

Ibn Sīnā on Floating Man Arguments

AHMED ALWISHAH

In his writings on psychology, Ibn Sīnā embarked on a comprehensive project: an investigation of the existence of the self, and an exploration of the self's nature. The lynchpin of this project is the Floating Man Argument (hereafter FMA),¹ and the subsequent discussions that surround it, especially in *al-Ta'liqāt and al-Mubāḥathāt*. Several scholars have examined FMA in the past. However, they have focused mostly on the earliest version of Ibn Sīnā's *al-Nafs*, and paid little or no attention to other extant versions of this text, which appear—critically—to be more advanced.² This

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- 1 Most scholars have translated the term as “Flying Man.” I believe that the accurate translation is “Floating Man,” because the name of the argument is derived from the verb *yahwā* in *al-Nafs*, which literally means “to fall down,” and from *mu'allaqa* in *al-Ishārāt*, which has a range of meanings, among them “floating.” Thus, from both meanings, it is more appropriate to deduce the name “Floating Man.” See Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1957); *Avicenna's De anima (Arabic text): being the psychological part of Kitāb al-Shifā'*, ed. F. Rahman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).
 - 2 See scholars such as S. Pines, “La Conception de la Conscience de Soi chez Avicenne et chez Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī,” *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge* 29 (1954): 21–56; M. Marmura, “Avicenna's ‘Flying Man’ in Context,” *Monist* 69 (1986): 383–396; A. Druart, “The Soul and Body Problem: Avicenna and Descartes,” in *Arabic Philosophy and the West*, ed. A. T. Druart (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1988), 27–48; D. Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West* (London: Warburg Institute, 2000); A. Hasnawi, “La Conscience de Soi chez Avicenne et Descartes,” in *Descartes et le Moyen Âge*, ed. J. Biard and R. Rashed (Paris: Vrin 1997), 283–291; R. Sorabji, *Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Deborah L. Black, “Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows,” in *The Unity of Science in the Arabic Tradition*, ed. Shahid Rahman, Tony Street, and Hassan Tahiri (Dordrecht: Springer Science, 2008), 63–87. While it is true that Marmura presented three versions of the FMA, his treatment of the FMA suffered from two critical problems: (a) it had not integrated Ibn Sīnā's latest

paper³ shows, through careful examination of the versions of FMA, that Ibn Sīnā's project unfolds in three primary stages: In the early FMAs, Ibn Sīnā sets out to affirm the existential separability of the self and the body, to establish the inextricable relation between the existence of the self, and its self-awareness, and to offer a way to individuate one Floating Man (hereafter FM) from another. Failing in the earliest versions to explain why one could not identify the self with any of his bodily parts, or form the concept of his self without having the concept of his body included in it, Ibn Sīnā advances to another form of separability—namely, conceptual separability. In *al-Risālat al-adḥawīyya* and in an argument that is analogous to FMA, Ibn Sīnā demonstrates that because the self and its bodily parts are knowable, one can form the concept of his self, or the 'I,' without understanding that his bodily parts are included in it. In the final stage, after having emphasized the essentiality of self-awareness to the existence of the self, Ibn Sīnā sets out to examine the nature

works, in which he develops significant points concerning the FMA, and (b) it failed to identify the main premises of the FMA.

- 3 The roots of this study grew out of conference presentations by Alwishah in 2002 and 2005; and primarily out of Alwishah's dissertation, specifically the part which concerns Ibn Sīnā's FMA and self awareness. See Ahmed Alwishah, "Avicenna's Philosophy of Mind: Self-Awareness and Intentionality" (PhD diss., UCLA, 2006). An examination of Alwishah's dissertation and Black's "Avicenna" shows that while they present different treatments of Ibn Sīnā's concept of self-awareness, they share the following common inferences and ideas: (1) Self-awareness is essential/intrinsic to self/intellect (Alwishah, 81; Black, 65). (2) "No medium is required in order to become self-aware; we perceive the self "through itself" (Alwishah, 69–74; Black, 65). (3) Self-awareness is immediate, direct and unconditioned (Alwishah, 69–76; Black, 65). (4) Self-awareness is present in the soul/self from the beginning of its existence (Alwishah, 58; Black, 65). (5) The self is aware of its self continuously and not intermittently (Alwishah, 83; Black, 65). (6) The existence of the self is just the awareness of the self (Alwishah, 58, 78–79; Black, 65). (7) Self-awareness presupposes any activities/actions (Alwishah, 70; Black, 67). (8) One does not lose his awareness of his self even in sleep or drunkenness (Alwishah, 77; Black, 67). (9) In the case of self-awareness, there must be an identity relation between the subject/knower and the object/known of this awareness (Alwishah, 69; Black, 69). (10) Self-awareness is not an activity (Alwishah, 70–71; Black, 70).

of self-awareness and its relation to the other kinds of awareness. In the last version of FMA and its relevant passages, Ibn Sīnā (a) identifies self-awareness with the attributes of immediacy, continuity, certitude, and self-referentiality, and (b) links the immediate and the perceptual forms of awareness by positing that there are two distinct orders of awareness with different relations to the self. It is only by recognizing these different stages, and the developments in Ibn Sīnā's thought, that one can obtain a critical and comprehensive understanding of Ibn Sīnā's FMA.

