

# ARISTOTLE AND THE ARABIC TRADITION

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107101739](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107101739)

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First published 2015

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Aristotle and the Arabic tradition / edited by Ahmed Alwishah, Josh Hayes.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-107-10173-9

1. Philosophy, Arab. 2. Islamic philosophy. 3. Aristotle – Influence. I. Alwishah, Ahmed, editor.

B741.A737 2015

181'.92--dc23

2015008924

ISBN 978-1-107-10173-9 Hardback

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## *Avicenna on self-cognition and self-awareness*

*Ahmed Alwishah*

The concepts of self-awareness (*al-shu'ūr bi-l-dhāt/nafs*) and self-cognition (*ta'aqqul al-dhāt/nafs*) are fundamental to the writings of Avicenna's psychology. Perhaps Avicenna was the first in the history of philosophy to distinguish between these two states of self-knowledge. In this chapter, I will show how Avicenna departs from Aristotle's theory of self-knowledge by presenting an important distinction between self-cognition and self-awareness. With this distinction, Avicenna demonstrates how the limitation of self-cognition in affirming the individuation and essentiality of self-knowledge can be overcome by postulating the state of self-awareness. Unlike self-cognition, self-awareness is identified with (a) a direct access to the identity and the individuation of the self, (b) an essential sameness between the self and its object, and (c) a continuous state – for to be a self is to be aware of itself. I will show that while self-awareness and self-cognition represent different states, they are connected through the epistemic moments of reflexive attention and an awareness of awareness to provide a broader understanding of self-knowledge. Finally, while Aristotle and Avicenna disagree on applying the key attributes of self-awareness to the human rational soul, they agree on applying them to the divine intellect. However, I will show that Avicenna's characterization of the object of divine self-thinking is substantially different from Aristotle's account. Avicenna's view of the distinction and the relation between self-awareness and self-cognition provides both a critical understanding and a necessary assessment of the complexity of human self-knowledge.

### **I The distinction between self-cognition and self-awareness**

At the outset it is important to sketch Aristotle's view of self-knowledge and to see how it is essentially distinguished from Avicenna's notions of self-cognition and self-awareness. In *De Anima* III. 4, Aristotle asserts

that the intellect is possible until it thinks. This sense of possibility is different from the possibility that precedes “the acquisition of knowledge by learning or discovery” (*De Anima* III. 4, 429b8–9)<sup>1</sup> it is the possibility to think itself. Aristotle offers two reasons why the intellect thinks itself and why the intellect is the same as its object. First, the object of the thought is immaterial, “thought is itself thinkable in exactly the same way as its objects are. For in the case of objects which involve no matter, what thinks and what is thought are identical” (*De Anima* III.4, 430a3–5). Aristotle makes it clear that there are two kinds of objects of thought; one “with matter” and other “without matter,” and only the latter is the object of self-thinking. That is to say when the intellect becomes an object of its thinking and given that this object is immaterial, the intellect becomes one with it. Second, the intellect “shares the nature of the object of thought” (*Metaphysics* XII.7, 1072b20). The intellect grasps itself as an object of thought and thus thinks itself.<sup>2</sup> But does the intellect always think itself? For Aristotle, the answer to this question is contingent upon whether we are speaking of the passive or active intellect. In *De Anima* III.4, 430a5, Aristotle claims that the intellect which lacks actuality is not always thinking. In contrast, at *De Anima* III.5, 430a20–25, Aristotle judges the active intellect which is immortal to be always in the state of thinking.

Many points can be derived from Aristotle’s remarks on self-knowledge, but in relation to the scope of this study, one can deduce three key principles:

- A. When the intellect thinks of an object, the intellect thinks itself.
- B. If the object of the intellect is immaterial, the intellect and its object are one and the same.
- C. The intellect (with the exception of the active intellect) is not always thinking itself.

Throughout his corpus, Avicenna endorses these three principles of Aristotle’s notion of self-thinking. With respect to (A), Avicenna upholds that “if the intellect is cognizing something else, it must cognize itself.”<sup>3</sup> Following Aristotle, Avicenna affirms that in cognizing an object the intellect must cognize itself. Like many previous philosophers, Avicenna

<sup>1</sup> *De Anima* III.4, 430a3–5. All translations of Aristotle’s works are taken from Aristotle 1984b.

<sup>2</sup> Oehler 1974 rightfully interprets this claim as “*nous* knows itself by means of its participation in the nature of its object. The nature of its object is to be knowable. When *nous* participates in it, it assumes the nature of its object, which thereby becomes common to both” (499).

<sup>3</sup> Avicenna 1992: §300, 121. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Arabic are my own.

affirms (B). Avicenna’s *al-Ishārāt* explicitly states that “that which in itself is denuded from material attachments . . . cognizes itself.”<sup>4</sup> With regard to (C), Avicenna’s *al-Mubāḥathāt* also insists that “my intellect does not always cognize itself but my self is always aware of its existents. For if my self cognizes in actuality something other than itself, it is always aware that it is cognizing as long as it is cognizing.”<sup>5</sup> While he affirms these three points, Avicenna (as we will show) recognizes that Aristotle’s notion of self-thinking presents one aspect of self-knowledge and fails to address the other aspect of self-knowledge, i.e. self-awareness.

In what follows, I will show that two problems lead Avicenna to distinguish between self-awareness and self-cognition. One is related to the individuation of self-cognition and the other is linked to the relation between the intellect and the other internal faculties. But before we examine these two problems in detail, it is important to mention that Avicenna paves the way for this distinction by explaining the difference between the term “awareness” (*shu‘ūr*) and the term “cognition” (*ta‘aqqul*). Unlike “awareness,” “cognition” requires the presence (*istiḥḍār*) of an object (an intelligible or intelligible form) in the intellect.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, to cognize X, X must be present as an intelligible form or concept in the intellect, whereas being aware of X requires the presence of neither in the self. Awareness is a precognitive stage that is intrinsic to the existence of the self.<sup>7</sup>

## II Self-cognition and the problem of individuation

In *al-Mubāḥathāt*, Avicenna’s disciple, Bahmanyār, presents Avicenna with the question of how one can cognize his self and whether it is possible to attain self-cognition within an individual self?<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, self-cognition requires an intelligible, but based on Aristotle’s view in *Posterior Analytics* 1.31, intelligibles must be universals – since universals are the proper objects of our understanding. With these assumptions in mind, Bahmanyār claims:<sup>9</sup>

1. To cognize something is to have it as an abstract intelligible.
2. Intelligibles are universal concepts.
3. The cognition of my self is merely a cognition of an abstract universal intelligible of the self.

