some way *intentional* and directed toward an object. In contrast to the Aristotelian orthodoxy, then, the primary object of self-awareness is the *self* as a bare subject, not its *activity* of thinking.

3 Awareness and Consciousness

If primitive self-awareness is absolutely primary, as Avicenna urges, indeed even identical with the soul's existence, why would we ever need to be alerted to such a basic datum of experience? Avicenna himself admits that despite its primitive status, self-awareness is often something of which, paradoxically, we remain ignorant. Thus in the *Notes* he remarks: "A human being may be inattentive to his self-awareness, and [thereafter] be alerted to it"; and again, "But the soul may be oblivious to [itself] (*dhāhilah*), and need to be alerted, just as it may be oblivious to the primaries, and need to be alerted to them."[18] The implication, then, is that consciousness is *not* the same thing as self-awareness, and that we often fail to be conscious of our own selves.

The most striking illustration of the distinction between consciousness and self-awareness is Avicenna's assertion that even in sleep or drunkenness no one would fail to affirm his own existence. This declaration occurs in the version of the Flying Man found in the *Directives,*[19] and a similar point is made in the *Investigations*. In the latter work, Avicenna appeals to the existence of imaginative activity in sleep (i.e., dreaming), and he argues that self-awareness must necessarily be present in a person in whom there is cognitive activity of any kind. The fact that we are not fully conscious of that activity, and that we may fail to recall it when we awaken, is irrelevant. Thus understood, consciousness is not awareness, but rather, a second-order, reflexive operation for which primitive self-awareness is a necessary but insufficient condition:

> A doubt was raised to him that someone who is asleep is not aware of himself. So he said: the person who is asleep acts upon his images just as he acts upon his sensibles while

> awake. And oftentimes he acts upon cogitative intellectual matters just as he does in waking. And in this state of his acting he is aware that he is the one acting, just as he is in the waking state. For if he awakens and remembers his acting, he remembers his awareness of himself, and if he awakens and he does not remember this, he will not remember his self-awareness. And this is not a proof that he was not aware of himself, for the memory of self-awareness is different from self-awareness, or rather, the awareness of self-awareness is different from self-awareness.[20]

The claim that we can be *unconsciously* aware of ourselves at first glance seems an oxymoron. Yet the property of being an object of awareness even in the absence of conscious thought is a basic feature of all innate or primary knowledge for Avicenna, and primitive self-awareness too possesses this property in virtue of being innate. Thus the primary concepts and propositions on which all our thought depends are likewise absolutely basic, and we often take them for granted because of their pervasive role in all our cognitive operations.[21] We are seldom consciously aware of our employment of the principle of contradiction, for example, even though we cannot entertain any proposition unless it conforms to that principle. By the same token, we cannot think of any object unless we are at the same time aware of our selves as the underlying subject of the thought. But in neither of these cases need we be conscious of the role played by our innate knowledge in our knowledge of other things. Indeed, Avicenna seems to imply that it is unusual for innate knowledge of any sort to rise to the level of full consciousness.

Still, the separation of consciousness from awareness is problematic in an Avicennian context, since Avicenna does not have open to him the obvious appeal to memory as a means of explaining how I can be aware of objects of knowledge which I am not consciously entertaining.[22] For it is a key tenet of Avicenna's cognitive psychology that the concept of memory applied to the intellect is meaningless. Avicenna argues for this controversial conclusion on the grounds that "it is impossible that [an intelligible] form should be existent in complete actuality in the soul but [the soul] not understand it in complete actuality, since 'it understands it' means nothing other than that the form is existent in it."[23] What, then, can it mean to claim that I am aware of any object—including my self—and yet not actually, that is, consciously, understanding it?

In the case of other examples of innate knowledge, this problem is fairly easily resolved. For primary intelligibles are not fully *innate* for Avicenna in the way we ordinarily understand innateness. In this respect, the legacy of the Aristotelian identification of the human intellect as in pure potency to its intelligibles retains its hold on Avicenna.[24] There are two principal characteristics of innate knowledge as it is manifested in the primary intelligibles: (1) we never actively seek to learn them and we are not conscious of when they are acquired; and (2) under normal circumstances we do not consciously differentiate these intelligibles from the derivative intelligibles in which they are implicitly contained. The second of these two characteristics is what allows Avicenna to make sense of the claim that we are *aware* of innate intelligibles—in the sense that they are actually present *in* our minds—even though we are not consciously thinking of *them*. Their innate presence in us is in virtue of their containment in *other* concepts, and hence they

do not violate Avicenna's rejection of intellectual memory. If our minds were totally empty of all other thoughts, we would not possess these ideas either.

This solution is open to Avicenna to a limited extent in the case of primitive self-awareness, since self-awareness is a precondition for thinking about any object other than the self. But Avicenna has made the stronger claim that self-awareness *is* the soul's very subsistence and existence. At no point can the soul *exist* unless it is aware of itself, even if it is not consciously or actively thinking of itself. This is not true even of the most fundamental of primary intelligibles. Self-awareness, then, cannot be the soul's implicit consideration of itself as the subject of *other* thoughts, since that would, in effect, reduce primitive self-awareness to Aristotelian reflexive awareness. In primitive self-awareness the self is not present to itself as an intelligible object in the way that other objects are present in its thought. Of what then, is the soul aware when it is aware of nothing but the existence of itself?

4 Awareness and Identity: What Self-Awareness is not

In my overview of the Flying Man argument, I noted that Avicenna identifies the object to which we are alerted by the thought experiment as the existence (*wujūd*) or individual existence (*annīyah*) of the self or soul (*dhāt; nafs*). While the same terminology is also found in the *Notes* and *Investigations,* in these works Avicenna prefers to speak of our awareness of our *huwīyah* or "individual identity." Like the various terms for "existence," "identity" serves to convey the primitiveness of self-awareness, the fact that it is empty of any specific cognitive content. But the term "identity" also captures two additional properties that are distinctive of primitive self-awareness. First and most fundamentally, self-awareness is the only form of knowledge in which cognitive identification—the identity of knower and known—is on Avicenna's view completely realized in human thought.[25]

> When you are aware of yourself, it is necessary that there is identity (*huwīyah*) here between the one aware and the thing of which there is awareness. ... And if you are aware of something other than yourself, in this case there will be an otherness between the one who is aware the object of awareness. ... As for awareness of the self, the one who is aware of that which he is, is his very self, so here there is identity and no otherness in any respect."[26]

The second property follows as a corollary of the complete identity between knower and known: self-awareness must be direct and cannot be mediated in any way at all. While the denial of intermediaries in self-awareness is usually linked with attempts to show that self-awareness cannot be a form of sense perception, this is nonetheless a basic feature of primitive self-awareness whose consequences extend to the intellectual as well as the sensible sphere.[27]

In the course of elaborating upon the claim that we are primitively aware only of our individual identity and existence, Avicenna eliminates three distinct but closely related theses regarding the nature of self-awareness and in particular the

sort of knowledge of the self that can be gained in this primitive act. According to Avicenna, primitive self-awareness is neither: (1) an activity of any discrete *part* or *faculty* within the soul; hence it does not have any particular part of the soul as its object; nor (2) is it awareness of the soul's essential nature or quiddity; nor (3) is it awareness of the aggregate or totality of the soul's collected parts.