The Existential Separability

In the first chapter of *al-Nafs*, Ibn Sīnā makes it clear that the main objective of FMA is to affirm the existence of the essence of the human soul, and to understand its nature. Such affirmation, he claims, cannot be achieved by obtaining or inferring new knowledge, but rather only by drawing attention (*tanbih*)⁴ to a special knowledge or truth (*ḥaqq*) which intrinsically⁵ exists within the self. Having established that, Ibn Sīnā proceeds to present FMA₁ by stating that:

We say anyone among us must make himself believe (*yatawahm*) that it is as if he is created all at once and as a whole (*kamila*), but his eyes are prevented from seeing anything external, and he is created floating in the air or a vacuum in such a way that the substance of the air does not collide with him so as to allow him to perceive; and his limbs are separate and do not meet or touch each other. He then reflects on whether he affirms the existence of his self. For he will not have a doubt in affirming the existence for his essence, yet he will not along with this affirm [the existence of] the

4 In addition, Ibn Sīnā uses the term *tadhkīr* (remembering). He dropped this term, however, in his version of FMA in *al-Ishārāt*.

5 Later in *al-Ta'liqāt*, Ibn Sīnā restates this introduction of FMA and adds the term *awālī* (intrinsic). See Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, ed. H. al-'Ubaydī (Baghdad: Bayt al-Ḥikma, 2002), §36, 112.

extremities of his limbs, nor his innards, his heart, or anything external to him. Instead, he will affirm [the existence] of his essence, without affirming that it has length, breadth or depth. Nor, if in that state he were able to imagine there to be a hand or other body part, would he imagine that it was a part of his essence or as a condition for his essence. You know that what is affirmed is different from what is not affirmed and what is assented to is different from what is not assented to. Therefore, the essence that he affirms to be existent has a specific characteristic of being his very self, other than his body and his organs; these he does not affirm. Thus, he is admonished and has a way of attending to the existence of his soul as something other than the body and immaterial, and he is acquainted (*‘ārif*) and is aware of it (*mustash‘ir*), but if he is oblivious of it, he will need to be rebuked.⁶

One can reconstruct Ibn Sinā’s FMA₁ in the following steps:

1. The FM is aware of the existence of his self without being aware of the existence of his body.
2. The FM affirms the existence of his self without affirming the existence of his body.
3. The FM is taken without his body; all that is left is his self, which does the affirming [i.e., his self affirms itself].

At this point, one may conclude that:

4. Denying the existence of his self is inconceivable, since it is a necessary condition for affirming his existence.
5. Denying the existence of his body is conceivable, since it is not a necessary condition for affirming his existence.

6 *al-Nafs*, 16. [[*Avicenna’s De anima*]] Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations from Arabic are my own.

6. From (4 and 5) it follows that affirming the existence of the self without affirming the existence of the body is conceivable.

By affirming the existence of his self, the FM demarcates a crucial division between his body, which is not essential to his existence, and a non-corporeal entity, which is necessary to his existence as a whole. The FM is aware of himself, and this awareness in turn allows him to assert his own existence.

The relation between the existence of the self, and self-awareness, is investigated further in Ibn Sīnā's *al-Ta'liqāt*. There, Ibn Sīnā asserts that to be a self is to be self-aware. He expresses this idea elsewhere in *al-Ta'liqāt*:

- (a) "When the self exists, self-awareness exists with it."⁷
- (b) "For the existence of the self is the awareness of itself, and these concepts are both inextricable."⁸
- (c) "Our awareness of our selves is itself our existence."⁹

In (b) and (c) Ibn Sīnā invokes a robust, inextricable connection between "being a self" and "being aware of that which is a self." Thus, the FM can know that he exists on the basis of his awareness that he is a self. In *al-Mubāḥathāt*, Ibn Sīnā further asserts that this inextricable connection is presupposed not only by his awareness of his self, but also in any act of cognition. He writes that, "the soul is continuously aware of its existence. If my soul cognizes in actuality something other than my self, it is continuously aware that it cognizes as long as it cognizes."¹⁰ With that in mind, we can infer from the above that:

- 1. I am aware that I exist if I am aware of my self.
- 2. In knowing something exists, I know that I am aware of my self.

7 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, §34, 111.

8 Ibid., §61, 122.

9 Ibid., §70, 125.

10 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mubāḥathāt*, ed. M. Bidārfar (Qum: Baydār, 1992), §550, 185–186.

