CONSCIOUS THOUGHT UNDER SENSORY DEPRIVATION: AVICENNA'S FLYING MAN AND 'I'*

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أَوَلَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُواْ فِيۤ أَنفُسِهِم
"Have they not reflected upon their own selves?"
Qur'ān 30:8

1. There's a difference between the history of ideas and the history of philosophy, even when the ideas at issue happen to be philosophical (Williams 1978).[1] The former is, above all, history. It concerns itself with a text and raises the question, 'What does it mean?', by asking more directly, 'What *did* it mean?'. The latter is, first and foremost, philosophy. It too pursues the question of meaning, but with a slightly different spin. 'What does it mean?' becomes 'What *should* it mean?' (Vendler 1972). And this inquiry is often guided by the assumption that the great philosophers of the past have something important to teach us about the challenges we face today (Bennett 1966, 1974; Strawson 1966).[2]

My project belongs to the history of philosophy. It is, therefore, philosophy first. I approach the subject—embodiment and the self—with a nontrivial assumption. I assume that Avicenna (known to his admirers as *al-shaikh al-raīs*, or the foremost teacher) still has something of interest to teach us about it. In fact, the central claim of this paper is that his influential argument, "the Flying Man", contains an insight that recent commentaries fail to appreciate.[3]

The argument I have in mind appears in several texts, with minor variations. Recent discussion centers around its formulation in *al-Shifā'*: *fī al-nafs* which I reproduce here.

> … One of us must imagine himself so that he is created instantaneously and [in] perfect [condition] but with his sight veiled from seeing external [things] … floating in air or in a void so that the resistance of the air does not impact him—an impact he would have to sense—and with his limbs separated from each other so that they neither meet nor touch. [He must] then consider whether he affirms the existence

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[1] This terminology isn't ideal. But because I'm borrowing the point from Williams, and because I can't think of anything better, I'll stick with it.

[2] Or, perhaps, the challenges we *should* be facing today but aren't (Garber 2001).

[3] 'Floating Man' would be better, I think, but there's no use swimming against such a strong current.

> of himself (*dhātihi*). He will not hesitate to affirm (*yuthbitu*) that his self exists, but he will not thereby affirm any of his limbs, any of his internal organs, the heart or the brain, or any external thing. Instead, he will affirm his self 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 or as a condition of his self. You know that what is affirmed is different from what is not affirmed and that what is confirmed is different from what is not confirmed. Hence, the self whose existence he has affirmed is exclusive 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 as something different from the body—indeed, as different from any body at all—and to know and be aware of it.[4]

Because my interest in the Flying Man derives from my interest in a certain philosophical subject, I'm not as directly concerned with what Avicenna *did* say as I am with what he *should* have said. Happily, it's often the case that what someone did say coincides (and not by *mere* coincidence) with what they should have said.

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[4] One of the key terms in this passage (*dhāt*) is contested. The translation I've adopted (Kaukua 2015, p. 35), and ever so slightly adapted, sides with what appears to be the dominant position and treats it as roughly synonymous with 'himself' or 'his self'. An interesting alternative translation takes the term to be synonymous, in context, with the phrase 'his essence' (Hasse 2000; Adamson and Benevich 2018). The difference between the two translations may initially seem minor, but the alternative translation is supposed to favor a reading of the passage that comes rather close to the Cartesian modal argument for dualism (Adamson and Benevich 2018). Eventually, I'll explain why I believe this reading of the Flying Man is incorrect. For now, one quick consideration in favor of the dominant translation should suffice: it seems to fit much better with the way Avicenna describes the intended effect of his argument. He prefaces the Flying Man by saying that it "will make a powerful impression on someone who has the capacity to notice the truth for himself, without needing to be instructed." I take this to be an expression of confidence; the argument is likely to persuade a sufficiently intelligent yet uninitiated interlocutor. So, by Avicenna's lights, the argument doesn't incorporate a great deal of theoretical baggage or controversy. Otherwise, instruction would be needed to forestall misunderstanding and error. Now, the notion of essence is theoretical in nature; our understanding of it depends on the explanatory role it plays in Avicenna's system (Morvarid 2023). Since Avicenna is clear that his argument is an "indication" for someone requiring no instruction, we ought to resist interpretations that incorporate the notion of essence in the argument's premises; for that would only add theoretical baggage and make the premises more controversial. Furthermore, not every essentialist is comfortable hypostatizing essences. Some view the distinction between essence and accident as, fundamentally, a difference between ways in which a thing might instantiate a property—either essentially or accidentally. For an essentialist of this sort, an essence isn't a thing that exists in its own right. This matters, from the standpoint of interpretation, because controversial reasoning, even if correct, is more likely to be confounded by sophistries. The controversy might muddy the waters just enough for an erroneous but seductive argument to mislead. To that extent, instruction would be necessary, if only to forestall error. Setting these points of disagreement with Adamson and Benevich (2018) aside, I agree with the overall spirit of their approach, which prioritizes the virtue of interpretive charity over textual fidelity. More on this to come shortly. For a somewhat different take on the unorthodox interpretation, see Kaukua (2020).

Charity is the first virtue of interpretation (Davidson 1973; Lewis 1974). That is, meanings ought to be assigned so that, all else equal, what people think and say is rational given their circumstances. One crucial point of meaning ascription is to make sense of people, after all. And there's no better way of doing that, given the kind of sense-making at issue, than by representing their thought and speech as the upshot of their reasons.[5] If someone thinks or speaks as their reasons dictate, then in a perfectly straightforward sense they're thinking or speaking as they should. So, if circumstances are favorable, and the interpreter does their job well, the subject of interpretation will have said what they should have. In practice, then, we should expect the history of ideas and the history of philosophy to harmonize. When disharmony is unavoidable, as it sometimes is, there's no need to take sides; these projects are guided by different purposes and answerable to different principles. There's room enough in the humanities to pursue both. Tolerance is also a virtue.

To reiterate, my central claim is that Avicenna's Flying Man contains an insight that recent commentaries fail to appreciate. The insight is that a certain family of attitude-ascribing constructions appear to license the substitution of co-referring terms. Avicenna leverages the apparent "referential transparency" of these constructions to conclude that one isn't one's body. This means the Flying Man crucially differs from other historically significant lines of thought with which it's almost always assimilated, namely, Frege's Puzzle and the *cogito*-inspired argument for dualism (you remember the one: I doubt that my body exists; I don't doubt that I exist; therefore, I'm not my body). It also means that if the argument fails, it fails for an interesting reason—one that we ought to be clearer about than we now are.

