

Scepticism in the Global History of Philosophy

The Scope of Scepticism: Self-awareness as a Way Out?

Restricting sceptical doubt: self-awareness as a way out?

I. Ibn Sīnā [Avicenna] (c. 970–1037)

1. The ‘indicative method’

We have now come to know the meaning of the name bestowed on the thing that is called soul due to a relation it has, and so we should strive to apprehend the quiddity of this thing which has become a soul by the aforementioned consideration; in this place **we must point towards (*nushīra*) establishing the existence of the soul that we have by means of a reminder (*al-tanbīh*) and a call for attention (*al-tadhkīr*), by a pointer** that will be found apposite to the situation by one who has **the capacity to see the truth by himself** without the need to educate him, prod him onwards, and divert him from fallacies. (*Shifā’*: *Fī al-nafs* I.1, 15–16 Rahman; cited in Kaukua 2015, 33)

2. The Floating/Flying Man

So we say: [1] one of us must imagine himself so that he is created all at once and perfect but [2] his sight is veiled from seeing external [things], that he is created floating in the air or in a void so that the resistance of the air does not hit him – **a hit he would have to sense** – and that his limbs are separated from each other so that they do not meet or touch each other. [3] [He must] then consider whether he affirms the existence of his *self/essence* (*wujūda dhātīhi*). [4] He will not hesitate in affirming that his *self/essence* exists (*li dhātīhi mawjūdatan*), [5] but he will not thereby affirm any of his limbs, any of his intestines, the heart or the brain, or any external thing. Rather, he will affirm his self/essence (*dhātahu*) without affirming for it length, breadth or depth. If it were possible for him in that state to imagine a hand or some other limb, he would not imagine it as part of his *self/essence* (*dhātīhi*) or a condition *in his self/for his essence*. You know that what is affirmed is different from what is not affirmed and what is confirmed is different from what is not confirmed. Hence the *self/essence* (*dhāt*) whose existence he has affirmed is specific to him in that it is he himself, different from his body and limbs which he has not affirmed. Thus, he who takes heed has the means to take heed of the existence of the soul (*wujūdi al-nafs*) as something different from the body – indeed, as different from any body – and to know and be aware of it. (*Shifā’*: *Fī al-nafs* I.1, 16 Rahman; 18–19 Bakoš; cited in Kaukua 2015, 35; cf. Adamson & Benevich 2018, 148-9)

3. Second-order awareness of self-awareness vs. self-awareness: back to the case of the dreamer

The sleeper operates on his imaginations just as he operates on [the things] he senses when awake, and he often operates on intellectual and cogitative things just as when awake. In the state of his operation on that he is aware that he is that operator just as he is at the state of being awake, and so if he notices and remembers his operations, he remembers his awareness of himself (*shu’ūrahu bi dhātīhi*), but if he notices but does not remember that, he does not remember his awareness of himself (*shu’ūrahu bi dhātīhi*). That does not indicate that he wasn’t aware of himself (*shā’iran bi dhātīhi*). **Rather, awareness of self-awareness is different from self-awareness** (*al-shu’ūru bi al-shu’ūri bi al-dhāti ghayru al-shu’ūri bi al-dhāt*), and so **remembering self-awareness is different from self-awareness** (*dhikra al-shu’ūri bi al-dhāti ghayru al-shu’ūri bi al-dhāt*). Even one who is awake may not remember his awareness of himself (*shu’ūruhu bi dhātīhi*) when the pursuits, which he had and during which he was not unaware of himself (*lam yaghfulu fīhā ‘an dhātīhi*), are not retained in his memory. (*Mubāḥathāt* III.68, 61 Bīdārfar; cited in Kaukua 2015, 82)

II. René Descartes (1596–1650)

1. Self-awareness in the *Second Meditation*

So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (2nd Meditation; CSM II, 17)

2. ‘The cogito’ in the *Discourse on the Method*

Lastly, considering that the very thoughts we have while awake may also occur while we sleep without any of them being at that time true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth '*I am thinking, therefore I exist*' was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as **the first principle** of the philosophy I was seeking. (*Discourse on the Method*, Part 4; CSM I, 127)

3. ‘The cogito’ in the *Principles of Philosophy*

In rejecting - and even imagining to be false - everything which we can in any way doubt, it is easy for us to suppose that there is no God and no heaven, and that there are no bodies, and even that we ourselves have no hands or feet, or indeed any body at all. But we cannot for all that suppose that we, who are having such thoughts, are nothing. For it is a contradiction to suppose that what thinks does not, at the very time when it is thinking, exist. Accordingly, **this piece of knowledge - *I am thinking, therefore I exist*** - is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way. (*Principles of Philosophy*, I §7; CSM I, 195)

4. “Eternal truths”

[...] when we recognize that it is impossible for anything to come from nothing, the proposition *Nothing comes from nothing* is regarded not as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as **an eternal truth which resides within our mind**. Such truths are termed common notions or axioms. The following are examples of this class: *It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time*; *What is done cannot be undone*; *He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*; and countless others. It would not be easy to draw up a list of all of them; but nonetheless **we cannot fail to know them when the occasion for thinking about them arises, provided that we are not blinded by preconceived opinions**. (*Principles of Philosophy*, I §49; CSM I, 209)