3. Thus, the awareness of my self is present in every act of cognition.

Having shown the connection between the notion of existential separability, and the inextricable relation between the existence of the self and self-awareness, Ibn Sīnā proceeds to present a more advanced account of existential separability in FMA2:

If a human being was created all at once in such way that his hands and feet stretched out so that he neither sees nor touches them, nor do they touch each other, and so that he does not hear any sound, he would certainly not *know* that any of his bodily parts existed, and yet he would *know* (*‘alama*) that his *ānniyya* existed as one thing even though he would not know all those parts, for what is not known is not the same as that which is known.¹¹

There are two key developments in this version that are worthy of our investigation: First, there is Ibn Sīnā’s use of the term *ānniyya*¹² to equate or replace the term *dhāt*. The concept of *ānniyya* underwent a number of changes and refinements in Ibn Sīnā’s philosophy. In most of his writings, Ibn Sīnā uses the term *ānniyya* to mean “individual existence.” However, in the context of the FMA and its

11 *al-Nafs*, 255. [[*Avicenna’s De anima*]]

12 *Ānniyya* is an abstract noun derived from the Arabic particle “*ānna*,” which is used to introduce the topic of a nominal sentence and has no direct translation into English, although “it is the case that” is functionally similar. According to some modern scholars, the earliest text to contain the term *ānniyya* is the *Theology of Aristotle*. In his translation of this text, Friedrich Dieterici takes *ānniyya* to be an equivalent to the Greek term τὰ ὄντως ὄντα, and in turn takes this term to mean essence (see R. Frank, “Arabic Philosophical Term *Anniyah*,” *Les Cahiers de Byrsa* 6 (1956), 181). Paul Kraus concludes that the term *ānniyya* is the equivalent of both the Greek infinitive τὸ εἶναι and the Greek participle τὸ ὄν (see Frank, “Arabic Philosophical Term *Anniyah*,” 183). Al-Kindī was the first to use the term *ānniyya* in Arabic philosophical writings to mean existence. In *al-Falsafat al-ūlā*, he argues that “the cause of the existence and the continuance of everything is the True One. This is because each thing has an *ānniyya* and has a reality [that causes it]” (see al-Kindī, *al-Rasā’il al-falsafīyya*, ed. M. Abū Rīdā (Cairo: al-Fikr al-‘Arabī, 1950), 97).

relevant passages to a specific usage, he uses the term specifically in reference to the self.¹³

With respect to the first use, Ibn Sīnā affirms his predecessors' interpretations of *ānniyya*, al-Fārābī's in particular.¹⁴ For example, in *al-Madkhal*, Ibn Sīnā defines *ānniyya* as that which "refers essentially to the question of 'which'¹⁵ (*ayyu-mā-huwa*) a thing is," as opposed to *māhiyya*, which he defines as that "which pertains essentially to the question of 'what' (*mā-huwa*) a thing is."¹⁶ In his *Metaphysics*, Ibn Sīnā makes clear that *ānniyya* necessitates quiddity, whereas quiddity does not necessarily require the existence of *ānniyya*, i.e., quiddity can exist in the state of potentiality. With the exception of the Necessary Being, whose *ānniyya* is the same as His quiddity, everything which has an *ānniyya* must have a quiddity.¹⁷ In other words, in any given temporal being this must be true: if there is an *ānniyya*, then there must be a quiddity.

In FMA2 and 3, and other relevant passages, Ibn Sīnā takes *ānniyya* to mean something that is not necessarily opposed to quiddity. It is, instead, that which represents the identity and the core of what it is to be a *particular* human. For example, in *al-Risāla al-adḥawiyya*, Ibn Sīnā defines what he calls the persisting

13 See Deborah L. Black, "Avicenna on Individuation, Self-Awareness, and God's Knowledge of Particulars," in *The Judeo-Christian-Islamic Heritage: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. R. Taylor and I. Omar (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2012).

14 In his discussion of the emphatic particle *ānna*, al-Fārābī states that sometimes the existence of the thing is called its *ānniyya*, sometimes the essence of the thing is called *ānniyya*, and sometimes—likewise—the substance of a thing is called its *ānniyya* (see al-Fārābī, *al-Alfāz al-mustā'mala fī l-manṭiq*, ed. M. Mahdī (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1968), 45). Al-Fārābī equates this term with *māhiyya* by showing that "philosophers call 'the complete existence' of a thing *ānniyya*—which itself is a *māhiyya*" (see al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*, ed. M. Mahdī (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 2004), 61).

15 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifā', al-Madkhal*, ed. G. Qanawāti, M. Khuḍayrī, and F. al-Ahwānī (Cairo, 1952), 46.

16 Ibid.

17 Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, trans. Marmura, 276.

(*al-thābita*) *ānniyya* to be “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-ḥāṣil*) and identity (*al-hawiyya*) of being human continues to exist.”¹⁸ Later, he explicitly states that that “which can be indicated by the concept of the *ānniyya* is truly his self (*dhāt*).” He insists that “the affirmation of my being as one lies within my substantial (*al-jawhariyya*) *ānniyya* and [not within my quantitative or qualitative attributes].”¹⁹ Finally, Ibn Sīnā affirms that my awareness of my *ānniyya* is prior to my awareness of the existence of my external or internal organs.²⁰ We can derive from all of these remarks that the term *ānniyya* here denotes a specific aspect of the self, namely, that which represents the identity and the continuous mode of awareness of one’s existence.