<sup>4</sup> Avicenna 1957–1960, 1971: II, 371. <sup>5</sup> Avicenna 1992: §550, 185–186.

<sup>6</sup> Avicenna 1992: §239, 107–108. <sup>7</sup> See Alwishah 2006: 62, 85. <sup>8</sup> Avicenna 1992: §282, 118.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

4. But an abstract universal intelligible of the self is different from my individual self.
5. Hence, my self-cognition fails to cognize my individual self.

Bahmanyār's argument rests on the assumption that like any form of cognition, self-cognition must have a universal object and hence its grasp of the self is a grasp of the universal object of the self and not the individual self. A similar argument can be stated against Aristotle's principle (B). For if (B) is true and the object of the intellect is universal, then the intellect is not thinking of an individual intellect. Avicenna is primarily concerned with the individual self more than the individual intellect and thus directs his response to Bahmanyār's challenge by proposing the following, "If one does not call the awareness of my self a 'cognition' – for 'cognition' signifies the universal abstract type of awareness – then one may state that my awareness of my self is not a cognition and that I am not cognizing my self."<sup>10</sup>

Self-cognition has no direct access to the individual self and this type of directness is constrained only to self-awareness. Avicenna's proposal focuses the debate upon which part of the human soul is responsible for self-awareness and in which sense it is different from the intellect. As Bahmanyār claims, given that my intellect is like "the faculty in me which is aware of my individual self" (*al-quwwa allatī tash'ur minī bi-dhātī al-juz'ī*), and it is immaterial – and needs no intermediary in cognizing itself, then why cannot it cognize my individual self?<sup>11</sup> For Avicenna it is not clear that these share similar attributes. While Avicenna consistently affirms the attribute of immateriality to the intellect, he is unwilling to ascribe the attribute of "immediacy to an individual self" to the intellect. For the first time throughout his writings, Avicenna acknowledges that the cognitive faculty of intellect is different from "the faculty in me which is aware of the totality of the self." He identifies the latter to be the "rational soul" (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqā*).<sup>12</sup>

But what is unique about the rational soul and why cannot it be taken merely as an intellect? An examination of Avicenna's remarks on the rational soul reveals that it signifies different attributes of the human soul and in addition to being a cognitive faculty, it is endowed with the ability of being aware of its existence. In *'Uyūn al-hikma*, Avicenna distinguishes the rational soul according to three attributes and each is defined by the degree of its participation with a given body.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. §283, 118. <sup>11</sup> Ibid. §286, 119. <sup>12</sup> Ibid. §287, 119. <sup>13</sup> Avicenna 1996: 80.

- (a) An attribute that relates to the activity of awareness; this activity is "produced solely by the rational soul itself without the participation of the body."<sup>14</sup>
- (b) An attribute that relates to the activities produced by the rational soul with the participation of the body and its faculties, such as cognition (*ta'āqqul*), observation (*ru'ya*) of particular objects, and ethical judgments.
- (c) An attribute that relates to the activities that are taking place in the body with the participation of the rational soul such as laughter, crying, shyness, and compassion.

Clearly, Avicenna treats the part of the soul pertaining to awareness distinctively from that which concerns cognition. Every act of cognition must be included within this primitive awareness but it is not necessary that the cognition of one's awareness must be cognized by the intellect. In *al-Risāla al-aḏḥawīyya*, Avicenna claims that "the rational soul cognizes its faculty (intellect) and itself; and it cognizes that it is cognizing and there is no intermediary between it and its faculty nor between itself and that it is cognizing another faculty."<sup>15</sup> In contrast to Aristotle, there is an attribute in the rational soul that is aware of every activity occurring in the soul or with the participation of the body and such an attribute is aware of the existence of the soul regardless of whether the cognitive faculty thinks itself or an object or is not thinking at all.<sup>16</sup>

The root of the disagreement between Avicenna and Aristotle lies in their different views of what constitutes the earliest stage of the rational soul. For Aristotle, as we saw earlier, the passive intellect thinks itself only when it thinks of an object. He identifies the passive intellect to be that (a) "which can have no nature of its own, other than that of having a certain capacity," and (b) it "is, before it thinks, not actually any real thing" (*De Anima* III.4, 429a21–24). In his commentary on *De Anima*, Alexander characterizes the material (passive) intellect to be that "which

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. <sup>15</sup> Avicenna 1969b: 175.

<sup>16</sup> In *al-Risāla al-aḏḥawīyya*, Avicenna identifies "that which is aware of the individual self" to be a specific aspect of the soul in which he refers to as *annīyya* (ibid. 13). In the second version of the "floating man" and its relevant passages, he uses *annīyya* to mean something representing the identity and the core of what it is to be a human. Avicenna defines what he calls the persisting (*al-ihābiya*) *annīyya* by "that which if it is assumed to be existing and the other things which pertain to a human are assumed to be annihilated, then the core (*al-hāsil*) and identity (*al-huwiyya*) of being a human continues to exist" (ibid.). The term *annīyya* denotes a specific aspect of the rational soul, namely that which represents the identity and the continuous mode of awareness of one's existence. See Alwishah 2006: 45.