4.1 Parts and Faculties

That self-awareness cannot pertain to a part of the soul in the sense of a particular faculty within the soul follows directly from the claim that the sole object of primitive self-awareness is one's individual identity. Since the self is not identical with any one of its parts or faculties, self-awareness cannot be reducible to any limited form of reflexive understanding by one cognitive faculty to the exclusion of the others, even though the individual faculties of the soul are all capable, at least in a limited way, of reflexive awareness of their own activities. When such reflexive awareness occurs, it is not primitive, but a form of second-order awareness or knowing that one knows:

> And as for awareness, you are aware of your identity (*huwīyah-ka*), but yet you are not aware of any one of your faculties such that it is the object of awareness. For then you would not be aware of yourself but of some part of yourself. And if you were aware of yourself not through your self, but rather through a faculty such as sensation or imagination, then the object of awareness would not be [the same as] that which is aware, and along with your awareness of yourself you would be aware that you are aware of your soul (*bi-nafsi-ka*) and that you are the one who is aware of your soul.[28]

In this passage and remarks elsewhere, Avicenna tends to focus on the impossibility of the corporeal faculties of sensation and imagination being the powers by which the soul is aware of itself, in the same way that he tends to associate the unmediated character of self-awareness with the denial that self-awareness is a sensory act. Nonetheless, the analysis on which Avicenna's point is based does not depend in any special way upon the corporeal basis of sensation—the senses simply provide the most vivid examples of mediated and partial knowledge of the self. Thus, even in one passage where he is responding to a specific question about the soul's ability to understand itself intellectually, Avicenna quickly reverts to counter-examples based upon the limitations of the senses. The response here adds another dimension to the denial that self-awareness can be attributed to the activity of any particular faculty within the soul, for Avicenna eliminates not only reflexive awareness by a faculty of its own acts, but also the grasp of any one part of the soul by another. In such cases the identity criterion for self-awareness is doubly violated, since neither the subject nor the object of awareness is identical with the soul in its totality:

> And if this power is subsistent through a body, and your soul is not subsistent in this body, then that which is aware of this body through that faculty would belong to something separate through another form. So there is no awareness of yourself in this case in any way, and no apprehension of yourself through what is proper to it (*bi-khuṣūṣīyati-hā*).[29]

> Rather, some body would sense with something other than itself, in the way that you sense your leg with your hand.[30]

While the example here centres on the limitations of the senses, the conclusion would seem to be universally applicable to all parts of the soul. To the extent that any cognitive faculty functions as an instrument by which the soul performs a determinate range of activities directed towards a determinate class of objects, its operations will violate the identity criterion for self-awareness, regardless of whether or not the faculty in question uses bodily organs in the performance of those acts.

4.2 Universal and Quidditative Knowledge

Despite his tendency to focus on examples drawn from the senses, Avicenna does admit that primitive self-awareness cannot be an act of the intellect in any standard sense. He denies, for example, that self-awareness is implicit in the act of understanding the general concept "soul" or "humanity" which I exemplify as a particular instance, on the grounds that one cannot simultaneously be aware of a whole as well as one of parts. In this case the "whole" is not the self, however, but the universal, and the "part" is not a faculty of the soul, but rather, my self as a particular instance falling under a universal class:

> Next he was asked, "And how do I perceive the general intention of the soul; and am I at the same time also aware of my individual soul?" He answered, "No, it is not possible to be aware of something as well as one of its divisions (*wa-tajzi'ah-hu*)."[31]

While the denial that self-awareness can be accomplished by any isolated part or faculty of the soul thus applies as much to the intellect as to the senses, it is more common to find Avicenna arguing against the identification of self-awareness as an act of intellection on the grounds that self-awareness neither consists in nor supervenes upon universal knowledge of the soul's essential nature:

> After this he was asked: "And if I understand the soul through the general intention, am I in that case a soul absolutely, not a particularized, individuated soul; so am I therefore every soul?" The reply: "There is a difference between the absolute considered in itself and universality. For universality is what is said of every soul which has another consideration; and one of these two is a part of my soul, the other is not.[32]

In this passage Avicenna appeals to the distinction between quiddity and universality articulated in Book 5 of the *Metaphysics* of the *Healing*. On this account of universals, any object that I know *exists* in my intellect, and in virtue of that mental existence its quiddity acquires the additional property of universality. An intelligible universal is thus an instance of some quiddity—in this case "humanity"—enjoying a form of conceptual existence in which it is combined with the properties peculiar to that realm of existence.[33] This entails, as Avicenna here indicates, that when any absolute quiddity is instantiated in mental existence it is but one *part* or constituent of the resultant universal. By the same token, when the quiddity "humanity" is combined with a set of properties peculiar to concrete, extramental existence to form an individual human, it once again is but a part or

constituent of an entirely distinct entity. Thus, while my own proper self and my universal concept of "human being" *share* the same essence or quiddity, "humanity," "humanity" itself is not completely *identical* with either my self nor that concept. While there is *partial* identity between my universal concept of "human" or "soul" and my self, then, the identity is not complete. So on these grounds too intellectual knowledge even of my own nature fails to meet the identity criterion for primitive self-awareness.

The understanding of the universal under which my own nature falls is thus neither necessary nor sufficient for self-awareness. Indeed, as Avicenna notes in the first of the two passages cited above,[34] to the extent that the universal and the particular are two different sorts of cognitive objects, when I am actively contemplating the universal "human," any explicit awareness of my individual self will be precluded by another axiom of Avicenna's cognitive psychology, namely, that the soul can only consciously think of one intelligible at a time: "For it is not in the capacity of our souls to understand intelligible things together in a single instant."[35] With this we have yet another explanation for Avicenna's claim that primitive self-awareness must in most instances be differentiated from conscious attention. For by and large my everyday conscious thoughts are focused on objects *other* than my own individual identity and existence, and I cannot, on Avicennian principles, actively and consciously attend to my individual existence while at the same time actively thinking other thoughts. That is why, one presumes, thought experiments like the Flying Man are needed.