Second, while Ibn Sīnā suggests that the FM has no prior knowledge at all in both FMA₁ and FMA₂, he posits different ways of affirming the knowledge of the existence of the self in each. In FMA₁, the FM affirms this knowledge after (i) imagining the separability of his self from the body, and (ii) then reflecting upon his disembodied self. In other words, the FM engages in a process of withdrawal from his body and its sensory contents, while directly accessing that which is doing the reflection. In doing so, he distinguishes between being a self as subject in relation to things other than itself, and a self as subject in relation to itself alone. However, in FMA₂, Ibn Sīnā argues that, for the FM, knowledge of the existence of his *ānniyya* is not something which results from the stages of imagining and reflecting. Rather, it is something concurrent with (*maʿa*) the realization of being unaware of his bodily parts. To put this another way, the

18 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Risālat al-aḍḥawiyya fī l-maʿād* (published under the title of *Epistola Sulla Vita Futura*), ed. F. Lucchetta (Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1969), 13.

19 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mubāḥathāt*, §403, 147.

20 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mubāḥathāt*, §62, 59; see also another edition of Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mubāḥathāt*, in *Aristūʿinda al-ʿarab*, ed. A. R. Badawī (Cairo, 1978), § 370, 207. This latter edition is hereafter referred to in notes as Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mubāḥathāt* (ed. Badawī).

FM's knowledge of his *ānniyya* includes his knowledge that he is unaware of any of his bodily parts. One significant consequence of this shift in FMA2 is that it offers a way to individuate one FM from another. For in the case of having two or more FM, the question may be raised: how is one FM to be distinguished from another? The facts—that each FM has no prior knowledge, and that the self of each is aware of nothing but itself—do not tell us how these selves are individuated. However, the shift between FMA1 and 2 suggests that an FM has a peculiar, complex awareness of both the existence of his self, and of not having an awareness of the existence of his body.

The Conceptual Separability

Having realized that FMA1 and FMA2 are limited to addressing the questions of why FM could not identify the self with any of his bodily parts, we now ask, Can one form a concept of his self without having the concept of his body included in it? Ibn Sīnā, in *al-Risālat al-adḥawīyya* establishes the following:

If a man reflects (*taʿammal*) on the thing by which he is called 'he,' and [by which] he refers to himself as 'I,' he will imagine that that [thing] is his body and his flesh. But then if he reflects or ponders [he would find] that if his hands, legs, ribs, and the rest of his external limbs did not belong to his body, he would continue to have [what is conceived by] the concept [which he refers to as 'I']. Thus, he would know that these parts of his body are not included in the concept [which he refers to as 'I']. Having arrived at this point, he will [further reflect] on [the separability] of his primary organs, such as the brain, the heart, and liver and etc., [from his 'I']. With respect to the brain, it is possible for one [to think that] part of it is separable, and yet the concept of [his 'I'] is affirmed. As far as the heart, it is not possible to assume [its separability] in reality, but only in imagination. For one can know that his *ānniyya*, which he refers

to, existed without knowing that he has a heart, and [without knowing] how it is, what it is, and where it is . . . After further investigation, [we find that] the thing which [means that] a man [can be] considered to be [*al-mu^ctabar*] a human is indicated by the concept of *ānniyya*, and this is his true essence; and it is the thing by which he knows that he is ‘he’; that [essence] is, by necessity the soul.²¹

At the outset, and unlike the previous FMAs, Ibn Sīnā presupposes someone who has knowledge of the existence of both his self and his bodily parts. Then he sets out to investigate the questions: Why am I not my body? What is that which substantiates the referential ‘I’ in me, and can it be understood without conceiving of any bodily parts in it?

In response to the above questions, Ibn Sīnā argues that one at first intuitively identifies what substantiates ‘I’ with the existence of his body. Early in FMA2, Ibn Sīnā attributes this intuitive identification to what he called the “perpetual inextricable relation” (*dawām al-mulāzama*) between the self and the body.²² Such a relation causes one to believe that whenever one thinks of himself, one does so in such a way that the body partakes in it. However, in his view, a further investigation of this matter should counter this naive identification and reveal the true subject of the ‘I.’

In the course of this investigation, Ibn Sīnā offers two correlated steps. First—and unlike the case in FMA1 and 2, where he classifies the bodily parts under one category—in this argument Ibn Sīnā thinks it is essential for our inquiry into the referential ‘I’ to distinguish between the external and the primary/internal bodily parts. Within each category, one needs to examine the possibility of ascertaining the ‘I’ independent from having knowledge of the bodily parts. While Ibn Sīnā is quick to ascertain this possibility with respect

21 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Risāla*, 141–145.