is not yet thinking, but has the potentiality to come to be like this” and that “it is without qualification a potentiality for an actuality. . . capable of receiving forms and thoughts.”<sup>17</sup> For Alexander, the passive intellect (*nous pathētikos*) is not an extant thing, but rather a disposition to perceive the intelligible forms. Avicenna takes Alexander to be interpreting (b) “the intellect before it thinks is nothing.”<sup>18</sup> In his book *al-Ta’līqāt ‘alā hawāshī kitāb al-Nafs*, Avicenna shares Theophrastus’ concern that to think of the intellect as nothing before it thinks leads to absurdity, namely that: (a) if the intellect does not think, (b) then it is nothing and (c) if that is true, then when the intellect thinks another thing, “It (the intellect) will be another thing and not itself.”<sup>19</sup>

In Avicenna’s view, when Aristotle states that this faculty “is not a thing like anything,” he does not mean that the rational soul has neither essential existence nor actual existence.<sup>20</sup> Rather, that which has no essential existence lacks the potentiality to be and to be actual.<sup>21</sup> Having established this claim, Avicenna takes (b) to mean first that the passive intellect is nothing like any of its acquired intelligible forms by referring to Aristotle’s idea that in order for the intellect to think of all the forms it must be nothing definite, and “nothing definite” does not in itself mean a thing. Second, at this early stage, the intellect lacks activity, for it is not acting upon any of its intelligible forms (*ṣuwar al-ma’qūlāt*).<sup>22</sup> Beyond its existential setting, Avicenna rejects the idea that the passive intellect has no positive nature of its own. He insists that it has an attribute (*ṣifa*) and mode (*hāl*) and “nothing which has this attribute can be mixed.”<sup>23</sup> Based on what we have discussed, it seems what Avicenna means by “mode” and “attribute” are “essential existent” and “self-awareness,” respectively. The actualization of the passive intellect is a further affirmation of the presence of self-awareness and not a reason for it to be.

According to Avicenna’s notion of the rational soul, if my intellect cognizes itself, I must be aware that I have an intellect and it is cognizing itself. In contrast, according to Aristotle’s notion of the rational soul, if my intellect thinks itself, it is not clear whether I am aware that I have an intellect that is thinking itself since what I am thinking of at the moment of actualization is that my intellect is thinking of an object.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander 2004: 106; 26–27, 107; 8–19. <sup>18</sup> Avicenna 1947b: 100.

<sup>19</sup> See Priscian of Lydia 1997, 30, 1, 27–9 trans. Huby. <sup>20</sup> Avicenna 1947b: 100. <sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. <sup>23</sup> Ibid. 101.

### III Self-cognition and the problem of identity

Another issue that invites Avicenna to draw a distinction between self-awareness and self-cognition pertains to the relation between the cognitive faculty and another faculty, the faculty of estimation. In *al-Mubāḥathāt*, this issue is presented with the following questions:

Are we cognizing ourselves? It is not clear yet whether we are cognizing it or ourselves by a material faculty or not. Does my cognitive faculty exist in a body or not? And if it does, then why can this not be the case that my cognitive faculty operates within the faculty of estimation in such a way that my estimative faculty is aware of it in the same way that the cognitive faculty is aware of the estimative faculty? Hence, it will not be the case that the cognitive faculty is aware of itself but rather it is aware of it through another in the same manner that the faculty of estimation is not aware of itself through itself but aware of it through the intellect.<sup>24</sup>

It is not surprising that the faculty of estimation, in this context, is used as a parallel to the intellect. In Avicenna’s view, there is a strong affinity between the intellect and the faculty of estimation. This faculty works directly with the intellect and the practical intellect benefits from its perceptual contents.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Avicenna considers this faculty in animals as equivalent to the faculty of the intellect. In the same text, Avicenna explicitly states that animals are aware of their existence in virtue of having the faculty of estimation.<sup>26</sup>

In the passage above, the main question “are we cognizing ourselves?” is immediately followed by a hypothetical case designed to question the distinctiveness of the cognitive faculty as opposed to the estimative faculty. The hypothetical case proceeds in two steps. First, the faculty of the intellect is aware of the faculty of estimation and the faculty of estimation is aware of itself through the faculty of the intellect. Second, given that both faculties share a dynamic relation and influence each other, there is no reason why one is not to assume that estimation is aware of the intellect and that the intellect is aware of itself through this faculty. I take the last point to be an attempt to show that self-cognition of the intellect can be fulfilled by having an intermediary faculty, i.e. the faculty of estimation. Furthermore and in response to the main question above, Avicenna emphasizes the dynamic relation that the intellect has with the internal

<sup>24</sup> Avicenna 1992: §438, 159.

<sup>25</sup> According to Avicenna “the estimative faculty serves the particular intellect” (Avicenna 1959: 50). On the faculty of estimation, see esp. Black 1993: 219–258.

<sup>26</sup> According to Avicenna “man is aware of itself and an animal aware of itself in virtues of its estimative faculty” (Avicenna 1992: §519, 179).

senses and the possibility of having it become aware of itself through an intermediary faculty makes it less likely to cognize the self in itself as a pure entity. At the end of this argument, Avicenna once again reminds us of his earlier point that the intellect is a faculty designed to grasp the universal and it is not qualified to cognize the individual self.

Having addressed the difficulty and complexity of having the intellect cognizing the self in itself as individual self, Avicenna stipulates that it is only through self-awareness that one can have direct access to one's self. He justifies this claim by arguing that "with respect to awareness, you are aware of your identity and without being aware of any of your faculties – for [if you are aware of a faculty] then this faculty becomes the thing in which you are aware of and not your self."<sup>27</sup> By "any of your faculties," Avicenna includes the intellect (given that he already excluded cognition from awareness). Thus, unlike self-awareness where identity becomes self-evident to the one who is aware, identity, in the case of self-cognition, is concomitant with one who thinks the thought. In other words, with self-cognition, my identity is confused with the act of cognition and it is not a pure identification of what I am. Avicenna even uses the term "cognitive confusion" (*al-khālṭ 'aqliyyan*) to signify the process in which one can attain an abstract concept of something other than itself.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, directness is not required in self-cognition since I must have an object of cognition in order to cognize my self. As Avicenna states "he who cognizes something other than himself cognizing must cognize himself."<sup>29</sup> This certainly corresponds to Aristotle's principle (A). Another potential source is Aristotle's claim in *Metaphysics* XII.9 that "knowledge and perception, and opinion and understanding have always something else as their object" (1074b36). Aristotle denies that there is direct access to the subject in all these functions. Klaus Oehler infers from this passage that Aristotle "allows for the reflexivity of these functions. It is a sort of self-reference which can come about only through reference to a distinct object."<sup>30</sup> For Avicenna, the intellect does not cognize itself directly, but rather concomitantly by having an object other than itself. This belief leads Avicenna to question the use of the term "cognition" in a reflexive sense. He states that "if it becomes evident to us that our essence is [present] to ourselves without the mediation of cognition, then what is the need to say that 'we cognize ourselves and through it (cognition), we realize that we have the essence of ourselves.'"<sup>31</sup> The awareness of the essence of one's self