4.3 Collections of Parts

Thus far I have considered Avicenna's grounds for rejecting two of the three candidates that might be put forward as sources of self-awareness—one of the soul's particular cognitive faculties, or its intellectual understanding of its own essential nature. But Avicenna also rejects the claim that self-awareness might be nothing more than our perception of the total aggregate or collection of our various parts. One question posed in the *Investigations* wonders whether a human being just is the collection of his parts (*jumlah-hu*), and if so, whether the totality of that collection constitutes the object of his awareness. In response Avicenna argues that self-awareness cannot be equated with awareness of the sum total of one's parts, since it is possible to be aware of one's individual existence while lacking awareness of the collection in its entirety. This follows from Avicenna's claim that self-awareness is the very existence of the self and thus something that is always present at every moment in which the self subsists. But the totality of one's parts does not display any stability and continuity, for those parts change over time, and many of them are hidden from us under ordinary circumstances. Avicenna casts the "hidden parts" argument as an inference based on the mutability and hiddenness of our internal organs, an emphasis that might once again lead us to suppose that the main impediment to self-awareness here derives from the bodily side of our selves:[36]

> For many a person who is aware of the being of his existence (*bi-wujūdi ānīyati-hi*) is not aware of the collection, and were it not for autopsy there would have been no knowledge of a heart, nor a brain, nor any principal nor subordinate organ. Whereas before all this he was aware of his existence. Moreover, if the object of awareness remains an object of awareness while, for example, something of the collection is separated in such a way that there is no sensing of it, in the way that a limb is cut off from an anaesthetized amputee, then it is conceivable that this could happen to him and he would not sense it, nor be aware that the collection has been altered, whereas he would be aware of his self, that it is his self, as if he had not been altered. And as for the thing from the collection which is other than the collection, it is either the case that it is an internal organ or an external organ. And it may be that none of the internal organs is an object of awareness at all, but existence (*al-ānīyah*) is an object of awareness prior to autopsy. And that of which there is awareness is different from that of which there is no awareness. And the external organs may be missing or changed, whereas the existence of which we are aware is one thing in its being an object of awareness as an individual unity (*waḥdatan shakhṣīyatan*).[37]

In its appeal to the constancy of my awareness of the individual unity that is my self, even in the absence of complete awareness of my bodily members, this line of reasoning appears to commit the same suspect fallacy of which the Flying Man argument is often accused: I am aware of my self; I am not aware of the totality of my parts; therefore my self is distinct from the totality. But Avicenna's distinction between primitive self-awareness and conscious thought lessens the sophistical appearance of the argument in the present context, and it allows us to give the argument a purely epistemological interpretation. On the basis of that distinction, the "ignorance" of our brains or hearts to which Avicenna refers cannot be understood as a simple failure to be *conscious* of them. So the argument merely illustrates the epistemological conclusion that primitive self-awareness is not the *same kind* of knowledge as bodily consciousness: it tells us nothing about the underlying nature of the self nor its distinction from the collection.

Yet if we follow this line of interpretation, we will also be prohibited from identifying primitive self-awareness as identical with any conscious state of an immaterial mind or soul. For it can surely be claimed that non-philosophers and materialists lack *consciousness* of their non-material parts as well, that is, of their immaterial minds and rational souls, despite the continuity of their self-awareness. That is, after all, what allows them to be materialists. So if Avicenna's argument here is meant to apply to bodily parts in particular, and not equally to the immaterial faculties of the soul, it is inadequate. What it does establish is that if self-awareness is indeed a necessary concomitant of our existence underlying all our derivative conscious states, it must be an entirely different mode of knowing from any of those states, be they sensible or intellectual.

5 Individuation and Self-Awareness

We have seen, then, that despite a few indications to the contrary, Avicenna generally appears to recognize that he cannot draw any determinate conclusions regarding the nature of the self based on his analysis of self-awareness alone. Given the very primitiveness of that state, the most one can do is to establish

what self-awareness is not. But there is one suspect presupposition that continues to inform Avicenna's discussions of primitive self-awareness, and that is the assumption that there *is* an underlying self of some sort which is, at a bare minimum, a single, individual unity to which all the soul's manifold activities are somehow ultimately referred.

The problem that is lurking here is one which brings Avicenna up against the anomalies in his dualistic account of human nature. Avicenna claims that human souls are subsistent entities in their own right, and yet, since there are multiple individuals in the species "human," those individuals can only be distinguished from one another by the diversity of their matter.[38] If the self is indeed a unity, as Avicenna's account of self-awareness implies, and if its unifying function is incompatible with corporeality, then self-awareness would seem to be a function of the soul itself.[39] But Avicenna has admitted, perhaps reluctantly, that self-awareness cannot be a function of the intellect, since the self is not a universal. So we are faced with the question, what mode of cognition corresponds to a self that is at once subsistent and individual, but not entirely immaterial, and not the sole exemplar of its own nature or quiddity? The dilemma that Avicenna faces here is nicely captured in the *Investigations*:

> He was asked: By what faculty do we perceive our particular selves? For the soul's apprehension of intentions is either through the intellective faculty—but the awareness of the particular self (*al-dhāt al-juz'īy*) is not intellected; or through the estimative faculty—but the estimative faculty apprehends intentions conjoined to images. And it has been shown that I am aware of my essence even if I am not aware of my limbs and do not imagine my body.[40]

Avicenna's immediate response to the problem is simply to note that the impediment to the intellectual understanding of an individual is matter, which is intrinsically unintelligible, not individuality *per se.* Hence, if there is some aspect of the human soul's individuation that is not simply reducible to matter and material accidents, the individual self may in some way be intelligible. Still, Avicenna remains non-committal as to the exact faculty to which primitive self-awareness should be traced:

> He answered: It has been shown that the universal intention is not apprehended through a body, and that the individual intention which is individuated through material accidents to a determinate magnitude and a determinate place is not perceived without a body; but it has not been shown that the particular cannot be apprehended at all without a body, nor that the particular cannot be converted into the judgement of the universal. Rather, when the individuation of the particular is not by means of magnitude, place, and the like, then there is no hindrance to the one's being aware of it—so I suppose it would be the intellect. The impossibility of this has not been shown anywhere. And there is no harm in there being a material cause of this individual, and of its being a material thing in some respect, so long as the concomitant individuating form is not itself a material form, but is instead one of the forms characteristic of that whose individuation is not through a body. The intellect or the intellective soul cannot, however, perceive an individual particular by means of material forms with magnitude.[41]

Even if we grant that the material aspects of human nature in and of themselves do not rule out the possibility of an intellectual grasp of ourselves as individuals, it is difficult to see how such knowledge would fit the account that Avicenna has

given of primitive self-awareness. When Avicenna does attempt to describe more precisely how such intellectual self-awareness might be accomplished, the explanation turns on the possibility of singling out an individual by means of its accidents through a process whereby I understand myself by combining my grasp of "humanity" with my understanding of properties that are peculiar to me:[42]