22 *al-Nafs*, 255. [\[\[Avicenna’s *De anima*\]\]](#)

to the external parts, he is reluctant to do the same with respect to the primary/internal parts, the brain in particular. He is aware of the *prima facie* difficulty of thinking, that that which substantiates the 'I' is something separable from the brain. The brain plays a critical role in Ibn Sīnā's cognitive theory: It contains key faculties that bridge the perceptual reality and the mind. Like Descartes,²³ Ibn Sīnā distinguishes between the intellect and the brain, and denies that the brain is employed in pure understanding or reasoning. However, while Ibn Sīnā affirms that the brain is employed only in imagining and sensing, he is unwilling to assert that one can think of the separability of the brain in its entirety from the 'I.' For while both think that my idea of my 'I' is independent from my idea of my body, Ibn Sīnā seems to think that my idea of my 'I' contains an affinity between my brain and my intellect.

But which part of the brain is inseparable from the 'I'? Ibn Sīnā has not addressed this question at all, but based on his doctrine of the internal faculty, one can assume that he is referring to the part of the brain that is responsible for the faculty of representation and estimation.²⁴ After all, these faculties, estimation in particular, are working directly with the intellect, and the practical intellect benefits from their perceptual contents. Thus, while it seems that Ibn Sīnā fully emerges from the Aristotelian cocoon upholding the view that the subject of the 'I' exists independently from the body, here he allows the power of the soul to be diffused within the subject of the 'I.'

Now, with regard to the second step of this investigation, Ibn Sīnā identifies that which substantiates the 'I' as the essence of the soul. The 'I' is that which refers to one's *ānniyya*, and "the *ānniyya*

23 Descartes argues that, "I have often also shown distinctly that mind can act independently of the brain; for certainly the brain cannot be used in pure thought: its only use is for imagining and perceiving" (see René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911–12), 2:212).

24 *al-Nafs*, 41–45. [[*Avicenna's De anima*]]

is his true essence.” He explicitly states that, “when one refers to himself as ‘I’ [he is referring to something] other than the totality of his bodily parts; it is the thing that exists beyond his body.”²⁵ Later, he expresses the relation between the ‘I’ and the awareness of essence when he states that I am aware of my ‘I’ even if I don’t know that I have a hand, leg or other bodily parts.”²⁶ Hence, we gather from all these remarks that one is always aware of his ‘I,’ and that the ‘I’ refers to the essence of one’s self, not to any object added to the essence.

The question of what substantiates the ‘I,’ is critically relevant to Ibn Sīnā’s distinction between essence and existence. Contrary to Aristotle, Ibn Sīnā holds the view that existence is superadded to essence, and is not inherent in it. In *al-Ishārāt*, he states that, “the existence of a thing is different from its essence, and it is not part of it . . . rather, it is superadded to it.”²⁷

Thus, in the light of this distinction, one can deduce the following:

- (a) My essence is perceived to have a mode of being that is distinct from the existence of my body.
- (b) My essence is aware of itself without being aware of my body.
- (c) I am aware of my ‘I’ even if I am not aware of my body, or of anything beyond my essence.
- (d) Thus, my ‘I’ is a referential expression of my awareness of my essence.

The referential ‘I’ picks out the essence of what it is to be me, and in every instance of the referring, I affirm my awareness of this essence.

The idea that to be aware of one’s self is essential to what it means to be a self is emphasized over and over in previous FMAs. In

25 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Risāla*, 184.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt*, 49.

what follows, Ibn Sīnā sets out to explore the nature of self-awareness, and its relation to perceptual awareness.

The Immediacy and Continuity of Self-Awareness

In FMA₃, Ibn Sīnā focuses his attention on identifying the nature of self-awareness. In *al-Ishārāt*, Ibn Sīnā argues:

Return to yourself and reflect. If you are healthy, or rather in some other state of health such that you discern a thing accurately, are you oblivious to the existence of yourself and do you not affirm it? To me this [being oblivious and not affirming it] does not happen to an intelligent [person]. One's self does not escape even the sleeper in his sleep, and the drunk in his drunkenness, even though its representation to oneself is not fixed in memory. If you imagine yourself to have been at your first creation mentally and physically sound, and it is assumed that your self is altogether in such a position and disposition as not to perceive its parts nor have its limbs touch each other—but separate and momentarily suspended in temperate (*ṭalq*) air—you find that it is oblivious to everything except the fixedness (*thubūt*) of its individual existence (*ānniyyatihā*). With what you are you aware of yourself at that time, prior to that time, and posterior to it? What is it of yourself that you are aware of? Is it one of your senses, is it your intellect, or a faculty other than your senses by which you are aware of [yourself]? If it is your intellect or a faculty other than your senses by which you are aware of [yourself], then are you aware of [it] by means of an intermediary or without intermediary? I do not think in that case you are in need of an intermediary. Thus, it is without an intermediary [that you are aware of yourself]. It remains, therefore, that you are aware of yourself without the need for another faculty or intermediary. Hence it

remains that you are [aware of yourself] by means of your senses or internal [power] without intermediary. Reflect further!²⁸

Ibn Sīnā centers his argument on two key notions, namely, the immediacy and continuity of self-awareness.