The plan is simple. Sections 2-3 unpack my central claim by situating Avicenna's argument within a more general discussion of content-carrying attitudes and their ascription. Frege's Puzzle takes center stage, but some of the key issues are closely related to the *cogito*. I don't want to deny that there are interesting similarities between the Flying Man on the one hand and Frege's Puzzle and the *cogito* on the other. But I'm inclined to think that these similarities don't run as deep as recent commentators claim. Section 4 preemptively addresses some worries for my core claim. In Section 5, I present the positive case for it.

There's an argument in twentieth-century philosophy of language that resembles the Flying Man more than either Frege's Puzzle or the *cogito*; this argument also relies on the possibility of conscious thought under sensory deprivation, but the conclusion that its author draws surprisingly *conflicts* with Avicenna's reasoning. Who should we side with

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[5] Sense-making of this sort is often called *rational reconstruction*. Given an independent understanding of the author's aim in producing the work at issue, the project of rationally reconstructing the work's central line of thought allows us a bit of interpretive flexibility, insofar as it would better serve the achievement of that aim.

here? In Section 6, I argue that we should side with Avicenna. Section 7 asks how an advocate of the bodily conception of self might respond to Avicenna's argument. One line of thought is tentatively sketched to show that if the Flying Man fails, it fails for an interesting reason. I don't mean to suggest that other avenues of resistance are less promising. I sketch this particular response because the philosopher who inspires it is part of my narrative in earlier sections.

2. I don't listen to podcasts often. My commute to campus is short. I prefer music. And my mind tends to wander. But every now and then I come across a podcast that captures my attention. Kieran Setiya's *Five Questions* is the most recent one.

The episode from April 2021 stands out. Setiya's guest was Richard Kimberly Heck, a specialist in the philosophy of Gottlob Frege (among other important subjects). In the episode, Heck describes their evolving take on the influential puzzle at the heart of Frege's theory of content. How can referentially equivalent contents, ascribing the same property to the same object, nevertheless differ in "cognitive value"? A fully rational yet ignorant subject might affirm one content and simultaneously reject its counterpart. She might then learn that the counterpart is also true and thereby extend her knowledge.

For example, Frederica might not know that her eccentric neighbor, Stefani Germanotta, is the award-winning quadruple threat, Lady Gaga. So, she might rationally believe that Lady Gaga is a celebrity *and* that Stefani Germanotta isn't. Over time, she might realize her mistake. She might come to think, "Stefani Germanotta *is* a celebrity; in fact, she's Lady Gaga!" Frederica would thereby extend her knowledge. How is that possible? Her 'Gaga'-belief and her initial 'Stefani'-belief are about one and the same person. The truth of the former guarantees the falsity of the latter. As a result, her state of mind was straightforwardly incoherent. So how could she have been fully rational all along?[6]

This brief presentation of Frege's Puzzle focuses on the nature of propositional attitudes, paradigmatically, believing that such-and-such is or isn't the case.[7] How should the contents of these attitudes be carved up, or their implementation in underlying representational states be understood? According to an influential line of thought, solving

[6] Frege's answer was that the 'Gaga'-belief is distinct from the 'Stefani'-belief. They involve different "senses". How to understand the idea of sense is a notoriously difficult question (Gray 2018; Heck 2024), much more difficult than is often acknowledged (Almotahari and Gray 2021). Frege doesn't consider the possibility that, although the two beliefs are identical, the underlying representational states that encode them are distinct (Fodor 1990, 1994).

[7] It's somewhat controversial but, plausibly, not every attitude is a *propositional* attitude (Montague 2007; Grzankowski 2013; Benton 2017). In addition to knowing that Bob is in his office, there's the state of knowing Bob. And knowing Bob may not be analyzable in terms of propositional content. Plausibly, knowing Bob is an *objectual* attitude. In the discussion to come, I'm going to assume that something like this traditional distinction is, if not entirely unproblematic, then sufficiently clear for use in understanding the Flying Man.

the Puzzle requires a detailed conception of the various ways in which Frederica can think about and acquire knowledge of Stefani/Gaga. One prominent tradition elaborates this conception in terms of our normal capacities for bundling information into actionable "files" (Evans 1982; Recanati 2012, 2016; Goodman 2024).

But there's another way of formulating the Puzzle, one that foregrounds the language with which we *ascribe* propositional attitudes, in particular, sentences like 'Frederica believes that Lady Gaga is a celebrity'. This formulation asks, why is the substitution of 'Stefani Germanotta' in place of 'Lady Gaga' invalid? Why would it be fallacious to affirm 'Frederica believes that Stefani Germanotta is a celebrity' on the basis of affirming 'Frederica believes that Lady Gaga is a celebrity'? The two embedded names refer to the same person; why doesn't the preservation of reference preserve truth?[8] Linguistic contexts of this sort, which prohibit the substitution of co-referring terms, are "referentially opaque" (Quine 1953).[9]

The first way of formulating the Puzzle, in terms of propositional attitudes, raises a problem in the philosophy of mind. Adequately addressing it requires (among other things) a metaphysics of mind suitable for explaining rational behavior. After all, Frederica might be disposed to act in ways that are both self-undermining *and* rational, depending on whether she would identify the target of her action as "Stefani" or "Gaga". One would like a story to make sense of this puzzling assessment of her predicament.

The second way of formulating the Puzzle, in terms of propositional-attitude *ascriptions*, raises a problem in the philosophy of language. Adequately addressing *it* requires an account of referential opacity that can be seamlessly integrated with a compositional semantic theory for a fragment of English. Ideally, we'd like a unified account of both the attitudes and the language with which we ascribe them, an account that does justice to the full range of facts about cognitive value. But how this sort of unification is to be achieved remains controversial.[10]

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[8] Frege's answer was that the substitution of customarily co-referring terms under an attitude verb triggers a shift in reference. So, contrary to my description of the case, reference isn't preserved. This response raises all sorts of logical problems. See Kaplan (1968) for a classic discussion of the issue. More recently, Yalcin (2015) and Lederman (2022) situate the Fregean take on apparent opacity within a fairly standard compositional semantic theory.

[9] On Frege's view, the relevant grammatical position isn't opaque. The appearance of opacity is due to reference shift. Carnap (1956) develops this idea further. See Gibbard (1975) for an application of Carnap's theory to alethic modal contexts. And see Almotahari (2017; 2020) for a defense of Gibbard (1975) that's friendly to a bodily conception of the self.