is intrinsic to the self and the act of cognition or any other act adds nothing to the presence of the self to itself.

Contrary to self-cognition, in the case of self-awareness, I am aware of nothing but my self and this awareness consists in a reference to my self. Such a reference can be described as reflexive in the sense that I am aware of my self as being my self and nothing more, i.e. "to be I as I" (*takūna anta anta*).<sup>32</sup> For Avicenna, the referential "I" is immune from any failure of reference for there is a direct reference between my awareness and the thing that I am aware of, my awareness of my 'I,' is the same as my awareness.<sup>33</sup>

In this sense, Avicenna's view seems to stand in stark contrast to Kant's view that the 'I' is known "only through the thoughts which are its predicates, and of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever."<sup>34</sup> For Avicenna, the 'I' is known to its subject independently from any predicate attached to it, "my awareness of my 'I' (*anā*) as the one who has this awareness" is not due to the belief that I have a heart, brain, or any other bodily organs, but rather it is in virtue of being aware of my 'I' in itself (*ash'uru bihi annahū anā bi-l-dhāt*).<sup>35</sup> Self-awareness is the kind of awareness where no action (*fi'l*), activity, or even thought mediates between the self and its awareness of itself. Avicenna claims that by apprehending certain activities one must presuppose the existence of the self without necessarily proving it, and this special knowledge is inherent in the self and not in the act of cognition:

when I say 'I act,' I express my self-awareness [along with the act itself]; otherwise how do I know that I am the one who is doing the act, except that I consider [my awareness] to my self first, then I consider the act. All this without considering anything [external] to my awareness of my self.<sup>36</sup>

Self-awareness is the foundation for my belief that I am the one who is thinking of X, acting upon or receiving X. By seeing a tree in my garden or thinking of Euclid's fifth postulate, I become directly aware of the fact that I am the one who sees the tree or the one who thinks of the fifth postulate. With that in mind, there is no distinction between the self and the activity of being aware of my self. The objection to this view is that by being aware of my thoughts or my actions, I am not necessarily aware of a real entity such as the self or the persisting self that is the source of these thoughts. Rather, I am aware of the activity itself and nothing else. To borrow

<sup>27</sup> Avicenna 1992: §440, 159. <sup>28</sup> Ibid. §515, 178. <sup>29</sup> Ibid. §300, 122. <sup>30</sup> Oehler 1974: 497.

<sup>31</sup> Avicenna 1992: §435, 158.

<sup>32</sup> Avicenna 1957–1960, 1971: II, 347. <sup>33</sup> See Alwishah 2006: 78–80. <sup>34</sup> Kant 1929: 331.

<sup>35</sup> Avicenna 1959: 256. <sup>36</sup> Avicenna 2002: §60, 122.

Hume's words, I am aware of a "bundle or collection of different perceptions."<sup>37</sup>

In *al-Ta'liqāt*, Avicenna discusses this objection in great detail. He begins his discussion by arguing that if there is an impression (*athar*) from my self in my self, then I must be aware of two things (a) my self and (b) an impression from my self. He explains that "the impression by which I become aware of my self would not have an impression of my awareness of myself without the existence of my self."<sup>38</sup> But if the existence of my self is already established then there is no need to be aware of my self by having an impression other than the existence of my self. Hence, the existence of my self requires no impression to be self-evident to me simply because such an impression would fail to do that without, one way or another, assuming the existence of my self:

If I become aware of my self, and this awareness comes as result of an impression from within my self, then, how do I know that this impression is an impression that emanates from my self except that I know my self prior to that (the act of awareness). Thus, I will infer from this impression – by having a sign (*'alāma*) among many signs – that this impression is an impression of my self. And if I have an impression "from my self" "in my self" and judge it to be the impression of my self, then I need to synthesize between that impression and my self.<sup>39</sup>

What we can derive from the passage above is that (a) there must be a feature or sign that indicates that the "awareness of a self" is an awareness of my self; and (b) given that the existence of the self and the awareness of the self are inseparable, the assumption that some activity has taken place in the self as an activity will be secondary to the "awareness of a self" and neither a primary nor a direct act of knowing it. Thus, in the case of the awareness of my self, I have direct access to my object, i.e. my self. The fact that there is nothing that mediates between my self and my awareness of my self suggests that this relation requires no inference or reasoning but rather the mere fact of my existence.<sup>40</sup> The intrinsic relation between the existence and awareness of the self is explored further when Avicenna discusses the sameness thesis.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Hume 1978: 252. <sup>38</sup> Avicenna 2002: §40, 113–114. <sup>39</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>40</sup> The attribute of directness and the notion that no medium is required in order to become self-aware has been already discussed in Alwishah 2006: 69 and subsequently by Black 2008: 65.

<sup>41</sup> See Alwishah 2006: 69–78.