A. **Immediacy:** Ibn Sīnā suggests above that there is direct access to the awareness of the self. It is the kind of relation where no action, activity, or even thought mediates between the self and its awareness of itself. He makes it clear that by apprehending certain activities, one must presuppose the existence of the self without necessarily proving it, and this special knowledge of the self is inherent in the self, and not in the act of cognition.

In *al-Ta'liqāt*, Ibn Sīnā emphasizes the direct relation between the self and its awareness of itself, by employing two main concepts: presence (*ḥuḍūr*) and identity (*huwiyya*). With respect to the former, he asserts that:

In every state the self presents itself to the self, and can never be oblivious to it. For the existence of the self is the same as the awareness of itself, and the self does not become aware of itself, for it is already aware of itself and its presence in-it-self.²⁹

In this sense, the self presents itself to us with a continuous awareness of itself. To apprehend itself, it does not require any acts or activities, not even a specific act which brings about self-awareness. Ibn Sīnā argues that in the case of self-awareness, there must be an identity relation between the subject and the object of this awareness: “When you are aware of yourself, then there must be an

28 Ibid., 2:343–345, see Ibn Sīnā’s *Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics*, trans. Shams Inati (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 94–95, with significant modification,

29 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, §61, 122. See also another edition of Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, ed. A. R. Badawī (Cairo, 1973), 148; this latter edition will henceforth be referred to in notes as Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt* (ed. Badawī).

identity relation between the subject of this awareness (*shār*) and the object of this awareness (*mashūr*).³⁰

Aristotle posits a view that captures the identity relation between the intellect and the object of its thought. In *De Anima* 430a 3–5, Aristotle asserts that “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.” For Aristotle, the self-thinking of the intellect, as he shows in *Metaphysics* (1072b 20–22 and 1074b 35–36), and as Lewis demonstrates, is incidental to “whatever (first-order) perceiving or knowing the person is currently engaged [in].”³¹ Unlike Aristotle, Ibn Sīnā centers his idea of identity on the notion of direct-awareness, and not on the activity of thinking. He denies that there is any activity of thinking or representation that mediates between the self and its awareness of itself. For Ibn Sīnā, the self is intrinsically aware of its existence: “The self-awareness 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.”³²

Bahmanyār, a disciple of Ibn Sīnā, was not convinced by this explanation, and he put an intriguing alternative hypothesis to Ibn Sīnā. Bahmanyār held that awareness is just another form of perception—the kind of perception in which a substantial self is not assumed. Later, he called this perception an “impression” (*athar*), which is generated within our inner sense.³³ His view, in a way, is analogous to Hume’s claim that

... when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without

30 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta’liqāt*, §59, 120–121. See also *al-Ta’liqāt* (ed. Badawī), 147–148.

31 F. Lewis, “Self-Knowledge in Aristotle,” *Topoi* 15 (1996): 39–46.

32 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta’liqāt*, §72, 125.

33 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mubāḥathāt*, §444, 160–161. See also *al-Mubāḥathāt* (ed. Badawī), §425, 222.

a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.³⁴

Both Bahmanyār and Hume seem to agree that (a) introspective awareness/knowledge is a form of perceptual awareness/knowledge, and (b) there is no substantial persisting self which is present in the inner sense, or to be more precise, in the “impression” itself.

Ibn Sinā responded to Bahmanyār, first by stating that the act of perceiving itself is an affirmation of the self, insofar as it is the self which is doing the perceiving.³⁵ Furthermore, he provided a complex argument to repudiate the claim that self-awareness is not an awareness of a self, rather, it is merely an “impression” which occurs in oneself. His argument can be constructed as follows:³⁶

1. The claim that “an impression occurs to us, and we are aware of that impression” means one of two things:
 - (a) The occurrence of “awareness” is the same as the occurrence of an “impression.”
 - (b) The occurrence of “awareness” is something that follows the occurrence of an “impression.”
2. If (a), then the statement “we are aware of that impression” would be meaningless. For the terms “awareness” and “impression” would become synonymous (*murādāf*) with each other.
3. If (b), then either (i) the concept (*maʿnā*) of the quiddity of the self is presented in the awareness, or (ii) it is not presented in the awareness.
4. It is not the case (ii), for that means the awareness is an occurrence of something which has no quiddity.

34 David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 252.

35 Ibn Sinā, *al-Mubāḥathāt*, 446, 161. See also *al-Mubāḥathāt* (ed. Badawī), §425, 222.

36 Ibn Sinā, *al-Mubāḥathāt*, 446, 161. See also *al-Mubāḥathāt* (ed. Badawī), §425, 222.

5. It is not the case (i), for it entails that in addition to the impression which causes the occurrence of the awareness, there must be an impression for the occurrence of the quiddity of the self in the awareness. However, this occurrence is not caused by an impression, but rather is constitutive (*mutakawina*) in the awareness.
6. Therefore, it is not the case that an “impression” brings about the awareness of a self.

