

RECENT WORK

BOOK REVIEW ON ***SCULPTING THE SELF: ISLAM, SELFHOOD AND HUMAN FLOURISHING*** (BY MUHAMMAD FARUQUE)*

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In the perusal of contemporary philosophical literature, one rarely comes upon a work that engages in an analytic penetration of a philosophical topic with such erudition and cosmopolitanism. Faruque's study draws on primary philosophical work from English, German, French, ancient Greek, Persian, Arabic, Urdu sources and then supplements them with the latest and most cutting-edge scientific and historical studies; this is all done in an elegant and inclusive manner. Indeed, this study is not only a comprehensive philosophical treatment of selfhood, but it is also a blueprint for an exemplary philosophical analysis which is not cramped by scholarly parochialism endemic to the run-of-the-mill academic essays.

After arguing why the self is not a modern invention, Faruque develops his theory of the "spectrum model" by a complex philosophico-philological argument, taking full account of the various terminologies such as *nafs*, *rūh*, *dhāt*, *khud*, etc., which are used to express the self in Islamic thought. In the process, he also notes astutely how the term has been misconstrued in various modern disciplines such as anthropology, religious studies, and neuroscience. In a way, Faruque's thesis on the meaning of "self" is unsurprising: "self" is a spectrum term in that "it encompasses a multidisciplinary perspective, [showing] a wide range of meanings that are related to each other as in a continuous spectrum, while also being completely unrelated at other times as in a discontinuous spectrum" (27). "Self" is then what Wittgenstein called a family-resemblance term, one whose meaning is not common to all its occurrences but is rather determined by a series of overlapping similarities. Faruque diagrams the various theories of selfhood which he extracts from his in-depth studies (23) so the reader is

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* Muhammad Faruque (2021), *Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood and Human Flourishing* (University of Michigan Press), 311 pages. ISBN 978-0472132621

not confused about the criss-crossing of the spectrums constituting the meaning of “self”. Of course, Faruque’s aim is not restricted to explicate the spectrum view, as he also wants to articulate and defend a primary meaning, what he calls “a basic sense of the self” (49), and that involves self-knowledge, first-person subjectivity and agency (49). In what follows, I set forth what I have gleaned from Faruque’s arguments and the organization of the book. My judgment is that despite Faruque’s nuanced and inclusive view of selfhood, an account of self-knowledge that allows for descriptive objectivity in a normative context is absent.

Sculpting the Self has a preface, an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, a useful bibliography and three detailed indices. The indices, especially the *Index Locorum*, testify to and exhibit (in detailed outline) the richness of the pluralist commitment of the author. In the introduction, Faruque sets out the various philosophically salient aspects of the self. All of these aspects are clearly set out and supplemented by useful diagrams. I especially appreciated the section titled “Descriptive vs. Normative Approaches.” Faruque is clear what this distinction amounts to, and, in agreement with a central trend in contemporary philosophy, he identifies what is unique about the human self with the normative: what he calls – with Christine Korsgaard – the “aspirational” aspect of the self. One could also invoke Wilfrid Sellars’s phrase “fraught with ought”, as a way of characterizing normativity, and that is important because Faruque’s analysis of the distinction suggests that he adheres to a norm/fact dualism (33-44; the dualism is explicitly stated in 143), which I believe chafes against the positions of some of the philosophers he invokes approvingly (e.g., John McDowell). I will amplify this concern further below.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to explicating the author’s nuanced differentiation between a self-knowledge that is reflective and one that underlies the subject-object dichotomy and is best broached as self-presence (78). For the latter, Faruque draws on the writings of Avicenna, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā. Self-presence, for Faruque, is an immediate, non-inferential knowing by being present to oneself and is presupposed by perceptual acts and thinking (77). To drive the point home for those philosophers in his audience who are not familiar with Islamic philosophy, Faruque invokes Kant’s account of the “I think” as that which accompanies all my representations and which, in turn, cannot be represented, and therefore cannot be known. Faruque cleverly subjects the Kantian view to the criticism that McDowell levelled against it in his now classic *Mind and World*. In this work, McDowell objected to Kant’s attempts to restrict nature to that which can be described scientifically (i.e., as subject to nomological descriptive lawfulness in contrast to the normative, “ought-laden” one). An upshot of Kant’s narrow construal of nature is that the self, the “I” of the “I think”, does not have a substantial presence; it resides in the natural world geometrically. Faruque is in agreement with McDowell’s critique of Kant and relates McDowell’s view of self-knowledge to the knowledge by presence he himself advocates. But there is a subtle point that is lost in Faruque’s discussion: McDowell does not imply that there is a kind of self-knowledge that is incapable of propositional (i.e., descriptive) articulation. In other words, for McDowell, self-knowledge, in the sense of self-presence, is thinkable. It does not hover in a non-conceptual space. Faruque’s noble efforts to limit scientism

about the self, does not address McDowell's insistence that the space of concepts does not have a boundary and Faruque does not fend off the threat to reduce presential self-knowledge to a kind of non-conceptual self-awareness. In fact, he embraces the "threat". I will come back to this problematic embrace below, but, to be fair to Faruque, I concede that his aim in the book is not to showcase the nuances of McDowell's position.