5. Self-awareness & the Intellect

In the Second Meditation, the mind uses its own freedom and supposes the non-existence of all the things about whose existence it can have even the slightest doubt; and **in so doing the mind notices that it is impossible that it should not itself exist during this time**. This exercise is also of the greatest benefit, **since it enables the mind to distinguish without difficulty what belongs to itself, i.e. to an intellectual nature, from what belongs to the body**. (Synopsis of the 2nd Meditation; CSM II, 10)

Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely **nothing else belongs to my nature or essence** except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. [...] And accordingly, **it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it**.” (6th Meditation; CSM II, 54)

6. The self as a “thinking thing/substance”?

But I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this 'I' is, that now necessarily exists. So **I must be on my guard against carelessly taking something else to be this 'I', and so making a mistake in the very item of knowledge that I maintain is the most certain and evident of all**. I will therefore go back and meditate on what I originally believed myself to be, before I embarked on this present train of thought. (2nd Meditation; CSM II, 17)

[...] I am, I exist - that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist. At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. **I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks**; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason - words whose meaning I have been ignorant of until now. But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? As I have just said - **a thinking thing**. (2nd Meditation; CSM II, 18)

➤ A “**thinking substance**”? (see *Objections and Replies*)

A challenge from Madhyamaka Buddhism: Deluded self-awareness & Nāgārjuna’s critique of the substantial self

III. Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE)

1. The challenge against introspection

Since sight and hearing, etc., and
Feeling, etc., exist,
He who has and uses them
Must exist prior to those, some say.

If there were no existent thing,
How could seeing, etc., arise?
It follows from this that prior to this,
there is an existent thing.

**How is an entity existing prior to
Seeing, hearing, etc., and
The felt, etc.,
Itself known?**

If it can abide
Without the seen, etc.,
Then, without a doubt,
They can abide without it.

(*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (MMK) 9:1-4; trans. Garfield 1995)

2. Back to the emptiness of all views?

I prostrate to Gautama
Who through compassion
Taught the true doctrine,
Which leads to the relinquishing of all views

(*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (MMK) 27:30; trans. Garfield 1995)

Primary texts

- Descartes, René, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (eds.). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols I & II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. [Abbreviated as ‘CSM’]
- Ibn Sīnā, *Shifā’*: *Fī al-nafs* and *Mubāḥathāt* in Jari Kaukua. *Self-awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and beyond*, 33, 35, 82. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Nāgārjuna in Jay L. Garfield (trans. and ed.) *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. [Abbreviated as ‘MMK’]

Further reading

Ibn Sīnā

- Adamson, Peter, and Fedor Benevich. "The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna's Flying Man Argument." *Journal Of The American Philosophical Association* 4, no. 2 (2018): 147-164. [Take the relevant passages not to be about the flying man's being aware of his *self* but about his being able to grasp the existence of his *soul's essence*]
- Hasse, Dag Nikolaus. *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul 1160-1300*. London: Warburg Institute, 2000. [Anticipates key aspects of Adamson & Benevich 2018.]
- Kaukua, Jari. "Avicenna and the phenomenon of self-awareness: the experiential basis of the flying man." *Self-awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and beyond*, 30–42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. [A lucid account of the thought experiment as being about self-awareness, and gesturing at substance dualism]
- Kaukua, Jari. "In the first-person: Avicenna's concept of self-awareness reconstructed." *Self-awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and beyond*, 62–103. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. [A broader discussion of the role of self-awareness in Ibn Sīnā's psychology.]
- Kaukua, Jari. "The Flying Man and the Masked Man, One More Time: Comments on Peter Adamson and Fedor Benevich, 'The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna's Flying Man Argument'". *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6, no. 3 (2020): 285-296. [A response to Adamson & Benevich 2018.]
- Marmura, Michael. "Avicenna's 'Flying Man' in Context." *The Monist* 69, no. 3 (1986): 383-95. [Offers a seminal discussion of 3 of the instances of the 'flying man' in Ibn Sīnā's corpus; reconstructs the thought experiment slightly differently from Kaukua 2015.]

Descartes on the 'cogito'

- Hatfield, Gary C. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Wilson, Margaret Dauler. *Descartes*. London: Routledge, 1978.

Nāgārjuna & self/no-self in Indian Philosophy

- Adamson, Peter and Jonardon Ganeri. *Classical Indian Philosophy: A History of Philosophy without any Gaps*, vol. 5. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022 [2020]. [see pp. 109-116 for a general overview of a sceptical trajectory in Indian philosophy, especially in Buddhist and Jaina philosophy; see also pp. 238-44 on Nāgārjuna]
- Garfield, Jay L. (trans. and ed.) *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. [Detailed commentary of MMK.]
- Garfield, Jay L. *Engaging Buddhism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. [see especially pp. 91-121 on the self]
- Siderits, Mark, and Katsura, Shōryū. *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: The Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. Classics of Indian Buddhism. Boston, 2013. [Detailed commentary of MMK.]
- Westerhoff, Jan. "Nāgārjuna". *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* < <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nagarjuna/>>, 2022 [2010].
- Westerhoff, Jan. *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. A Philosophical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.