#### IV The sameness thesis in human and divine intellects

Another important aspect that distinguishes self-awareness from self-cognition is that the former has an essential sameness between the subject and the object of its awareness, while the latter has an accidental relation. Avicenna expresses this sameness relation by employing three formulas: (a) "the identity between the subject and the object of this awareness" (*huwiyya bayna l-shā'ir wa-l-mash'ūr*), (b) "our awareness of ourselves is itself our existence" (*shu'ūranā bi-dhātīnā huwa nafsu wujūdānā*), and (c) "intellect, intelligizer, and intelligible are one thing" (*'aql wa-l-'āqil wa-l-ma'qūl shay'an wāhidan*). Avicenna introduces the first formula in the following passage:

There must be an identity (*huwiyya*) between the subject and the object of this awareness (*al-shā'ir wa-l-mash'ūr*) . . . The subject that is aware (*al-shā'ir*) of this awareness and the object of the awareness (*al-mash'ūr*), namely, the self, are the same. Thus, the relation between them is not an otherness relation (*ghayriyya*) in any possible way, rather it is an identity (*huwiyya*); for if you do not know yourself you will not know that the object of awareness of yourself is yourself.<sup>42</sup>

In being aware of my self I am aware of the identity relation between being an object and being a subject of this awareness:

1. The self is aware of its object.
2. The object of this awareness is the self ("object of awareness of yourself is yourself").
3. The self is the same as its object.

Here Avicenna's justification of the sameness relation between the subject and the object of awareness is inspired by Aristotle's principle (B) – that "in the case of objects which involve no matter, what thinks and what is thought are identical" (*De Anima* III.4, 430a3–4). Elsewhere, Avicenna applies this principle to self-awareness by asserting that "my awareness of my self does not involve any material instrument and the subject and the object of the awareness must be one and the same."<sup>43</sup> Avicenna establishes this claim on a set of metaphysical assumptions:<sup>44</sup> (a) Existent things are divided into categories: that which exists for itself, and that which exists for an other. (b) The former must be aware of itself and not by means of an other, while the latter is aware of itself by means of an other. (c) Immaterial

<sup>42</sup> Avicenna 2002: §59, 120–121. <sup>43</sup> Ibid. §76, 127. <sup>44</sup> Ibid. §85, 130.

things belong to the former category and material things belong to the latter category. (d) The self is immaterial, thus it must be aware of itself.

However, Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt* draws our attention to the fact that one should not conclude from (c) and (d) that every immaterial thing has the ability to cognize.<sup>45</sup> Such a conclusion, in his view, may lead to the following objection:

Perhaps you say that when the material form in its subsisting [object] is abstracted in the intellect, then that which prevents<sup>46</sup> it [from being immaterial], would be removed. [If that is the case] then why are we not ascribing to it the ability of cognizing (*ta' aqqul*)?<sup>47</sup>

The hidden premise in this objection is the assumption that every immaterial thing has the ability to cognize. Thus the objection can be simply formulated in the following:

1. If X is abstracted from its material attachments, X becomes an immaterial thing.
2. Every immaterial thing has the ability to cognize.
3. Then X has the ability to cognize.

In his response to this anticipated objection, Avicenna limits (2) only to the category of the immaterial things that adhere to two conditions: (a) being self-subsistent substance and (b) being susceptible (*qābila*) to intelligible concepts.<sup>48</sup> I assume that “intelligible concepts” include the concept of the subject itself. Hence it seems that (b) primarily prevents other immaterial things from cognizing other immaterial things or themselves. For immaterial things, such as celestial objects, meet (a), but they lack the ability to grasp intelligible concepts. The conditions are restricted only to the human intellect (i.e. divine intellect cognizes the principles of all existents but is not susceptible to intelligible concepts).

After Avicenna establishes the identity relation between the subject and the object of awareness, he proceeds to present a second formula of

<sup>45</sup> Adamson extensively examines the connection between intellection and immateriality in Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt* and his commentators views, *al-Rāzī* in particular. See Adamson 2012a: 97–122.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Ṭūsī rightfully explains “that which prevents it” (*al-mā nā al-māni*) to be “conjoining with matter.” See his comments in Avicenna 1957–1960, 1971: II, 422.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Adamson presents a somewhat different translation of this passage: “Perhaps you will say that when the form that subsists materially is abstracted in the intellect, then the characteristic that prevents [it from itself engaging in intellection] is removed. So what stops us from ascribing intellection to it?” (2012a: 100). I disagree with him on the translation of key concepts, especially *qawām*, *al-mā nā al-māni*, and *ta' aqqul*.

<sup>48</sup> See Avicenna 1957–1960, 1971: II, 423.

sameness between the existence of the self and its awareness of itself. He makes it clear in this formula that to be a self is to be aware of itself. This inextricable relation between existence and the awareness of the self is expressed by Avicenna's perception that “the self-awareness of the essence of the self is intrinsic (*gharizī*) to the self, and [it] is the same as its existence; thus there is no need for something external to the [self] for the self to be aware of itself.”<sup>49</sup> This concomitant relation between self-awareness of a self and the existence of its essence (*anniyya*) is presented most strikingly in three places throughout *al-Ta'liqāt*: (a) “When the self exists, self-awareness exists with it,”<sup>50</sup> (b) “For the existence of the self is the awareness of itself, and these concepts are both inextricable.”<sup>51</sup> (c) “Our awareness of ourselves is itself our existence.”<sup>52</sup> In (b) and (c), Avicenna invokes a robust and inextricable relation between “being a self” and “being aware of that which is a self”:

1. The self-awareness of the essence of the self is the existence of the self.
2. The self-awareness of the self is intrinsic to the essence of the self.
3. It follows that (2) is true if one realizes that (1) is a necessary condition for knowing the existence of the self.

Having examined these two formulas of sameness, we may conclude that the sameness relation between the self and its awareness of itself is essential and intrinsic to the existence of the self.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, self-cognition consists of an accidental sameness between the intellect and its intelligibles. Avicenna explicitly states that “if the intellect [in act] cognizes something, it cognizes that it is cognizing and this is a cognition of itself.”<sup>54</sup> In this sense, Avicenna restates Aristotle's principle (A) – “thought is itself thinkable in exactly the same way as its objects are” (*De Anima* III.4, 430a3). For both philosophers, the sameness between the intellect and its intelligible is not direct or essential but rather an accidental sameness.<sup>55</sup> As Frank Lewis rightfully suggests with respect to Aristotle, the sameness thesis holds not between the intellect and its object, “but more elaborately between the actualization of the passive power in *nous* for being brought to think and the actualization in the object of thought of its active power for bringing

<sup>49</sup> Avicenna 2002: §72, 125. <sup>50</sup> Ibid. §34, III. <sup>51</sup> Ibid. §61, 122. <sup>52</sup> Ibid. §70, 125.