> So he replied: If this self-awareness is not called an "intellection" (*'aqlan*), but rather, the term "intellection" is proper to what belongs to the awareness of the abstract universal, then one could say that my awareness of myself is not an intellection and that I do not understand my self. But if every perception of what subsists abstractly is called an "intellection," it need not be granted that every intelligible of everything is a universal intention subsisting through its definition. Though perhaps if it is to be granted, it is only granted in the case of external intelligibles; nonetheless it is certain this is not to be granted absolutely. For not everything has a definition, nor is every intelligible just a simple concept, but rather, the thing may be understood through its states, so that its definition is perceived mixed with its accidents. In this way, when I understand my self I understand a definition to which is conjoined an inseparable accident (*'ārid lāzim*).[43]

Avicenna's point, then, seems to be we can conceptualize complex intelligibles such as "laughing human" or "political human," and that these concepts can provide a model for intellectual self-awareness of our individual identities. My understanding of my self on that model would consist of the definition of "human" plus a series of necessary accidents conjoined to that definition, which in concert would contract that definition to pick out me alone.[44] But there are obvious difficulties with this solution. From a metaphysical perspective, it is not clear what property or set of properties could count as a necessary accident singling out my individual self, since Avicenna generally rejects bundle theories of individuation.[45] More importantly in the present context, however, this model seems to lack entirely the immediacy which is the characteristic feature of primitive self-awareness. Even if it is indeed possible for me to grasp my own individuality intellectually through a process such as the one just described, such an intellection could in no sense be counted as one in which I am simply aware of my individual existence and identity prior to any conscious awareness I have of either my essence or my attributes.

Avicenna's account of primitive self-awareness thus seems to require a different paradigm of intelligibility which would allow for direct acquaintance with an immaterial particular. In a few places Avicenna indicates that such an account might be developed on the basis of parallels between self-awareness and sensible observation. This, at least, is implied by Avicenna's inclusion of propositions expressing self-awareness under the category of "observational" (*al-mushāhadāt*) premises in the *Directives,* a category which is principally comprised of sensible propositions such as "the sun is shining," and "fire is hot." In this context, however, Avicenna does not distinguish sharply between primitive self-awareness and our awareness of our mental states, since the task at hand is to classify propositions based upon their reliability, rather than to explore the cognitive processes that underlie them.[46] So these propositions have already been filtered by the intellect and no longer display the immediacy of the perceptual acts on which they are based. In the *Notes* too Avicenna compares self-awareness to the knowledge we gain of an individual by direct acquaintance (*al-ma'rifah*) and through observation

(*al-mushāhadah*).[47] But ultimately Avicenna fails to develop these suggestions in any comprehensive way, so that the exact nature of primitive self-awareness remains somewhat mysterious.

6 Second-Order Awareness and Knowing that One knows

Thus far I have focused solely on Avicenna's account of primitive self-awareness, since that is the form of self-knowledge to which Avicenna devotes the most attention. But Avicenna does not entirely neglect other forms of self-knowledge, and in the course of his accounts of self-awareness he often invokes the distinction between primitive self-awareness on the one hand, and awareness *that* we are aware on the other hand. Whereas primitive self-awareness is a form of innate knowledge and thus is of a piece with the soul's very existence, awareness *of* awareness is something which we must acquire through conscious effort:

> As for its awareness that it is aware of itself, this it has through acquisition. And for this reason it does not know that it is aware of itself, and likewise for the rest of the things for which it acquires the power to become aware. And this is something which is not existent in it, which it needs to procure for itself.[48]

Unlike primitive self-awareness, whose exact character remains obscure despite its pervasiveness, awareness that we are aware is an intellectual act, and hence it is always at the level of actual conscious thought:

> But our being aware that we are aware is an activity of the intellect. Self-awareness belongs to the soul in actuality, for it is always aware of itself. And as for the awareness of the awareness, it is potential. And if the awareness of the awareness were actual, it would always be [so], and there would be no need for the consideration of the intellect.[49]

At first glance it might appear that this acquired form of awareness is the Avicennian counterpart to the traditional Aristotelian conception of self-awareness as an act concomitant with the understanding of other things. Yet there are reasons to think that such a comparison is not entirely apt. Avicenna's model is clearly a propositional one, whereas the Aristotelian notion of an awareness that is concomitant with our knowledge of an object seems prior to any propositional judgment. I suspect, however, that Avicenna would claim that there really is no such thing as reflexive self-awareness in the Aristotelian sense, since he rejects both of the principles upon which the Aristotelian account is based.[50] So Avicenna would probably agree that Aristotelian reflexive knowledge is either nothing but awareness that we are aware, and hence it is indeed propositional; or that it offers a flawed account of primitive self-awareness and is to be rejected outright. Similarly, it is not clear whether our intellectual grasp of our own natures or quiddities—i.e., our simple understanding of the intelligibles "human" and "soul"—would count as instances of awareness *that* we are aware in Avicenna's eyes. Here too it seems unlikely that Avicenna would consider such knowledge to be a form of second-order *awareness*. For in order to

count as "awareness," it would seem necessary for the knower to apply the concept "human" to her understanding of herself. Failing that, her knowledge of humanity would seem to constitute *self*-knowledge only incidentally.

Despite his relative silence on the exact scope and nature of second-order awareness, there are a couple of short and provocative passages in which Avicenna attempts to offer some account the role it plays within human knowledge. Two functions seem paramount: (1) second-order awareness is necessary for conscious thought to occur; and (2) second-order awareness plays a role in the attainment of certitude (*al-yaqīn*).

With respect to (1), Avicenna argues that the complete identity that characterizes primitive self-awareness necessitates that a different sort of cognitive act must occur in order to acquire knowledge *that* one is aware: "For so long as you know (*ta'rifu*) yourself, you do not know that this awareness of it from yourself is yourself."[51] This is a direct consequence of Avicenna's distinction between awareness and consciousness. Since self-awareness under normal circumstances is something that we are not attentive to, it must be made the subject of conscious reflection by the intellect in order to play an active role in our cognitive pursuits. And the role that second-order awareness plays in those pursuits seems to be in its own way a central and foundational one, especially for the philosopher. For certitude, the epistemic goal at which philosophy is supposed to aim, is defined as an act of second-order knowledge.