[10] For one recent proposal, see Almotahari and Gray (2024).

Like Frege, Heck held one view of these matters early in their career (Heck 1995), and a different view a bit later (Heck 2012).[11,12] They discuss the change with Setiya. Nearing the end of the conversation, just after Setiya poses the fifth and final question, things take an interesting turn.

KS: "It's always a significant question to ask about any philosopher", [Iris Murdoch] said, "What are they afraid of?" So, what are you afraid of?

RKH: I'm puzzled by this one, too. So, I will tell you the thing that most terrifies me. I don't know whether it has anything to do with philosophy. But the thing that most—absolutely most—terrifies me is the idea of being completely immobilized but fully conscious and aware of what's going on. I mean there are people who have this happen to them. And I think the reason I'm so terrified about this is because I used to suffer often from what psychologists call dissociation, which is this sort of sense that you're not connected to your body. Honestly, what am I terrified of? That's what I'm terrified of. But what that would have to do with philosophy, I don't know. And I've struggled to sort of think of, like, are there things that I'm afraid of that would kind of be insightful about my philosophical work or something like that? The only thing I could come up with was something like humiliation. …

KS: Well, on the being immobilized but fully conscious, maybe this is too thin a connection but isn't there a thought experiment—if not in Frege, then in Evans or Anscombe—in which we imagine someone who is, as it were, unable to sense anything but conscious, and there's a question about whether they could use the first person, whether they would have the concept of the first person?

RKH: Yeah, I have not worked on the first person. I have some sense of what you're talking about, but I haven't really worked on that topic, so I don't know this example terribly well.

KS: Well there goes my plan to diagnose your deep interest in Frege, tracing back to your fear of being immobilized. Well, okay, it was worth a try.

RKH: Yup.

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[11] I'm relying on the dominant account of Frege's philosophical development, according to which 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung' marks a transition from a rather different view held in the *Begriffsschrift*. This account has been challenged (Thau and Caplan 2001) and defended (Heck 2003; Dickie 2008).
[12] Heck's early work dealt with the issues in philosophy of language. Their later work belongs to the philosophy of mind. But the issues in language and mind are closely related. See Heck (2014).

The hypothetical case that Setiya seems to have had in mind appears in Anscombe's notoriously difficult paper, 'The First Person'.[13]

> And now imagine that I get into a state of 'sensory deprivation'. Sight is cut off, and I am locally anaesthetized everywhere, perhaps floated in a tank of tepid water; I am unable to speak, or to touch any part of my body with any other. Now I tell myself "I won't let this happen again!" If the object meant by "I" is this body, this human being, then in these circumstances it won't be present to my senses; and how else can it be 'present to' me? But have I lost what I mean by "I"? Is that not present to me? Am I reduced to, as it were, 'referring in absence'? I have not lost my 'self-consciousness'; nor can what I mean by "I" be an object no longer present to me (Anscombe 1975, p. 31).[14]

Remind you of anything?

3. I'll come back to the Flying Man momentarily. First, I'd like to say something about the connection between Frederica's predicament and Anscombe's case.

Just as Frederica has multiple ways of thinking about and acquiring knowledge of Stefani/Gaga, a subject has different ways of thinking about and acquiring knowledge of herself: an *indirect* sort of way, mediated by observation of the environment or inference from a prior identification (e.g., the so-and-so is F; I am the so-and-so; therefore, I am F), and a *direct* sort of way, unmediated by observation or inference. Anscombe's case dramatizes this distinction (McDowell 2009, ch. 11). And once we understand it, we can appreciate the distinction's significance for the cognitive value of referentially equivalent 'I'-thoughts.

Compare two situations. In the first, John Perry knows that someone with a torn bag of sugar walking around the counter is making a mess. He then realizes, "I'm the only person with a torn bag of sugar walking around the counter", and thereby comes to know, as he would put it, "I'm making a mess" (Perry 1979). In the second situation, Perry acquires

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[13] The connection between Avicenna and Anscombe is briefly acknowledged in Black (2008, fn. 8). Before coming across Setiya's conversation with Heck, I was reminded of the connection by M. S. Zarepour. Interestingly, Locke raises the possibility of conscious thought under sensory deprivation in a journal entry dated February 20, 1682: a thinking substance "may subsist in a state of insensibility, without partaking in … any perception whatsoever" (Lähteenmäki 2021, p. 111).

[14] A similar case is discussed briefly in Evans (1982), where the focus is on an important difference between 'here'-thoughts and perceptually mediated demonstrative thoughts:

> Thus one can think 'I wonder what it is like here' when one is blindfolded, anaesthetized, and has one's ears blocked. I think this observation has led some people to think that the special way of gaining knowledge which we have in virtue of occupying a place is irrelevant to our 'here'-thoughts about it, and that in those thoughts we identify the place by description, roughly as *the place I occupy*. This seems wrong to me (pp. 152-153).

I'll return to Evans much later in the discussion.

first-person knowledge that he might express in the same way, "I'm making a mess", not by observation and inference but by intentionally making the mess (Anscombe 1963; cf., Small 2019). The referential content of Perry's 'I'-thought is the same in both situations, but the thoughts seem to differ in cognitive value. One way in which this difference is traditionally marked is by classifying the latter thought as *immune to error through misidentification*: an inferentially unmediated first-personal thought (that I'm making a mess) can be wrong—perhaps the thinker is merely hallucinating—but the error can't be factored into two components, namely, a true belief to the effect that someone is making a mess and a false belief that I happen to be that person (Wittgenstein 1953; Shoemaker 1968; Evans 1982).

Whether we imagine an immobile yet conscious subject floating in a sensory deprivation tank or "flying" in a void, the case resembles Frederica's predicament insofar as it highlights a way in which 'I'-thoughts might differ in cognitive value. The resemblance is powerful enough to get Setiya to associate (albeit reservedly) Heck's fear of conscious immobilization with their interest in Frege's Puzzle. But it shouldn't obscure the crucial difference between the logic of the Flying Man and the considerations that make the notion of cognitive value so puzzling. Nor, for that matter, should it motivate us to assimilate the Flying Man with any other historically significant line of thought that hinges on the referential opacity of content-specifying 'that'-clauses. Here I have in mind the case for dualism based on the *cogito*.[15] Unlike Frege's Puzzle and the *cogito*-inspired case for dualism, Avicenna's Flying Man doesn't involve referential opacity—at least, not as obviously as recent commentaries claim (I elaborate on this qualification in footnote 35).