<sup>53</sup> See Alwishah 2006: 70, 81; Black 2008: 65. <sup>54</sup> Avicenna 1957–1960, 1971: II, 415–416.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander emphasizes this interpretation by stating that “by thinking it (the intellect) becomes the very thing which it is able to think. Primarily (*proëgoumenós*) and in itself, it is thinking the intelligible from whenever it thinks, but incidentally (*kata sumbebēkos*) [it is thinking] itself, because it belongs to it incidentally 2005; it becomes the thing it thinks whenever it thinks” (Alexander 2004: 86, 14–23). See Sorabji 2005: 136.



nous to think it.”<sup>56</sup> Avicenna presents a third formula of sameness that captures the relation between what he refers to as the intellect, intelligizer,<sup>57</sup> and intelligible (*‘aql wa-l-‘āqil wa-l-ma‘aqqūl*). While the early formulas are applicable to the human intellect, this formula is discussed primarily in relation to the divine intellect. While it is true that at one point in *al-Mubāḥathāt*, Avicenna applies this formula to the human intellect, he also categorically applies it to the divine intellect.<sup>58</sup> As a matter of fact, in *al-Ta‘līqāt*, Avicenna insists that this formula must be restricted to the First (God): “He who cognizes itself must be [at once] the intellect, intelligizer, and intelligible, and this stipulation (*ḥukm*) is true only with respect to the First (God).”<sup>59</sup> But, how do these three aspects apply to the divine essence and what does each aspect signify? In *al-Ilāhiyyāt*<sup>60</sup> and *al-Ta‘līqāt*,<sup>61</sup> Avicenna offers several remarks addressing this question. His remarks suggest that God is intellect, intelligizer, and intelligible in the following manner:

1. God’s essence is an identity denuded of matter, and therefore it is an intellect.
2. God grasps his own essence, and so, by (ι), his own intellect. To complicate this point further: God’s grasping his own essence, which is an intellect, itself constitutes his essence, and its being an intellect.
3. God is both the agent and the patient of the act of intellectual grasping.

Prior to Avicenna, Aristotle presents three aspects of sameness by stating that the divine intellect “must be itself that thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking” (*Metaphysics* XII.9, 1074b33–35). For Aristotle, the divine intellect is the object of its thought and as explained earlier in *Metaphysics* XII.7, the divine intellect is the best possible object of thought. That is to say, the divine intellect is thinking of X and X is nothing but the divine intellect itself, therefore the divine intellect thinks itself. Avicenna rephrases Aristotle’s formula “its thinking is a thinking on thinking” with “intellect, intelligizer, and intelligible.” In both formulas, the divine intellect is identical with its activity and its object. The identity relation is essential and not accidental for both believe that the divine intellect is pure actuality and does not require an external object or content to think.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis 1996: 45. <sup>57</sup> By “intelligizer” I mean the one who grasps his own intellect.

<sup>58</sup> In *al-Mubāḥathāt*, Avicenna states that “the essence and the quiddity of the intellect in itself necessitates that it is to be an intellect, intelligizer and intelligible” (Avicenna 1992: §864, 308).

<sup>59</sup> Avicenna 2002: §276, 271. <sup>60</sup> See Avicenna 2005: 285.

<sup>61</sup> See Avicenna 2002: §252, 259; §271, 267; §279, 273.

In addition, a careful examination of their views reveals that there is a striking similarity between Aristotle’s notion of divine self-thinking and Avicenna’s notion of self-awareness. Both notions have the attributes of directness, essential sameness, and (as we shall soon see) the continuity of thinking/awareness. With respect to the last point, Aristotle argues in *De Anima* III.5 that the active intellect “does not sometimes think and sometimes not think. When separated it alone is just what it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal . . . and without this nothing thinks” (*De Anima* III.5, 430a20–25). Avicenna, on the other hand, singles out the attribute of continuity as a key attribute in the notion of self-awareness. Avicenna’s view logically entails that God is always thinking and that He is eternal. But to substantiate this point with textual evidence one may refer to *al-Ta‘līqāt* where Avicenna asserts that “the existence of the First is His cognition of his essence . . . His existence is His cognition of it (his essence). His existence is perpetual, hence, His cognition of His existence is perpetual.”<sup>62</sup>

Having established this similarity, it is important to point out that there is a crucial difference between their notions of divine self-thinking. They disagree on how to define the object of divine self-thinking. For Aristotle, the content of the divine intellect’s thinking of itself is not clear, especially whether it has the same object, i.e. Himself, over and over. A *prima facie* reading of the phrase of “its thinking is a thinking on thinking” suggests, and as some scholars have noted,<sup>63</sup> that the divine intellect thinks nothing but itself and that divine activity is pure self-contemplation or what Norman refers to as “a sort of heavenly Narcissus.”<sup>64</sup> To avoid the judgment of self-contemplation, Avicenna denies that the object of God’s thinking of Himself is only Himself. Instead, Avicenna argues that in cognizing His essence, God cognizes at once that He is the principle of every existent and to everything that “is posterior to His essence.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, “because God cognizes his essence and He is the principle of all things, He cognizes by His essence all things.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore and by being the principle of every existent, God causes the existence of all the existents and whatever God causes, God cognizes. Avicenna denies that God cognizes His essence first then cognizes that He is the principle of all

<sup>62</sup> Avicenna 2002: §279, 273.

<sup>63</sup> According to De Koninck 1994: 472: “Self-contemplation in the anthropomorphic sense . . . is a plain absurdity to anyone. However, so is the Aristotelian God as read by Zeller, Ross, and, most recently, Oehler.”