Hence, with respect to (2), Avicenna argues, in a very compact statement prefaced to one of his accounts of primitive self-awareness, that insofar as certitude entails knowing that one knows, it is akin to and perhaps dependent on second-order awareness:

> Certitude is to know that you know, and to know that you know that you know, *ad infinitum*. And the apprehension of one's self is like this. For you apprehend your self, and you know that you apprehend it, and you know that you know that you apprehend it—*ad infinitum*."[52]

Avicenna does not make it entirely clear here whether "knowing that one knows" and "being aware that one is aware" are synonymous. Does Avicenna believe that knowing that one knows is simply a special case of second-order awareness focused on one's awareness of a particular object, or does he intend to make the stronger claim that certitude is ultimately *dependent* upon our capacity to bring primitive self-awareness to the level of conscious attention? Some remarks on the nature of our *feeling* of certitude in the *Psychology* give us reason to think that Avicenna would indeed assign self-awareness a foundational role in all certain knowledge.

In the passage in question, Avicenna presents the phenomenon of a person who feels certain that she knows the answer to some question as soon as it is posed to her, even when she has never actually worked out the point at issue before. In effect, she teaches herself as well as her audience during the course of her articulation of the reply. Avicenna's account of what is going on in such cases is somewhat problematic, although it coheres well with the general principles that are laid out in this part of the *Psychology*. What Avicenna argues is that in cases such as

these the knower is actually certain of the reply she is about to give, and that actual certitude is only possible if one's belief is indeed true and one's knowledge actual. Given the respondent's actual certitude, the knowledge in question cannot be potential, even proximately so, "because it is impossible to be certain that something actually unknown is known by him but stored away. For how could you be certain of the state of something unless the thing (*al-amr*) itself in relation to which you were certain were known?"[53]

Now in the case of our knowledge of things other than ourselves, the inference from the strength of our psychological certitude to the reality of that about which we are certain is clearly suspicious. But the point does shed light on the role that Avicenna envisages for self-awareness in the attainment of certitude. For as we've seen, primitive self-awareness is the only form of knowledge that is, from the first moment of our existence, always actually present in us. And certitude, as here described, rests on an *actual* relation between the knower and that of which she is certain. Primitive self-awareness, then, is the only form of knowledge in which the actual relation between the knower and the object known is guaranteed. Moreover, since the person who is actually certain of anything must grasp the relation between herself and the other objects of which she is certain, primitive self-awareness would also seem to be an ingredient within any additional claims we have to be certain of the nature of things other than ourselves. Certitude thus consists in the awareness that we are aware; it is not a distinct form of second-order knowledge in which primitive self-awareness plays no central role.

7 Knowing that We Know and the Problem of Infinite Regress

Avicenna's identification of certitude as a form of knowing that one knows is not unprecedented in the Islamic philosophical tradition. Al-Fārābī (ca. 870–950) had already stipulated this as one of the conditions of certitude in his discussions of the nature of demonstrative science:

> Certitude is for us to believe concerning the truth to which assent has been given that it is not at all possible for the existence of what we believe of this thing to be different from what we believe; and in addition to this, we believe concerning this belief that another [belief] than it is not possible, even to the extent that whenever there is formed some belief concerning the first belief, it is not possible in one's view for it to be otherwise, and so on *ad infinitum*.[54]

The principal function that this claim plays in al-Fārābī's epistemology is to differentiate knowledge from true opinion: while true opinions may indeed correspond with reality, al-Fārābī argues that only when we *know* that our belief in their correspondence is necessary does our opinion rise to the level of certitude. Al-Fārābī himself often uses the term "awareness" (*shu'ūr*) to explicate this second-order-knowledge, and what he appears to have in mind is a criterion that involves the subject's direct acquaintance with the evidence upon which her belief is based, the fact that it rests on the subject's "own vision."[55] This in turn entails concomitant self-awareness, al-Fārābī suggests, since I must also recognize that it is *my*

knowledge that is the guarantor of my belief. If a subject is certain of his belief, his cognitive state must be that of "someone who considers the thing at the time when he is considering it and is aware that he is considering it."[56]

One striking feature of al-Fārābī's account of knowing that one knows is the claim that certitude entails an infinite regress of second-order acts of awareness. It is this feature of al-Fārābī's criterion that Avicenna himself echoes in the *Notes,* and it is also a point of contention in a debate over second-order knowledge between al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd, 1126–1198). Al-Fārābī himself does not comment much on the infinity condition: he does not state whether the infinity is potential or actual, for example. Given the Aristotelian prohibition against actual infinites, we might presume that the regress here is necessarily potential. If I am certain of something, then I will be able, if challenged, to assert second-order, third-order, etc. claims as required, but I need not and perhaps cannot actually accept an infinity of meta-propositions. The second-order claim is sufficient to establish certain knowledge, since it secures my grasp on the evidentiary basis for my belief. Hence, there is no danger that a sophistical challenger might disturb my certitude by charging that while I may know that I know *p*, I may not *really* know that my knowledge won't falter when I reach a tenth-order or hundredth-order claim, for example.

Yet some version of the possibility of an infinite regress of self-awareness claims does seem to worry Avicenna. It is not, however, the infinite regress of second-order awareness that concerns him, but rather, the view that holds that our becoming alerted to our primitive self-awareness (as, for example, by performing the Flying Man), constitutes a *repetition* of the act of primitive self-awareness itself. This Avicenna denies: "A human being may be inattentive to his self-awareness, and be alerted to it; but he is not aware of himself twice."[57] Here, the core of Avicenna's concern seems to be the preservation of the privileged character of self-awareness amongst the soul's cognitive acts. But the prohibition against the "repetition" of our selves in ourselves does not prevent an infinite regress of acts of knowing *that* we know. Rather, second-order awareness must necessarily be of a different kind from primitive self-awareness and have a distinct object from it: there must be some form of epistemic ascent here.

The problem posed by the infinite regress of awareness resurfaces in an exchange between Avicenna's critics, al-Ghazālī and Averroes. This debate is especially instructive for our purposes since many of al-Ghazālī's claims presuppose the Avicennian paradigm of self-awareness, in which second-order awareness is a distinct act of understanding from primitive self-awareness, whereas Averroes's responses are more faithful to the traditional Aristotelian picture. Unlike Avicenna and al-Fārābī, however, al-Ghazālī, explicitly rejects the possibility of an infinite regress of second-order acts: [58]

> Rather, he knows his being a knower by another knowledge, [and so on] until this terminates in a knowledge of which he is oblivious and does not know. We do not say that this regresses *ad infinitum* but that it stops [at a point] with a knowledge relating to its object, where [the individual] is oblivious to the existence of the knowledge but not [to that] of the object known, This is similar to a person who knows blackness, being, in his state of knowing, psychologically absorbed with the object of his knowledge — namely, blackness — but

> unaware of his [act of] knowing blackness, paying no heed to it. If he pays heed to it, it will require another knowledge [and so on] until his heeding ceases.[59]

Al-Ghazālī's perspective here is ultimately far removed from Avicenna's. Al-Ghazālī seems to make self-awareness entirely dispensable to human knowledge, and its incidental character is even more pronounced than in the classical Aristotelian picture, where reflexive self-awareness, while not a necessary condition presupposed by all other knowledge, is nonetheless an inevitable by-product of it. Certainly al-Ghazālī's remarks are incompatible with the claim that certitude—that is, demonstrated, scientific knowledge—depends upon second-order acts of awareness. On al-Ghazālī's view, second-order awareness actually seems to be an *impediment* to complete awareness of the object of one's thought. For according to the above passage, in order to thwart the objectionable infinite regress of reflexive acts, we eventually posit a stage in which our absorption in the object known and our attention to it is so all-embracing that we lose ourselves entirely in the object and fail to note the otherness between it and ourselves.