In *al-Ta'liqāt*, Ibn Sīnā further stresses his view that an “impression” cannot be an intermediary between oneself and the awareness of oneself; he argues that my awareness of myself is fully transparent to myself, and it is prior to any form of awareness or impression.³⁷ For Ibn Sīnā, the claim that, “I am aware of an ‘impression,’” implies that one is also an object of one’s awareness. To claim that there is only an awareness of an “impression,” and that there is no awareness of a self, is to deny the awareness of the “impression” itself. For one cannot be aware of oneself as experiencing an “impression,” without being aware of a self-experiencing this “impression.”

Having established that the immediacy of self-awareness is awareness with certainty, and that we are in a position to experience its certitude, Ibn Sīnā explains that “certainty is to know that you know something, and to know that you know that thing unconditionally. Self-awareness is like that, for you are aware of yourself, and you know that you are aware of your awareness, and you know that you are aware of it unconditionally.”³⁸ In this respect, both the notion of certainty, and that of self-awareness, inherit the unconditional truth of their objects, and constitute the first and second orders of awareness (we explain this below). Furthermore, the connection between certainty and self-awareness implies that self-awareness provides us with well-founded knowledge by eliminating the source

37 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, 40, 113–114. See also Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt* (ed. Badawī), 79.

38 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, 34, 111. See also Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt* (ed. Badawī), 79.

of any deficiency in inference or reasoning. There is no gap between what is, and what is aware of it.

B. Continuity: at the opening of the FMA₃, Ibn Sīnā addresses the question of whether the Floating Man is aware of his *ānniyya* in states other than the state of consciousness. His response comes as no surprise to us given that he has already argued for an inextricable relation between the existence of the essence of the self, and its awareness of itself. For him, there is no time at which one is not aware of his existence. The self, in his view, is conscious of itself continuously, and conscious of others in virtue of being conscious of itself. Ibn Sīnā writes, “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.”³⁹ But is one aware of one’s existence in different mental states? For example, Ibn Sīnā takes up the following question: “can one be aware of one’s own existence while sleeping?”⁴⁰ Based on the inextricable relation between self and its awareness of itself, the answer to this question seems to be rather straightforward. The self is a conscious essence and it exists independently from the activities of the body, including the activity of sleeping. Hence, if I exist, I am aware of my essence, regardless of my activities. However, Ibn Sīnā does not confine his response to this view, but rather offers a complex argument:

A person in his sleep is acting upon his images, in the same way that he is acting upon his sensibles when he is awake; and [during his sleep], he often acts upon [his] intelligible/cognitive contents in the same manner that he does when he is awake. In the state of acting upon [all these during sleep], he is aware that he is the one who is acting in the same way as when he is awake. Thus, when he awakes and remembers his acting [during his sleep], he would remember his awareness of

³⁹ Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta’liqāt*, 34, 111. See also Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta’liqāt* (ed. Badawī), 79.

⁴⁰ Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mubāḥathāt*, §66, 61.

himself [as the one who performed the acting] as well. And if he awakes without remembering that, then he will not remember his awareness of himself. However, this [forgetting] will not indicate that he is unaware of himself, because remembering the awareness of the self is different from the awareness of the self, and what is more “the awareness of the awareness of the self” is different from “the awareness of the self.” The person who is awake, too, will not remember his awareness of himself, if he cannot preserve in his memory some events that happen to him at the time when he was not oblivious to the [awareness of] himself.⁴¹

This argument includes many ideas that need to be explored:⁴²

1. Ibn Sīnā suggests that one is not only acting upon images and intelligibles while one is sleeping, but that one is also aware of oneself as the one who is acting upon them. He maintains that during sleep one is aware of images and intelligible forms in the same manner that one is aware of them while awake. He draws an analogy between the type of self-awareness that occurs during the process of sensing sensible forms, and the form of self-awareness that takes place in the state of imagining these forms. In both cases, the awareness of the self is self-evident to the agent. It is inconceivable to think of the self existing and interacting with its perceptual contents either while asleep or awake without being aware of itself.
2. Another important point is that self-awareness, which is present along with the activity of acting upon the images

41 Ibid. §60, 59. See also Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mubāḥathāt* (ed. Badawī), §380, 210. In comparing the editions of Badawī and Bīdārfar, I conclude that Badawī identifies the right ordering of lines 8–10.

42 Unlike Black, who discussed this passage (67), I focus primarily on the relation between self-awareness and the two cases of sleep, the remembrance of activity, and the awareness of awareness.

and intelligible forms, is registered in the memory of the agent. Thus, when one is awake, one remembers it along with the acting process. In other words, by remembering my dream as mine, I remember that I am aware of myself while I am dreaming. But provided that such awareness cannot be associated with a form of representation, or with an idea of myself, then how is it possible for me to remember my awareness of myself? I take it that what Ibn Sīnā means is that it is something constitutive in remembering that I am the one viewing the images during my sleep, and these images belong to a self which is aware of itself. For Ibn Sīnā, if there is an activity of dreaming, then it must be directed toward a subject who is experiencing this activity. In remembering this activity, one must be inherently remembering the subject who is experiencing this activity.