<sup>64</sup> Norman 1969: 63.

<sup>65</sup> See Avicenna 2005: 292, trans. Marmura and Avicenna, 1957–1960, 1971: III, 278.

<sup>66</sup> Avicenna 2005: 291, trans. Marmura, modified.

existences.<sup>67</sup> For Avicenna, the cognition of His essence and that He is the principle of all existents are one and the same cognition. We can conclude from above that while Aristotle's notion of self-thinking fails to communicate the key attributes of Avicenna's notion of self-awareness – the attributes of directness, essential sameness, and continuity – his notion of divine self-thinking decisively embodies these attributes.

## V The continuity of self-awareness

One of the logical conclusions that can be drawn from the sameness thesis, the second formula, in particular, is that the self is aware of itself continuously. But does this conclusion extend to self-cognition? Avicenna clearly affirms in *al-Mubāhathāt* as mentioned earlier that “my intellect does not always cognize itself but my self is always aware of its existents. For if my self cognizes in actuality something other than itself, it is always aware that it is cognizing as long as it is cognizing.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, the self is always aware of itself and it is aware of the act of its cognition, but its cognition of it as a self is not continuous. In addition to this argument, Avicenna presents a robust notion of the continuity of self-awareness. The self is aware of itself continuously and aware of others in virtue of being aware of itself. In *al-Ta'liqāt*, Avicenna explicitly argues that “the self is aware of itself in an absolute state and without any condition at all. The self is aware of itself always and not intermittently.”<sup>69</sup> Avicenna goes so far as to claim that one is aware of his self in states other than the state of consciousness by presenting the following case:

Return to your self and reflect whether, being whole, or even in another state, where, however, you discern a thing correctly, you would be oblivious to the existence of your self and would not affirm your self. To my mind, this does not happen to an intelligent man, so much so that not even the sleeper in his sleep, and the drunk person in the state of his drunkenness will lack knowledge of his self. For a person [in all of these cases], his self would not be oblivious to himself, even if a representation of himself has not been established in his memory.<sup>70</sup>

In this passage Avicenna shows that the failure of representation results from having no interaction between the intellect – which always possesses the activity of awareness – and the corporeal memory. The failure of memory to capture this activity would not prevent one from being aware

<sup>67</sup> Avicenna 2002: §252, 259.

<sup>68</sup> Avicenna 1992: §550, 185–186; see Alwishah 2006: 83; Black 2008: 65 and Kaukua 2007: 101–107.

<sup>69</sup> Avicenna 2002: 34, III.

<sup>70</sup> Avicenna 1957–1960, 1971: II, 343–344; Marmura 1986: 391, trans. modified.

of oneself, for the knowledge of oneself is disembodied pure content and need not be imprinted in a corporeal faculty.

This is a good point to summarize our results so far. We have shown how Avicenna distinguishes between self-awareness and self-cognition. This distinction is recapitulated in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1 *Distinction between self-awareness and self-cognition*

Self-cognition	Self-awareness
1. It must have an object.	1. It does not necessarily have an object.
2. It has no direct access to an individual self.	2. It must have direct access to an individual self.
3. It has an accidental sameness relation between the subject and the object.	3. It has an essential sameness relation between the subject and the object.
4. It does not always cognize the self.	4. It has a continuous awareness of the self.

From this distinction we can see that self-awareness is basic for human cognition. It is the stage that connects our mental and perceptual activities to an authentic and individual self. Unlike self-cognition, self-awareness is a state where the self grasps itself with or without having cognitive or perceptual content. With that in mind, let us now shift our attention from the distinction between these two states of self-knowledge to examine how they relate to each other. After all, they belong to one rational soul or an individual self.

## VI The link between self-cognition and self-awareness

In his writings, Avicenna identifies two epistemic moments in which these two states of self-knowledge are linked, namely the moments of reflexive attention (*tanbih*) and awareness of awareness (*al-shu'ūr bi-l-shu'ūr*). With respect to the first moment, Avicenna is perhaps the first to demonstrate the inextricable relation between attention and self-awareness. In *al-Ta'liqāt*, Avicenna expresses this relation by stating:

When we know something we know that in knowing it we are becoming aware of ourselves. For we know that ourselves have become aware of it and thus our awareness of ourselves is prior to it. Otherwise, how do we know that we become aware of something or not except that we become aware of

ourselves first. And such a thing is *attention*, and not a demonstration; the self as being aware of itself.<sup>71</sup>

Attention is a state in which one attends to the awareness of oneself without being directly caused by any perceptual input or stimuli. It is an act of consciousness that is directed toward a specific subject, i.e. the self. In addition to the two moments in which one attends to oneself, thinking and perceiving, Avicenna adds the moment of being aware of oneself. Within the act of attention the awareness of the self becomes salient for one cognitive faculty. In his writings, Avicenna characterizes attention:

1. A voluntary instant that follows the realization of one being oblivious to the existence of oneself (this will be explained further below). He writes “when one is oblivious to the awareness of the self, then he would attend to it, and in doing so he would not be aware of himself twice.”<sup>72</sup> Attention as a mechanism of consciousness aims toward making the self know when one’s cognitive faculty becomes fully occupied with perceptible awareness. In attending to the self one would not become aware of the self twice, for attention is not a realization of the existence of the self itself, but rather it is an act that affirms the self being aware of itself.
2. The object and the content of this type of attention are incorrigible.<sup>73</sup>

With that in mind, and provided that self-awareness is a continuous state, the question that needs to be answered is why one needs to attend to one’s self-awareness.