Averroes's response to al-Ghazālī's remarks in the *Incoherence of the "Incoherence"* staunchly defends the Aristotelian view that self-knowledge is indistinguishable from our concomitant awareness of other things. Averroes does allow for an exception to this claim in cases where we are talking about my knowledge of my *individual* soul (*'ilm bi-nafsi-hi al-shakhṣīyah*), by which Averroes means nothing but my ability to perceive my own individuating states and actions.[60] But on Averroes's view this sort of individual self-knowledge is clearly inferior to the self-knowledge that *is* identical with what is known, since in the latter case the knower has universal, essential knowledge of "the quiddity which is proper to him." Averroes's point here is not simply that we only truly know ourselves when we have attained a scientific understanding of human nature. Rather, Averroes makes the following assertion based upon the identification of rationality as the essential difference of humanity:

> The essence of a human being (*dhāt-hu*) is nothing but his knowledge of things (*'ilm al-ashyā'*). ... The quiddity of a human is knowledge, and knowledge is the thing known in one respect and something different in another. And if he is ignorant of a certain object of knowledge (*ma'lūm mā*), he is ignorant of a part of his essence (*juz'an min-dhāti-hi*), and if he is ignorant of all knowables, he is ignorant of his essence.[61]

Despite its reliance on the identity of knower and known, Averroes's claim here is stronger than the Aristotelian position that the soul knows itself in the same way that it knows other things. The Aristotelian claim is simply that self-awareness can only occur reflexively, once another object is known. Aristotelian self-knowledge in this sense is episodic. Avicennian self-awareness, by contrast, is continuous and uninterrupted. Averroist self-knowledge, unlike either of these models, is progressive and cumulative: the acquisition of knowledge is a form of self-realization for Averroes, and hence my self-knowledge increases in proportion to the increase in my overall store of knowledge.[62]

On the basis of this stronger understanding of the identity of knower and known, Averroes denies that there could be any problem in positing an infinite regress of meta-levels of awareness. There is no need to cut off an infinite regress by

positing some mysterious stage at which the knower fails entirely to be conscious of herself, because there is nothing problematic about the sort of infinity that is implied by a series of claims that a subject knows *that* she knows:

> Now al-Ghazālī's answer, that this knowledge is a second knowledge (*'ilm thānī*) and that there is no infinite series here, is devoid of sense, for it is self-evident that this implies such a series, and it does not follow from the fact that when a man knows a thing but is not conscious that he knows the fact that he knows, that in the case when he knows that he knows, this second knowledge is an additional knowledge to the first; no, the second knowledge is one of the conditions of the first knowledge, and its infinite regress is, therefore, not impossible; if, however, it were a knowledge existing by itself and additional to the first knowledge, an infinite series could not occur.[63]

I take Averroes's point here to be the following: since my knowledge of an object is one and the same act of knowledge as my knowledge of myself, there is implicitly contained in that single knowledge a potentially infinite series of propositions asserting my knowledge *that* I know, *that* I know *that* I know, and so on. Self-knowledge is an *ingredient* within our knowledge of other things to the extent that certitude requires us to know that we know. Knowing that we know does not, then, generate an infinite series of distinct acts of knowing as al-Ghazālī maintains, and hence there is no need to terminate the series by positing some act of awareness in which self-knowledge is entirely absent. Such a move is absurd in Averroes's eyes, not the least because it places a form of ignorance at the core of the explanation of knowledge. There is no little irony in the fact that much the same objection could be made against the function that Avicenna assigns to primitive self-awareness: both primitive self-awareness and self-absorption into the object known rest our knowledge on modes of awareness that lie below the threshold of consciousness and that, as such, remain actually unknown.

8 Conclusion

It is clear from the many attempts that Avicenna makes to clarify the nature of primitive self-awareness that he considered it to be a fundamental principle in his own philosophy and a necessary and important corrective of the prevailing philosophical view that made self-awareness of secondary importance in the explication of human knowledge. It appears from his various characterizations of primitive self-awareness that emphasize its utter basicality and complete self-identity that Avicenna believed that some such state of pre-conscious awareness was necessary to ground the *unity* of the human being as the single knowing subject to which her diverse cognitions, grounded in various faculties, are referred. It is this concern with the unity of awareness, rather than the desire to establish the immateriality of that unifying subject, that is of paramount importance to Avicenna, even in the Flying Man experiment—a point which is attested to by Avicenna's decision to incorporate two of the three versions of the Flying Man into arguments for the unity of the soul.[64]

Nonetheless, it is impossible to deny that Avicenna is strongly attracted by the possibility of moving from an analysis of the primitiveness and simplicity of self-awareness to the conclusion that a being possessed of this capacity cannot be essentially corporeal. Thus in both the contexts in which the Flying Man is used to support the unity of the soul Avicenna eventually makes the additional claim that no body could act as the unifying or binding entity that he has discovered. And while Avicenna is in general careful to differentiate primitive self-awareness from simple intellectual understanding, his focus is in most instances fixed on establishing its non-sensory character.

More fundamentally, it seems reasonable to suppose that Avicenna's insistence on the necessity of positing some unifying principle of awareness is itself rooted in his commitment to the subsistence of the human soul and the merely relational character of its link to the body. It can hardly be an empirical inference, after all, for by Avicenna's own admission primitive self-awareness, as such, is prior to all conscious thought. Yet Avicenna's claim that self-awareness is indistinguishable from the very existence of the human soul follows quite naturally on the assumption that the fundamental attribute of the separate intellects—that of being always actually engaged in a "thinking of thinking"—must also be manifested in human intellects if they are to be intellects at all.[65] While Avicenna may agree with Aristotle that the human soul is indeed in mere potency to objects of knowledge *other* than itself, if the soul is essentially immaterial and rational, then there can be no point in its existence at which it is not in some sense actually cognitive. To the extent that the human soul is truly an intellective soul, it must have the characteristic property of all subsistent intellects, that of being actually intelligible to itself. No intellect can ever be empty of this bare minimum of self-awareness. The Aristotelian view of self-knowledge, then, can be accommodated into Avicennian psychology to a limited extent. But that view, like the more basic characterization of the soul as the form or perfection of the body, captures only those limited aspects of human knowledge that pertain to its temporal—and temporary—physical state.