3. In the case of dreamless sleep, in which there is no trace of the images or thoughts registered in the mind or in memory, Ibn Sīnā insists that one continues to be aware of oneself. Not remembering anything after one awakes from a dreamless sleep does not indicate that one has not been aware of oneself throughout the dreamless sleep. Ibn Sīnā explains his view by drawing an analogy between the different orders of awareness that one may experience while one is awake on the one hand, and the case of being aware, but not remembering the awareness of waking, on the other. One must distinguish between the state of awareness of the self, and the state of awareness of the awareness of the self (discussed further below). While it is impossible to be oblivious to the first-order of awareness, given that it is intrinsic, it is possible that one may not acquire second-order awareness. Likewise, just as it is impossible for one to be unaware of oneself during dreamless sleep, it is possible for one to forget this awareness while one is awake.

The Awareness of Awareness (*al-shu'ūr bi-l-shu'ūr*)

Ibn Sīnā's theory—that self-awareness is the awareness of awareness (i.e., that one is not only aware of something, but one is aware of being aware of something)—requires further examination. In *al-Ta'liqāt*, Ibn Sīnā links the process of knowing the self to the awareness of awareness by stating:

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 awareness [I will say that] this is something grasped by the intellect.*⁴³

The notion that the awareness of awareness is something peculiar to the intellect is expressed explicitly elsewhere: “The awareness of awareness is something attributed to the intellect.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Ibn Sīnā distinguishes between the awareness of the self, and the awareness of awareness, by showing that—unlike the former—the latter is not a primary concept; in other words, it is not an idea which is intrinsic to the existence of the self. Rather, it is something which is apprehended by the acquisition of the intellect: “A man can be oblivious of his awareness of himself and can be alerted to it; he will not be aware of it twice, and with regard to the awareness of awareness, it is obtained by acquisition and not by nature.”⁴⁵

Thus, there are two stages of awareness: (a) direct awareness of the self, which is experiential, and a privilege of the first person, and (b) the awareness of awareness, which can be obtained by the acquisition of the intellect without knowing the content of first-order awareness—because such 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

43 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, §36, 112. See also *al-Ta'liqāt* (ed. Badawī), 79–80.

44 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, §67, 124. See also *al-Ta'liqāt* (ed. Badawī), 160.

45 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ta'liqāt*, §55, 119. See also *al-Ta'liqāt* (ed. Badawī), 147.

first-order awareness, and first-order awareness becomes the object of the intellect. Thus, second-order awareness necessarily includes the existence of first-order awareness.

Now, an objection may naturally arise: To be aware of direct self-awareness is itself awareness, and so would require a further awareness of first-order awareness and so on, *ad infinitum*.

In *al-Mubāḥathāt*, Ibn Sīnā 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. Instead, one merely cognizes one's perception, and the object of the cognition is no different than the perception itself. Similarly, Ibn Sīnā asserts that one does not create a new self-awareness by reflecting upon an immediate awareness; but rather, one merely cognizes this continuous and primary self-awareness.⁴⁶ Hence, the cognition of first-order awareness itself is not a new awareness, but rather is a cognition of the same awareness. To block the sequence of infinite regress of awarenesses, Ibn Sīnā suggests that we ought to consider first-order awareness as something no different than the cognition of it. For him, 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. First-order awareness has no epistemic content; it is an awareness which occurs without being about anything that can be recognized by the intellect. By contrast, the content of second-order awareness is the experience that one acquires from drawing attention to one's direct awareness. In this sense, Ibn Sīnā seems to adopt a strategy which is similar to the one Aristotle employs in dealing with the problem of infinite regress, which is generated from the notion of "perceiving that we perceive."⁴⁷ Both philosophers block the regress by positing that the

46 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mubāḥathāt*, §435, §436, 158. See also *al-Mubāḥathāt* (ed. Badawī), §422, 221.

47 In *De Anima* 425b 15–17, Aristotle argues that, "if the sense which perceives sight were different from sight, we must either fall into an infinite regress, or

first perception (Aristotle), or immediate awareness (Ibn Sīnā), can also be a perception or an awareness of itself, and so there is no need to posit a new awareness.

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By analyzing the versions of FMA, we can systematically trace the three states in Ibn Sīnā's development of the existence and the nature of the self. Ibn Sīnā's FMAs are designed not only to affirm the existence and the autonomy of the self, but also to explore and explain the intricate relation that the self has with its body and its awareness of itself. By looking to the developments within Ibn Sīnā's FMAs, we can conclude that they serve not only to show the autonomy of the self but also to focus our attention on the tensions within, and the challenges of cognizing such an idea. The transition from existential to conceptual separability helps us to understand the difficulty of forming the concept of the self without including the concept of bodily parts. The contrast between self-awareness and the awareness of self-awareness supports the idea that self-awareness is a special kind of knowledge—a knowledge which identifies with the attributes of immediacy, certitude, continuity, and self-referentiality.

we must somewhere assume a sense which is aware of itself. If so we ought to do this in the first case" (see Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984)).