From beginning to end my discussion will be guided by the question, 'What *should* Avicenna have said?' As it turns out, what he should have said is just what a naive reading of his argument says he *did* say. Curiously, this reading of the Flying Man is either neglected, obscured, or simply misunderstood by its most recent commentators in English (Druart 1988; Sorabji 2006; Black 2008; McGinnis 2010; Alwishah 2013; Kaukua 2015, 2021; Adamson 2016*a*, 2016*b*, 2023; Adamson and Benevich 2018).[16] According to the interpretation I favor, Avicenna wasn't interested in *propositional* attitudes that we might canonically specify by means of a sentence like '*x* knows that *p*' or '*y* is aware that *q*'; he was interested in *objectual* attitudes whose most natural ascription takes the form '*x* knows *y*' or '*x* is aware of *z*'. (Note the grammatical difference: '*p*' and '*q*' occur in sentence position, whereas '*x*', '*y*', and '*z*' stand in for nouns.)

Frege's Puzzle and the *cogito* are about certain propositional attitudes and the canonical ways of ascribing them; they trade on the apparent opacity of the subject position in content-specifying 'that'-clauses. Avicenna's Flying Man, I want to say, is about

[15] See Treanor (2006) for an inventive spin on the *cogito* and its relation to dualism.
[16] There's a lot of work on Avicenna in French, German, Turkish, Farsi, and Arabic that I'm unable to discuss. I'm curious whether my line of thought is represented in this literature. I would be surprised if it weren't.

objectual attitudes; it exploits the transparency of the object position in their canonical ascription. If Frederica knows (is acquainted with or aware of) Stefani Germonatta, then she knows (is acquainted with or aware of) Lady Gaga, though obviously Frederica might not know (be acquainted with or aware of) the performer *as* Lady Gaga. But so what?

Perhaps Lady Gaga kept her stage name and musical career hidden from her disapproving but otherwise highly devoted father. Suppose for the sake of argument that she did. She wouldn't thereby render false the claim that Papa Germanotta knows her. The reason, I submit, is that knowing Lady Gaga doesn't require knowing her *as* Lady Gaga. What it does require is a good question, one about which various authors have recently said a good deal (Benton 2017; Grzankowski and Montague 2018).[17] Going forward, I won't take a stand on the matter. What I'll do is rely on the intuitive transparency of objectual-attitude ascriptions (or one family of objectual-attitude ascriptions) to demonstrate that this reading of the Flying Man is more promising than commentators usually think.[18]

4. Here, I suppose, one might reasonably object to my proposal before I even develop it. I'll articulate the objection in the voice of a hypothetical critic: "Avicenna claimed, in the passage you quoted at the beginning, that the flying man 'will not hesitate to affirm *that* his self exists'. This obviously conflicts with the interpretation you're now advancing. And this part of the English text doesn't appear to be a negligible peculiarity of just one translation. Adamson and Benevich translate it in basically the same way: the flying man 'has no doubt in his affirmation *that* his essence is existent' (2018, p. 148, emphasis added). Doesn't this tell strongly against your view?"

No. As the passage goes on, Avicenna's claim is formulated differently. The flying man is said to "affirm his self" (Kaukua), or to have "affirmed his essence" (Adamson and Benevich). Arguably, these formulations express or allude to objectual attitudes, since they

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[17] Many objectual-attitude reports involve "verbs of perception" (e.g., 'see', 'touch', 'feel', 'sense', and so on). Prominent logicians and linguists take at least some of these verbs to univocally induce transparent contexts, particularly in the case of "naked infinitives" or "unsupported clauses" (e.g., 'I saw John leave'). See, among others, Barwise (1981) and Higginbotham (1983). But the data regarding transparency appears to be somewhat messy. See D'Ambrosio (2022) for a careful discussion. My judgment about the validity of substituting 'Gaga' for 'Stefani' in 'Frederica knows _' isn't idiosyncratic. Respondents agree, as does Benton (2017). Eventually, I'll rely on a somewhat truncated version of these reports: '_ is known'. For example, if Banksy is known, and Banksy is Joe Bloggs, then Joe Bloggs is known, though of course it doesn't follow that Joe Bloggs is known *as* Banksy. Being known, period, and being known *as* so-and-so are, plausibly, distinct monadic properties.

[18] Articulating a theory of objectual knowledge and its canonical ascription would take us off topic. But I want to acknowledge that there are significant complications in the offing. Can't one know the number 12 without knowing the square root of 144? One can surely know the number 12 *as such* without knowing the square root of 144 *as such*. But knowing the number 12, *period*, just is knowing the square root of 144, *period*. Which of these readings is salient may depend on context. But I stipulate on Avicenna's behalf that the reading relevant to his argument is the one that doesn't rely on 'as such' modifiers.

involve noun-phrase complements. So, at best, the letter of the text is somewhat unclear. And where the text suffers from unclarity, our interpretation ought to hinge on what Avicenna *should* have said given his larger aim. My contention is that he should have formulated the claim univocally in terms of objectual attitudes.

But the critic might not be satisfied. "Your response doesn't explain why Avicenna used an attitude verb ('*yuthbitu*') that most naturally denotes a proposition-involving state of mind, namely, affirmation. In the relevant sense, only truth-value bearers can be affirmed. After all, to affirm is to represent as being true. So, isn't it just obvious that Avicenna had a propositional attitude in mind?"

No. Several points are relevant here. First, some background: Hodges (2019, Section 8) and Chatti (2019, pp. 19-20) maintain that Avicenna's predecessor, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, allowed for non-propositional acts of conceiving (*taṣawwur*) that somehow involve assent (*taṣdīq*). They observe, however, that this was an uncommon view—one that Avicenna rejected. In any event, Avicenna did embrace the distinction between propositional thought and non-propositional thought, and in precisely the same terms: *taṣawwur* versus *taṣdīq* (Street 2013, Section 2.1; Chatti 2019, p. 20). The challenge for me is reconciling my interpretation of the Flying Man in terms of non-propositional thought with Avicenna's choice of words in *al-Shifā'*. I think the challenge can be met, but one more preliminary observation is worth bearing in mind here.

Interpreters of Avicenna often have to reconcile themselves with the fact that "although his writings are marked by greater fluency than those of his predecessors—Al-Farabi and Al-Kindi, they suffer from the unfortunate defect of lack of exact formulation of expression" (Rahman 1952, p. 1). As a result, some infelicity is almost inevitable. Even the authors I'm challenging have to explain away the apparent infelicity of phrases like "affirm his self" and "affirmed his essence", so I'm in no worse position.