Notes

1. *De anima* 3.4, 429a23–24.
2. Aristotle, *De anima* 3.4, 430a1–2, and more generally to 430a9. Cf. 429b5–9. All translations of Aristotle are from Barnes 1984. For parallel remarks regarding sensible self-awareness, see *De anima* 3.2, 425b12–13, and more generally to 426a26. The claim that the intellect can only think itself after it has thought some other object is in turn a consequence of the principle of cognitive identification according to which the knower in some way becomes the object known in the act of perceiving or thinking. See *De anima* 2.5, 417a18–20; 418a3–6; 3.4, 429b29–30a1; 3.7, 431a1–6; 3.8, 431b20–432a1.
3. The Flying Man was popular amongst medieval readers of the Latin Avicenna, and modern commentators have often compared it to the *cogito* of Descartes. It occurs three times in Avicenna's major philosophical writings: twice in the *Psychology* of the *Healing* (1.1, p. 13 and 5.7, p. 225), and once in *Directives* p. 119. There is a vast literature on the Flying Man. Some important recent articles are Marmura 1986; Druart 1988; Hasnawi 1997. For the influence on the Latin West, see Gilson 1929–30, pp. 39–42; Hasse 2000, pp. 80–92.

The label "Flying Man" is not Avicenna's; as far as I can tell, it originates with Gilson 1929–30, p. 41 n. 1.

4. For the nature of these works and their place in Avicenna's philosophical development, see Gutas 1988, pp. 141–44, and Reisman 2002. Many relevant passages from the *Investigations* have been discussed and translated into French in Pines 1954.
5. I translate *shu'ūr* throughout as "awareness," which is the most natural English equivalent. While the term usually denotes self-awareness, it is occasionally used more broadly for awareness of other objects. See *Notes* pp. 30, 148, 162. In such cases it is close in meaning to *idrāk*, "apprehension" or "perception" (taken broadly without restriction to sensation).
6. The *Notes* and *Discussions* also consider the relation between animal and human self-awareness, where the former includes a human being's awareness of the activities taking place within the animal powers of her soul. On this see Black 1993, especially pp. 236–39.
7. *Kāmil* is a technical term in Islamic philosophy, and in Avicenna's psychology the cognate term *kamāl* is equivalent to the Greek *entelecheia*—"perfection" or "actuality"—used by Aristotle in the definition of the soul as the "first perfection of a natural body" (ἡ ψυχή ἐστιν ἐντελέχεια ἡ πρώτη σώματος φυσικοῦ; *De anima* 2.1, 412a27–29; 412b5–6). Given that one version of the Flying Man occurs at the end of Avicenna's discussion of soul as entelechy (*Psychology* 1.1), one might suppose that Avicenna intends us to take *kāmil* here in its technical sense. But I am inclined to read it more colloquially as meaning something like "mature." The purpose of this portion of the thought experiment is to force us to bracket any knowledge we have gained from experience, while still presupposing we have the full intellectual capacities of an adult. But if *kāmil* refers to the soul as a "first perfection," then the state of a newly born *infant* would also be included; and if it refers to the soul as a "second perfection," then the soul would no longer seem to be in a pristine state, and this would render the experiment unable to alert us to the *primitiveness* of self-awareness. For a comprehensive study of Avicenna's account of the soul as perfection, and of his teleology in general, see Wisnovsky 2003, especially pp. 113–41.
8. Anscombe 1975, pp. 152, 156 proposes a similar thought experiment involving sensory deprivation. One interesting difference between the Flying Man and accounts of self-awareness and personal identity in modern philosophy is Avicenna's claim that *memories* as well as occurrent sensations can be bracketed without threatening personal identity.
9. *Directives* 119.
10. This is the language of *Psychology* 1.1, p. 13. Avicenna uses the phrase *wujūd dhāti-ka* as well as *wujūd annīyati-hi* in 5.7, p. 225; at *Directives* p. 119, *annīyati-hā* is used. *Annīyah* is a technical neologism within classical Islamic philosophy commonly rendered as "existence" or "individual existence." For its origins see Frank 1956; d'Alverny 1959.
11. *Psychology* 5.7, p. 226.
12. See below at nn. 28–31.
13. This distinction is a variation on the distinction between necessary or innate (*ḍarūrī*) and acquired (*muktasab*) knowledge common among the *mutakallimūn.* On this see Marmura 1975, pp. 104–5; Dhanani 1994, pp. 22–38. For the role of the Flying Man argument in Avicenna's attempts to refute the Muʿtazilite view of the soul and its self-awareness, see Marmura 1986, pp. 383–84.
14. *Notes* p. 160; cf. *Notes* pp. 30 and 79.
15. Ibid., p. 161.
16. Ibid., p. 161. Avicenna goes on to draw an analogy with our need to know who Zayd is prior to identifying any properties as belonging to him. See n. 47 below.
17. Ibid., p. 161.
18. *Notes* pp. 147 and 79–80.
19. *Directives* p. 119: "The self of the sleeper in his sleep and the drunkard in his drunkenness will not slip away from himself, even if its representation to himself is not fixed in his memory."
20. *Investigations*, §380, p. 210.