Chapter 3 further develops the view of a non-reflective self-knowledge as self-presence. Faruque challenges Hume's bundle theory of the self as restricting the self to the object of a reflective awareness. Drawing on Iqbāl and Mullā Ṣadrā, Faruque argues that there is a level of non-reflective consciousness that escapes any reflective stance (115). As a result, he advocates a non-reflective awareness whose object is an invisible self which is immediately accessible via introspection and needs no proof (128). Again, I am left with the question I had in the previous chapter: is this fundamental self-knowledge conceptual? Faruque's subsequent exploration of Sartre and Heidegger on the "prereflective mode of Dasein" does not get to an answer. I am reminded of the at times frustrating exchange between McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus on whether the world-disclosing pre-reflective experience is conceptual or not. McDowell argued that it is conceptual and Dreyfus, who took the opposing stance, appeared to stubbornly resist McDowell's arguments.¹ For Dreyfus, conceptualization meant that a reflective awareness of a propositionally structured object is at work.² McDowell, however, argued for a normative account of conceptualization, according to which conceptual norms constrain our performances. For McDowell, conceptual norms are actualized in a non-propositional, and therefore non-reflective, form in experience. Moreover, this actualization is capable of receiving propositional articulation.³ In any event, Sartre's famous pronouncement that "consciousness and world are given at one stroke,"⁴ which he tied to Heidegger's assignation of ontological primacy to being-in-the-world, fits well with the conceptualist position that intuitions (products of sensory receptivity) and concepts (yielded by the spontaneity of understanding) are equiprimordial.⁵ Faruque's attempts to drive a deep wedge between a reflexive self-awareness and self-presence assumes a nonconceptualist approach to the latter. My own examination of the Islamic philosophical tradition has supported a conceptualist reading of Avicenna's account of

¹ The debate began with Dreyfus's APA Presidential Address: "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79.2 (2005): 47-65. It then continued with McDowell's reply, "What Myth?" and the subsequent rebuttals on the pages 338-377 of *Inquiry* 50.4 (2007).

² See the abstract of "The Return of the Myth of the Mental," in *Inquiry* 50.4 (2007): 352.

³ For this point in the context of the debate with Dreyfus, see "What Myth?" *Inquiry*, 50.4 (2007): 338-351. For a separate and thorough discussion of this point, see "Avoiding the Myth of the Given," in *Having the World in View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 256-72. I also examine this aspect of McDowell's position and its development in my *Analytic Philosophy and Avicenna* (London: Routledge, 2020), 31-32.

⁴ Sartre (1970), "Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology," trans. Joseph Fell, in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 1: 4.

⁵ McDowell (1994), *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 9-10.

pre-reflective awareness.⁶ I suspect that this reading can also be defended in regard to some of Avicenna's predecessors and successors.

Chapter 4 involves an intriguing discussion of the body in relation to self-knowledge and, in it, Faruque puts forward an account of the subtle body (as the *basis* of consciousness) which he draws from the Greco-Islamic-Indian sources (170). Faruque's argument is tantalizing and rich; this chapter is where he displays his historical and scientific erudition most conspicuously. Having said that, I admit that I am not convinced because his aim is to tie the normative dimension of the self to the so-called subtle body. In my view, in alignment with McDowell's critique of Kant discussed above, conceptual norms already interpenetrate our experience of nature and the self as a part of nature. We do not need a "subtle" body to accommodate the normative dimension of the self. The Greco-Islamic-Indian discussions of the subtle body, in my opinion, are meant to enrich our understanding of the worldly body and concern levels and stages of experience beyond everydayness.

Chapter 5 is a culmination of Faruque's erudite yet problematically fractured conception of the self as an uneasy conjunct of body and spirit. The spiritual self is the expression of "the normativity of the self" (197), whereas the body is what is available through descriptive "bio-physiological, socio-cultural, and cognito-experiential dimensions" of the self (197). In the previous chapter, we saw that the spiritual self is based in what Faruque articulated (exegetically and analytically) as the subtle body. I suppose his invocation of the Nietzsche-Schopenhauer connection is helpful to the advancement of Faruque's own position, as voluntarism is conducive to the norm/fact dualism (favored by Faruque). But I am not convinced that Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā are Faruquian allies. In *Analytic Philosophy and Avicenna*, I have argued that there is ample evidence for reading Avicenna as a thinker who avoids the naturalistic fallacy while admitting that the conceptual norms in our experience of nature constrain our thoughts about it.⁷ Nevertheless, I find Faruque's analyses rich and his exegeses of Avicenna, Bābā Afḍal Kāshānī, Mullā Ṣadrā, Ashraf 'Alī Thānavāī, Shāh Walī Allāh, Heidegger and Iqbāl stimulating and intriguing. Faruque has been able to accomplish a feat that is bound to improve philosophy's status quo in western academia. His ability to bridge traditions of wisdom separated by cultural and historical divides is truly impressive and refreshing.

The conclusion of the work sums up the arguments and illuminates them by introducing a variety of other thinkers and traditions of wisdom. A skeptic might worry that the richness and the variety of sources in Faruque's work will dissuade scholars with narrow specializations. But this is not so. Isiah Berlin famously divided thinkers into two categories: 1) the hedgehogs who viewed the world through a single idea, and 2) the foxes who jettisoned unitarianism and advocated a plurality of ideas.⁸ Whereas Berlin's Tolstoy has the talents of a fox but thinks of himself as a hedgehog,⁹ Faruque

⁶ See chapter 5 of my *Analytic Philosophy and Avicenna*.

⁷ See chapter 4 of my *Analytic Philosophy and Avicenna*.

⁸ Isiah Berlin (2013), *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

is guided by a unitary view but he is also able to penetrate a variety of different points of view from multiple sources. For this reason and at the risk of sounding cliché, this book is a boon to the specialists and the general readers alike. I recommend it strongly.