Now, to the heart of the matter: for Avicenna, knowledge is either propositional or non-propositional; and even propositional knowledge involves a non-propositional conceiving (*taṣawwur*). Presumably, when non-propositional conceivings are related to each other in the appropriate sort of way to form a complex conception, and this conception is met with the subject's assent (*taṣdīq*), the result is a propositional attitude. When this attitude achieves a familiar sort of cognitive success, it counts as propositional knowledge. Here's how Avicenna articulates all of this in the logic of *al-Shifā'*:

> A thing is knowable in two ways: one of them is for the thing to be merely conceived so that when the name is uttered, its meaning becomes present in the mind without there being truth or falsity, as when someone says "man" or "Do this!" … The second is for the conception to be accompanied with assent, so that if someone says to you, for example, "Every whiteness is an accident" you do not only have a conception of

> the meaning of this statement, but also assent to it being so (*al-Madkhal* 17; cited in Street 2013, Section 2.1.3 and in Chatti 2018, p. 20).[19]

Non-propositional conceiving can, by itself, constitute non-propositional knowledge. This point is made again in *al-Najāt*: "Every knowledge and science is either conceptions or assents. The conception is the first science and is acquired by the term (*hadd*) … like our conception of the essence of men" (cited in Chatti 2019, p. 21). Notice that Avicenna's example of non-propositional knowledge is "our conception of the essence of men". Knowledge of essence is paradigmatically non-propositional knowledge. And it's precisely this kind of knowledge that the Flying Man is supposed to impart.

Let's bring all of this to bear on the hypothetical critic's challenge. The verb '*yuthbitu*' is morphologically related to the noun '*ithbāt*', which is synonymous with 'proof' or 'demonstration'—terms that strongly connote cognitive success.[20] Proving or demonstrating is a particularly secure way of knowing. To that extent, 'affirmation' is wrong: one might affirm a falsehood and thereby suffer a cognitive failure. So, unlike 'prove' and 'demonstrate', 'affirm' doesn't connote cognitive success. Since the relevant sort of cognitive success is knowledge, the passage ought to be understood accordingly: the man in flight knows himself but he doesn't know his body. On my reading, then, '*yuthbitu*' signals that the argument hinges on a state of mind that constitutes knowledge. And, as we've seen, Avicenna allows for both propositional and non-propositional knowledge. The latter consists in an act of conceiving without assent. The man in flight naturally engages in self-conception. Since his cognitive faculties are "perfect", the self-conception they underwrite constitutes self-knowledge.

We might obtain further clarity here by having a look at another work of Avicenna's in which the Flying Man plays a role. I have in mind the chapter on terrestrial and celestial souls in *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*:

> Further, if you imagine yourself at the beginning of its creation and with a healthy intellect and a healthy disposition, and supposedly it is altogether in such a position and disposition as not to perceive its parts nor have its members in contact—but separate and suspended for a certain moment in free air—you find that it ignores everything except the assertion that it is. With what do you apprehend (*idrāk*)

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[19] I've made some minor stylistic changes to this passage, e.g., capitalizing the 'd' so that the phrase reads 'Do this!', and so on.

[20] Marmura (1986, p. 385) uses 'establish', as does Alpina (2018, fn. 15). In his recent translation of al-'Allāmah al-Ḥillī's *Taslīk al-nafs ilā hadhīrat al-quds* (*Clearing the Soul for Paradise*), Kaukua (2021, p. 26) uses 'establish' for a conjugation of '*yuthbitu*' (namely, '*bithābit*'). Could the best English term in the vicinity be 'discover'? It too connotes cognitive success, and it has both a propositional and a non-propositional reading: one can discover that such-and-such is the case, but one can also discover so-and-so. Interestingly, 'discovering so-and-so' and 'finding so-and-so' are near synonyms, and Forbes (2006, p. 37) takes the latter to be fully extensional.

> yourself at that time, prior to that time, and posterior to it? Also, what is it of yourself that is apprehended? … I do not believe that in that case you are in need of an intermediary. Thus it is without an intermediary [that you apprehend yourself]. If remains, therefore, that you apprehend yourself without the need for another faculty or an intermediary (tr. Inati 2014, pp. 94-95).

Here too we see vacillation between propositional-attitude reports ("…the assertion *that*…") and objectual-attitude reports ("…you apprehend yourself…"). And, as before, my contention is that, where Avicenna equivocates, we ought to interpret him in a way that privileges what he *should* have said. He should have formulated his argument univocally in terms of objectual attitudes. That way, it would avoid the appearance of invalidity. (More on this to come in the next section.)

The Arabic term corresponding to 'apprehend' is '*idrāk*'. Often, '*idrāk*' is translated as 'grasp'. Given that translation, Avicenna would be claiming that, under complete sensory deprivation, you would still grasp yourself. The metaphor is obviously tactile and sensory. In a footnote to this very passage, Inati says that she intentionally resisted translating '*idrāk*' in a way that would give the corresponding notion sensory import, because Avicenna's central point is that the attitude is realized in conditions of sensory deprivation (p. 194). That seems like a perfectly good consideration for preferring Inati's translation, but I think something is lost without the sensory allusion. Interestingly, some of the objectual attitude verbs that elicit the strongest and most stable transparency intuitions are verbs that express direct tactile relations (D'Ambrosio 2014). 'I touched _' is a paradigmatically extensional context. Translating '*idrāk*' as 'grasp' would, metaphorically, hint at this logical feature of the language. And that seems to me like a good consideration for preferring the tactile allusion. I make no claim about what the best translation would be all things considered.[21]

At this stage, I've done nothing more than state my view, acknowledge some preliminary worries it might elicit, and explain why those worries don't undermine my project from the start. The next section will be more constructive. I'll situate the view in a framework that better reveals how promising it is.

5. Avicenna describes the Flying Man as an "admonition" (*al-tanbīh*) and a "reminder" (*al-tadhkīr*), which serves "as an indication that will make a powerful impression on someone who has the capacity for noticing the truth by himself, without needing to be instructed, prodded, or turned away from sophistries."[22] So, a credible interpretation should satisfy at least three conditions: (i) it should explain what Avicenna meant by describing his

[21] In other contexts—I have in mind the *Ta'liqāt*—Avicenna explicitly formulates the key idea in terms of our awareness of our selves ("*al-shu'ūrunā bi dhātinā*"). See Kaukua (2015, pp. 52-53).
[22] This description occurs in the paragraph immediately preceding the text I quoted in Section 1. I borrow the translation from Adamson and Benevich (2018, p. 148).

argument as an "indication" (*ishāra*) that falls short of explicit instruction; (ii) it should avoid incorporating theoretical baggage that would make explicit instruction necessary; and (iii) it should avoid the attribution of silly logical mistakes (like the neglect of referential opacity). Avicenna was, after all, the most accomplished logician of his generation and many generations thereafter. Here I'll present a rather straightforward, uncomplicated, even naive reading of the argument that satisfies all three conditions.