21. For the parallel between primary intelligibles and the Flying Man, cf. Marmura 1986, p. 394 n. 6.
22. Compare Avicenna's distinction between awareness and conscious thought with a similar distinction later drawn by Leibniz, in which memory plays a key role: "Mais je suis étonné comment il ne vous est pas venus dans la pensée que nous avons une infinité de connaissances, dont nous ne nous apercevons pas toujours, pas même lorsque nous en avons besoin, c'est à la mémoire de les garder, et à la réminiscence de nous les répresenter" (*New Essays*, pp. 76–77). For the comparison with Leibniz, cf. Pines, 1954, p. 31.
23. *Psychology* 5.6, p. 217. As far as sense memory is concerned, we should recall that the Flying Man explicitly brackets sense memories as well as occurrent sensations.
24. See *Psychology* 5.5, pp. 208–9, for example.
25. For Avicenna's refutation of cognitive identification as a general feature of human cognition, see *Psychology* 5.6, pp. 212–213, and *Directives* p. 180. Avicenna does not recognize the identity of knower and known as an Aristotelian principle—which it obviously is—and he claims instead that it is an innovation of Porphyry. For discussion of this point see Black 1999b, pp. 58–60.
26. *Notes*, pp. 147–48. While this passage uses *huwīyah* to describe relation between the subject and object of self-awareness, other texts also use *huwīyah* to designate the object itself. See *Investigations* §55, p. 134; §370, p. 207; and §424, pp. 221–222.
27. Sensible awareness is by definition mediated, since both the external and internal senses require bodily organs. On this point see *Investigations* §349, p. 196; §358, p. 199; §367, p. 204; §375, p. 209; *Notes* p. 80; *Directives* p. 119. The related claim that dependence on bodily organs entails that the senses cannot be fully reflexive or aware of themselves is made in *Psychology* 5.2, pp. 191–94. For the Neoplatonic background to this claim, see Gerson 1997. Rahman 1952, pp. 103–104, pp. 111–114 discusses the parallels in the Greek commentators.
28. *Investigations* §55, p. 134. Cf. §424, p. 221.
29. This expression is not common in the texts on self-awareness that I have examined, but it appears to be more or less synonymous with *huwīyah*. Cf. the use of *mutakhaṣṣah* at *Investigations* §427, p. 223.
30. *Investigations* §424, pp. 221–222.
31. Ibid., §332, p. 192.
32. Ibid., §331, p. 192. Similar allusions to Avicenna's accounts of quiddity and universality are found in several other passages on the nature of self-awareness, for example, *Investigations* §372, pp. 208–9 (cited at n. 43 below); §422, p. 221; and §426, pp. 222–223.
33. *Metaphysics* 5.1-2. For a general overview of this aspect of Avicenna's metaphysics, see Marmura 1992; for the theory of mental existence implied by this account, see Black 1999b, pp. 48–62.
34. At n. 31 above.
35. *Psychology* 5.6, p. 214.
36. Likewise, in *Psychology* 5.5, p. 209, the term *jumlah*—"aggregate" or "collection"—is employed to explain the limited capacity of the senses to grasp true unity.
37. *Investigations*, §370, p. 207; the question posed here refers explicitly to the Flying Man "hypothesis" (*al-farḍ*) in the *Shifā'*. Cf. *Investigations*, §§357–358, p. 199; *Directives* pp. 119–121; *Psychology* 5.7, pp. 225–26.
38. For a recent discussion of the philosophical issues facing Avicenna on this point, see Druart 2000.
39. Avicenna argues at length for the unity of the soul in *Psychology* 5.7, and both this version of the Flying Man and the version in the *Directives* are intended to focus attention on the unity of the self as much as on its incorporeality.
40. *Investigations* §371, p. 208.
41. Ibid., §371, p. 208.
42. At *Investigations* §427, p. 223, Avicenna suggests that this is also the model whereby we should understand how the separated soul would be aware of itself.
43. *Investigations* §372, p 208.

44. Cf. *Investigations* §426, pp. 222–23, in which Avicenna makes a similar point in the course of comparing self-awareness with our knowledge of other humans.
45. See especially *Isagoge* 1.12, pp. 70–71; translation in Marmura 1979, pp. 50–52; for an overview of Avicenna's account of individuation, see Bäck 1994, pp. 39–53.
46. *Directives* p. 56.
47. *Notes* p. 161. "Acquaintance" (*ma'rifah*) is usually identified by Avicenna as a perceptual act performed by the senses and differentiated from intellectual knowledge. See especially *Demonstration* 1.3, p. 58: "The perception of particulars is not knowledge, but rather, acquaintance (*laysa 'ilman bal ma'rifatan*)." But as is noted in Marmura 1986, p. 387, Avicenna also uses the cognate term *'ārif*, common in discussions of mystical knowledge, to describe the act of self-awareness one experiences in the Flying Man.
48. *Notes* p. 30; cf. *Notes* p. 147.
49. *Notes* p. 161. Cf. *Investigations* §380, p. 210 (cited at n. 20 above), where Avicenna treats the *memory* of self-awareness as a form of awareness that we are aware.
50. That is: (1) cognitive identification; and (2) the claim that the rational soul has no nature of its own prior to thinking of other objects. Cf. above at nn. 1, 2, and 25.
51. *Notes* p. 161.
52. Ibid., p. 79.
53. *Psychology* 5.6, pp. 214–15.
54. Al-Fārābī, *Demonstration*, p. 20. Cf. *Conditions* p. 97.
55. For al-Fārābī's use of *shu'ūr* and cognates, see *Conditions* pp. 98–99.
56. *Conditions*, pp. 100–101.
57. *Notes* p. 147; cf. *Investigations* §425–26, pp. 222–223; and §422: "And attention [to the reality known] is not existent for it three times, but rather, its abstraction itself is in us; otherwise it would proceed to infinity."
58. It is worth noting, however, that in *Niche* c.1, §18, p. 8. Al-Ghazālī paints the possibility of such a regress in more positive terms: "Finally, it perceives its own knowledge of something, the knowledge of its knowledge of that thing, and its knowledge of its knowledge of its knowledge. Hence, in this single instance the intellect's capacity is infinite."
59. Al-Ghazālī, *Incoherence*, Discussion 6, §37, p. 106.
60. Averroes, *Incoherence*, Discussion 6, §51, pp. 335–336; Van Den Bergh 1954, pp. 200–201.
61. Ibid., p. 336; Van Den Bergh 1954, p. 201, slightly modified.
62. This is not surprising, of course, since the cumulative view of self-knowledge forms the core of the traditional doctrines of the acquired intellect (*al-'aql al-mustafād*) and conjunction (*ittiṣāl*) with the Agent Intellect; on this see Black 1999a.
63. Averroes, *Incoherence* §81, p. 351; Van Den Bergh 1954, p. 211.
64. Those in *Psychology* 5.7 and *Directives* p. 121; cf. n. 39 above.
65. So in *Psychology* 5.6, Avicenna's most sustained discussion of human knowledge, he consistently evokes the cognition of the separate intellects as his model of what understanding is, and then modifies this model where necessary in order to fit the exigencies of "ensouled knowledge"(*'ilm nafsānīyah*, p. 215).

Abbreviations

Primary Texts are Cited by the Following Abbreviated Titles

Averroes: 1930 (1954), *Incoherence: Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (*The Incoherence of "The Incoherence"*), ed. by M. Bouyges, Beirut, Imprimerie Catholique, Trans. in Van Den Bergh 1954.

Avicenna: 1892, *Directives: Al-Ishārāt wa-t-tanbīhāt* (*Directives and Reminders*), ed. by J. Forget, Leiden.

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Al-Ghazālī: 1998, *Niche: Mishkāt al-anwār* (*The Niche of Lights*), ed. and trans. by David Buchman, Provo, Utah, Brigham Young University Press.
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