In *al-Nafs*, Avicenna indirectly posits two points concerning this question. First, Avicenna categorically rejects those who define attention as “the returning of the self [to itself].”<sup>74</sup> Avicenna insists that there is no time in which the self is oblivious to its awareness.<sup>75</sup> One may be oblivious to certain actions that one attributes to oneself, but never be oblivious to the self itself. Second, Avicenna establishes that while self-knowledge (*ma’rifat al-nafs*) is an intimate knowledge of oneself, one may lose his attention to this kind of knowledge as result of having a weakness within the understanding, and thus one needs to regain this attention indirectly, i.e. through a perceptual object.<sup>76</sup> By “a weakness within the understanding,” Avicenna means

that one is not conscious enough to retain one’s attention to oneself. This may be due to the fact that one is fully occupied with either intelligible or perceptual contents. To make the awareness of the self salient to the mind as an awareness that presupposes the other mental activities, a voluntary instant of attention is needed. In this sense, attention is a moment that brings forth the awareness of the self in relation to the perceptual object. It plays a vital role in bridging between two types of awareness, immediate and cognitive awareness. For Avicenna, cognition without the awareness of the self is impossible. The self needs to be affirmed or present to itself in every aspect of perception. In perceiving a color of a paint or sound of music, one is not only formulating an idea of a color and sound but also formulating an idea of that which sees the color or hears the sound. On the other hand, the attributes of self-awareness as being direct, intrinsic, and self-contained are meaningless without being linked or contrasted to cognitive awareness. To bridge the lacuna between these two different moments of awareness, Avicenna suggests that attention to the self needs to be drawn, specifically attention that affirms the presence of the self at the moment of cognition.

The second way to bridge self-awareness and self-cognition is through the moment of the “awareness of awareness.” One is not only aware of something but one is aware of being aware of something. In *al-Ta’liqāt*, Avicenna links the process of knowing the self to the awareness of awareness:

The human soul could be oblivious to the awareness of itself, and thus it needs to be alerted to it in the same manner as when it is oblivious to other intrinsic properties. And it cannot attain this awareness by something else except itself, because if that happens, then there must be an “otherness” between it and itself, and that is impossible. Furthermore, if a thing does not know itself, how can an “otherness” make the self know itself? Therefore, it follows that something else cannot make the self know itself. With regard to the awareness of the awareness of [I will say that] this is something grasped by the intellect.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, Avicenna distinguishes between the concept of awareness of the self and the awareness of awareness by showing that unlike the former,

<sup>71</sup> Avicenna 2002: §71, 125. <sup>72</sup> Ibid. §55, 119. <sup>73</sup> See Avicenna 2002: §71, 251.

<sup>74</sup> Avicenna 1959: 251. <sup>75</sup> Ibid. 259. <sup>76</sup> Ibid. 257.

<sup>77</sup> Avicenna 2002: §36, 112. Elsewhere in same text Avicenna argues that “the awareness of awareness is acquired and not natural” (ibid. §55, 119).

the latter which equates to self-cognition, is not intrinsic to the existence of the self, rather it is something that is apprehended by the acquisition of the intellect. In addition, unlike the states of self-awareness “which is actual and continuous,” the state of the awareness of awareness is in “potentiality and it takes place from time to another.”<sup>78</sup>

We can infer from Avicenna’s remarks above that there are two stages of awareness: (a) direct awareness of the self that is experiential and a privilege of the first person and (b) awareness of awareness, a form of self-cognition, that can be obtained by an acquisition of the intellect without knowing the content of first-order awareness – such a content is unavailable. With that in mind, second-order awareness is qualified to be an epistemic claim that can be utilized in the process of reasoning or inference. To put it differently, in second-order awareness, the intellect intends first-order awareness, and first-order awareness becomes the object of the intellect. Thus, second-order awareness necessarily precludes the existence of first-order awareness.<sup>79</sup>

Now an objection that may naturally arise is that to be aware of direct self-awareness is itself an awareness, and so would require a further awareness of first-order awareness and so on, *ad infinitum*. In *al-Mubāhathāt*, Avicenna attempts to offer a way out of the problem of infinite regress by comparing the different orders of awareness to the different stages of perception. In his view, by apprehending a perception of an object, one does not create a new perception, but rather one merely cognizes his perception, and the object of the cognition is no different than the perception itself.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, Avicenna asserts that one does not create a new self-awareness by reflecting upon an immediate (first-order) awareness, but rather one merely cognizes this continuous and primary self-awareness. Hence, the cognition of first-order awareness itself is not a new awareness but rather it is merely a cognition of the same awareness. To block the infinite regress sequence of awareness, Avicenna suggests that we ought to consider first-order awareness as something no different than the cognition of it. In both orders of awareness, one is aware of the same object, i.e. the persisting self, the difference between them lies in their epistemic values. While first-order awareness has no epistemic content, it is an awareness which occurs without being about anything that can be recognized by the intellect, the content of second order awareness is the

experience that one acquires from drawing attention to one’s direct awareness. In this sense, Avicenna seems to adopt a similar strategy that Aristotle employs in dealing with the problem of the infinite that is generated from the notion of “perceiving that we perceive.”<sup>81</sup> Both block the infinite assumption by positing that the first perception (Aristotle) or immediate awareness (Avicenna) to be a perception or an awareness of itself and therefore there is no need to posit a new awareness.

## VII Conclusion

We have seen how Avicenna systematically distinguishes between self-cognition and self-awareness demonstrating that the latter is a primitive and necessary state for all subsequent cognitions, specifically self-cognition. The distinction entails that it is impossible for one to grasp that one has an intellect and thinks without presupposing the awareness of the identity and individuation of oneself. By being direct, intrinsic, and continuous, self-awareness affirms the centrality and the unicity of oneself. Unlike Aristotle, Avicenna applies three attributes of self-awareness not only to the divine intellect but also to the human self. Moreover, Avicenna redefines Aristotle’s notion of divine self-thinking by expanding the thinking of the divine intellect of its essence to being the principle of every existent. Finally, we see how this important distinction between these two states helps us to identify the two epistemic moments that link them with human self-knowledge as a whole.

<sup>81</sup> According to Aristotle “if the sense which perceives sight were different from sight, we must either fall into an infinite regress, or we must somewhere assume a sense which is aware of itself. If so, we ought to do this in the first case” (*De Anima* III.2, 425b15–17).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. §48, 117. <sup>79</sup> See Alwishah 2006: 80–83. <sup>80</sup> See Avicenna 1992: §436 and §437, 158.