The Flying Man depends on a situation that, from Avicenna's perspective, is genuinely possible in itself. That is, nothing in its very conception is contradictory or unintelligible, even if it happens to be inherently bizarre or downright impossible when considered in relation to other things (e.g., God's nature). This encourages a reading of the central argument on which it crucially involves modal reasoning. But this sort of reading seems to me, at best, optional. Another option—one that I want to take quite seriously—is that the argument identifies a property that you and I *actually* possess but that our bodies *actually* don't. In one way, this option fits better with the text, since no modal principles or conceivability-possibility connections are explicitly mentioned. But there are other text-based reasons in favor of the reading.

Notice that Avicenna describes the flying man as being "created" in "perfect" condition. Presumably, this means that his cognitive capacities are functioning as they should—as any normal human being's cognitive capacities would normally function. 'Normal' here doesn't mean statistically prevalent; it means consistent with the *télos* of the relevant kind. This is why normative terms, like 'perfect' and 'should', get a grip. If a capacity fails to achieve its *télos*, then it suffers from imperfection; it's not functioning as it should. So, the direct self-knowledge that the flying man enjoys in his peculiar situation is not the result of some special endowment only he possesses in that situation; it's the result of exercising a cognitive capacity that normal people—you and I—normally exercise. The case is meant to show that this capacity doesn't underwrite knowledge of one's body, for then it wouldn't be performing in perfect condition, because it wouldn't be delivering what it's supposed to, namely, bodily knowledge.

What the Flying Man indicates, without explicit instruction, is that you and I actually possess and actually exercise a cognitive capacity for direct self-knowledge as part of our shared human nature. Furthermore, this capacity isn't implicated in the way we acquire knowledge of our bodies. So, although the argument relies on a merely hypothetical case, its premises are categorical. That is, they're about what's actually the case. Contrary to Adamson and Benevich (2018), the Flying Man isn't a modal argument that presupposes an elaborate theory of essences or a rationalist model of modal knowledge. In other words, the argument isn't weighed down by such theoretical baggage.

Given that you and I successfully exercise a capacity for direct self-knowledge that isn't involved in generating our bodily knowledge, Avicenna's argument can be officially stated in the first person as follows: (iv) I am known directly (by exercising a certain capacity that normal humans possess); (v) my body isn't known directly (by exercising that

very capacity); therefore, I am not my body. Claim (iv) is a simple sentence in which 'I' occurs as the logical subject but refers to the object of the relevant state of knowledge. It is, one might plausibly think, referentially transparent. (More on this to come shortly.) The predicate that follows 'I' in (iv) ascribes the monadic property of being known directly. Claim (v) says that my body doesn't possess that property. As a result, the indiscernibility of identicals straightforwardly justifies the conclusion that I am not my body.

It's worth lingering here for a moment, because there seems to be confusion about this point in the recent exegetical literature. For example, consider one prominent author's discussion: "The flying man is aware *of* himself; he knows *that* he exists. But he is not aware *of* his body; he doesn't know *that* his body exists, nor indeed *that* any body exists. And if I am aware of one thing but not another, how can those two things be identical? This sounds pretty persuasive, until you reflect that one can be conscious of a thing without being conscious of everything about it" (Adamson 2016*a*, italics mine; cf., Black 2008, p. 65, and McGinnis 2010, p. 145).

Notice that Adamson begins by ascribing an objectual attitude to the flying man ("…is aware *of*…") but then provides what I assume is supposed to be an equivalent gloss by ascribing a propositional attitude ("…knows *that*…"). This presentation obscures the logical difference between the two attitude ascriptions,[23] a difference for which I gave a preliminary argument in the previous section.[24] In fact, my argument relied on a special case of the obvious truth that Adamson mentions: one can know (be acquainted with or conscious of) someone without knowing (being acquainted with or conscious of) that person *as*, e.g., Lady Gaga. Objectual knowledge of Lady Gaga doesn't require knowing everything about her. In particular, it doesn't require knowing her alter ego. So, if Frederica knows Stefani Germanotta, she knows Lady Gaga. If Lady Gaga is known widely, then Stefani Germanotta is known widely. Consequently, arguing for the distinctness of Lady

[23] It suggests that the opacity of "…knows that…" infects "…is aware of…". A similar mistake is made in Adamson's 2013 podcast on the subject. Cf., Adamson (2016*b*; 2023).

[24] Black (2012, p. 272) represents Avicenna's argument in terms of direct objectual awareness of ("grasping") the self. Black (2008, p. 65) notes in passing that authors have criticized the Flying Man on the grounds that it, like the *cogito*-inspired case for dualism, neglects the presence of referential opacity. Unfortunately, Black moves on from this observation without further comment. Understandably, her objective is to develop Avicenna's theory of self-awareness rather than to assess the cogency of the Flying Man. But there's a good reason why this lost opportunity is unfortunate: Black claims the Flying Man "seems to contain the obviously fallacious inference pattern, 'If I know *x* but I do not know *y*, then *x* cannot be the same as *y*'" (p. 65). Notice that in her representation of Avicenna's reasoning, the variables '*x*' and '*y*' occupy grammatical positions reserved for nouns, since there's no complementizer (as in 'I know *that*…'), which would indicate that the variables occur in sentence position. Claiming that this very pattern of reasoning is "obviously fallacious" misrepresents the logical difference between objectual-awareness ascriptions and propositional-awareness ascriptions (cf., McGinnis 2010, p. 145). Worse, it can motivate scholars to associate Black with the view that Avicenna was making a simple logical mistake, thus encouraging misunderstanding by virtue of her authority. For example, see Toivanen (2015, p. 69, fn. 15).

Gaga and Jane Bloggs in the following way should be logically unproblematic: Lady Gaga is known widely; Jane Bloggs isn't known widely; therefore, Lady Gaga isn't Jane Bloggs. It's just like arguing for their distinctness as follows: Lady Gaga is famous; Jane Bloggs isn't famous; therefore, etc. Being famous is, after all, basically the same property as being known widely. If x has this monadic property but y doesn't, then the indiscernibility of identicals entails that x and y are distinct. We obtain the Flying Man by substituting 'Lady Gaga' with 'I', 'Jane Bloggs' with 'my body', and 'widely' with 'directly'. The two arguments appear to instantiate the same pattern of reasoning. One might very plausibly think, then, that the Flying Man is logically unproblematic if the argument distinguishing Lady Gaga from Jane Bloggs is logically unproblematic. Surprisingly, every major discussion of the Flying Man with which I'm familiar alleges that a straightforward, uncomplicated, naive reading of the argument is vitiated by logical error.

I began this section by identifying three adequacy conditions. I'd like a story that (i) explains what Avicenna meant by describing his argument as an "indication" that doesn't require explicit instruction, (ii) avoids weighty theoretical baggage; and (iii) eliminates silly logical mistakes. I believe my interpretation satisfies all three conditions. The hypothetical case on which the Flying Man is based indicates that you and I have self-knowledge on the basis of a normal human capacity for acquiring such knowledge. Whatever bodily knowledge we might possess isn't based on the exercise of that capacity but on our sensorimotor faculties. These observations support a straightforward, uncomplicated, and rather naive argument from the indiscernibilty of identicals, the premises of which are identified in (iv) and (v). No weighty theoretical baggage is needed for the inference to go through. Finally, Avicenna's argument appears to instantiate the same logically unproblematic form as the argument for distinguishing Lady Gaga from Jane Bloggs. So, if there *is* a logical mistake, it's not a silly one.

Arguing for an interpretation on the grounds that it satisfies a few conditions of adequacy is, I hope, persuasive enough for commentators to take it seriously going forward. But I'm not going to pretend that the argument is conclusive. It would be better, I think, if we could situate the interpretation in a broader discussion of Avicenna's philosophical system. This is one respect in which Druart (1988), Black (2008), McGinnis (2010), Alwishah (2013), Kaukua (2015), and Adamson and Benevich (2018) are highly admirable—they connect the Flying Man with other elements of Avicenna's voluminous work. I'm not going to attempt anything that ambitious here, but I *can* draw your attention to one brief part of Book II, Section VI, Chapter X of Avicenna's *Najāt*, which fits particularly well with what I've said about the Flying Man.

> [A] We maintain that if the rational faculty [or intellect] were to know through a physical organ, so that its peculiar activity would be incomplete [or imperfect] except by the use of that physical organ, it would necessarily follow that it would not know its own self, nor the organ, nor its act of knowing. [B] For there is no organ

> between the rational faculty itself, nor does one intervene between it and its organ or between it and the fact that it knows. [C] It follows that it knows [itself] through itself, not through an organ (Rahman 1952, pp. 50-51).

Notice the way Avicenna specifies the content of the intellect's knowledge: "its own self". This suggests, as I've been arguing all along, that the kind of self-knowledge with which Avicenna was most fundamentally concerned was objectual knowledge (cf., Alwishah 2015, p. 151).[25]

6. Anscombe's classic paper on the first person is challenging. One reason why is that it weaves together subtly distinct but closely related arguments for a highly implausible thesis: that 'I' and its siblings ('me' and 'my') aren't referring terms.[26] It's difficult to tell how these arguments are supposed to fit together. Anscombe provides no positive account of the semantic role 'I' plays. As a result, we're not able to employ the familiar tactic of "reverse engineering" an argument that might support such an account. Nor are we able to tell a story on Anscombe's behalf that might explain why, if she were right, almost all of us would be deceived into thinking 'I' is a referring term. The paper is so challenging, in fact, that some philosophers are reluctant to critically engage with it (Kripke 2011, pp. 311-313). I can't help but feel a little foolish, then, charging ahead where the wise dare not go. But the way I've set things up compels me to say *something*.

I want to maintain, on Avicenna's behalf, that a sentence in which 'I' occurs as the grammatical subject partially justifies the application of the indiscernibility of identicals. This implies that the sentence in question has the logical form of a subject-predicate sentence in which the semantic role of 'I' is to contribute an object to which the predicate then ascribes a property. So, curiously, the use to which Anscombe puts her floating subject *conflicts* with the use to which Avicenna puts his flying man. Can I just leave this conflict hanging and conclude?

On my reading of Anscombe's paper, the central argument goes something like this:

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[25] Could Descartes have had objectual knowledge in mind? There's at least one passage that suggests so: "… what is this 'I' that I know?" (*Meditations* 2: 27). But there are passages that suggest otherwise: "…we do not have immediate knowledge of substances" (*Fourth Set of Replies*, 222). As far as I know, there doesn't seem to be anything in Descartes's system to suggest that passages of the first sort are anything but rhetorical.

[26] "'I' doesn't name a person, nor 'here' a place, and 'this' is not a name. But they are connected with names. Names are explained by means of them." (Wittgenstein 1953, Section 410). I take it that, by rejecting the claim that 'I' names a person, Wittgenstein is repudiating the view that 'I' is a referring term, not that it names something that isn't a person. Wittgenstein's overall position is more nuanced than this short passage indicates. He maintains that there are two ways of using 'I'; only on one does it fail to be a referring term. To that extent, Anscombe's view is more radical. She denies that 'I' is ever referential.

1. Normal cases of distinctively first-personal knowledge are direct and therefore unmediated by observation or inference.[27]
2. The paradigm use of 'I' is one in which it occurs as the grammatical subject of a sentence describing a case of *that* kind.
3. An adequate semantic theory of a term must explain the paradigm use to which it's put.
4. But a semantic theory of 'I' according to which it's a referring term doesn't explain its paradigm use: the kind of use in which it occurs as the grammatical subject of a sentence describing a normal case of distinctively first-personal knowledge.
5. Therefore, an adequate semantic theory of 'I' won't represent it as a referring expression.

But how is Anscombe's case of conscious thought under sensory deprivation supposed to contribute to this argument's success?

Insofar as the floating subject is unexceptional, Anscombe's case suggests that we possess a capacity for acquiring unmediated distinctively first-personal knowledge. Elsewhere, in her classic book on the nature of intention, Anscombe argues that we exercise this epistemic capacity in normal cases of intentional action. Knowledge of what one is intentionally doing, as one is doing it, is normally unmediated: non-observational and non-inferential (Anscombe 1963; cf., Small 2019). Given that we sometimes act intentionally, and that we do so without any aberration, it follows that there are normal cases of direct and distinctively first-personal knowledge. So, one might reasonably accept the argument's initial premise.

If my reading of Anscombe is on the right track, then at the forefront of her thought is a use of 'I' on which it reports what one is doing intentionally or how one is feeling self-consciously: the kind of use that occurs in, for example, 'I kicked the ball', 'I am leaving', 'I am nervous'. This is the "paradigm" use of 'I' to which the second premise draws our attention. According to Anscombe, or my reading of her, one must learn this use to master the meaning of 'I' (Anscombe 1975, p. 34; cf., Teichmann 2008, pp. 162-163), and because this use plays such an important role in the acquisition of competence with the term, it has (according to Anscombe) a centrality in semantic theorizing that other kinds of use (e.g., 'Where am I?') don't.

My reading of the second premise sheds some light on how we're meant to understand the third: semantic theories are to be evaluated at least partly on the basis of whether they illuminate certain facts about the acquisition of competence. There are, of course, other viable conceptions of semantic theory. Perhaps it has less to do with human psychology and the acquisition of competence and more to do with the description and explanation of an abstract structure that we put to use for largely social purposes (Soames

[27] Again, normalcy isn't a statistical property but a teleological one.

1984). I suspect Anscombe wouldn't be terribly bothered by this response. She might concede that the kind of semantic investigation she has in mind isn't, perhaps, the kind that's practiced nowadays by philosophers of language and linguists. But she would probably insist that there's an important question in the offing that philosophers of language and linguists are unequipped to answer, namely, how certain normal features of distinctively first-personal knowledge associated with 'I' distinguish its characteristic behavior from the way in which proper names typically behave.

The fourth premise is, probably, the most dubious. In support of it, Anscombe presents another hypothetical case: the community of 'A'-users (1975, pp. 24-30). The premise also raises questions about what Anscombe would regard as an explanation of the appropriate kind. Here is where the absence of a positive account—one that successfully does what Anscombe claims a referential theory of 'I' simply doesn't—is most strongly felt. Because I'm reluctant to speculate, and because the community of 'A'-users raises issues that don't really resemble the Flying Man, I won't explore the matter in any depth.[28] Fortunately, I won't have to, because it seems to me that there's a significant problem for the argument even if we concede that its fourth premise is true.

Anscombe's central argument (as I understand it) is invalid. Here's one way of making the point explicit: let's suppose that 'I' is referential but stipulate that its being referential doesn't explain what Anscombe took to require explanation. Still, we might suppose that the referentiality of 'I' doesn't *exhaust* its semantic character. It might have another semantic feature that explains the paradigm use on which Anscombe placed so much weight. What would this other feature have to be? It's a bit hard to say, since we're in the dark concerning the kind of explanation Anscombe demands, but here's one promising view: in addition to the referentiality of 'I', there's its conventional association with "a special and primitive way" in which one is presented to oneself (and to no one else) in thought (Frege 1919, p. 333). By exercising this special way of thinking—this unique "mental file", if you like—we can acquire direct and distinctively first-personal knowledge.[29,30] In other words, it's simply part of the file's nature to facilitate or partially constitute the

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[28] For further discussion, see McDowell (2009, ch. 11) and Teichmann (2008, ch. 4). I haven't been able to carefully study Doyle (2018), but Part Two is devoted to a sympathetic reading of Anscombe's paper. It seems that Doyle understands the central line of thought in Anscombe's paper quite differently.

[29] Commenting on the very passage in Frege (1919) that I'm relying on here, Kaplan (1989, pp. 533-534) argues that his two-feature theory of 'I', in terms of content and character, can do the work for which Frege posited a primitive self-presentational sense. I take no official stand on the best implementation of the two-semantic-features response to Ancombe's argument. I rely on Frege's view largely for rhetorical purposes. Anscombe had the benefit of Frege's 'Der Gedanke', but maybe not of Kaplan's 'Demonstratives'.

[30] If the referentiality of 'I' doesn't explain its paradigm use, then is it merely an idle wheel? Not at all. Classifying 'I' as a referring term explains its logical behavior: that it can validly participate in certain substitutions and generalizations. Accounting for the logical behavior of a term is a core aim of semantic theory (Soames 1984).

thinking of thoughts that are immune to error through misidentification; and it's simply part of the meaning of 'I' to activate such a file when the term is put to its paradigm use.

What this discussion brings out is that Anscombe's argument requires a claim that's much stronger than any I've made salient so far. It requires the claim that the referentiality of 'I' doesn't merely *fail* to account for its paradigm use; it positively *obstructs* any such account. If that claim were true, then the sort of view we imagined in the previous paragraph, on which 'I' is associated with two semantic features, would be ruled out; for one of the features (referentiality) would preclude the other (a primitive way of thinking about oneself) from doing its job. But I'm unable to find anything in Anscombe's paper that supports the truth of such an implausibly strong claim. The failure may well be mine. I leave it to students of Anscombe to judge.[31]

7. Substance dualism entails that I can survive bodily death. Nothing as radical as *that* follows from the Flying Man, whether we understand it in the way I've suggested or not. In fact, the conclusion of Avicenna's argument is compatible with the letter of physicalism; for it may well be that first-personal facts globally supervene on the fundamental physical facts even though my body and I are distinct (no two possible worlds indistinguishable with respect to the fundamental physical facts are distinguishable with respect to the first-personal facts). But a physicalism of this kind takes on an explanatory burden. It owes a story about the ground of the supervenience relation. If it's not sustained by the identity of one's body with oneself, what sustains it? Typically, a non-reductive physicalist will appeal to "constitution" or "realization" or some other explanatory relation in the vicinity. But where does Avicenna's argument leave the reductive physicalist? What might *she* say about the Flying Man?[32]

It's not obvious.[33] And that's largely the point.[34] If my interpretation is correct, then the argument doesn't fail for the boring old reason that the *cogito*-inspired case for dualism

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[31] Conversations about this material have led me to think that there are deep affinities between Anscombe's view of the first person and David Lewis's theory of *de se* attitudes. (James Laing informs me that Michael Thompson made this point years ago. Matthew Chrisman tells me that the point is made again in Boyle (2024, ch. 5).)

[32] See Lewis (1971) for a highly elegant defense of the bodily conception. His theory bears a striking resemblance to the theory in Gibbard (1975), briefly mentioned in footnote 9. The resemblance is acknowledged (along with some important differences) in the correspondence between the two authors (Beebee and Fischer 2020, Letter 236).

[33] Can't the reductive physicalist just flat-footedly deny claim (v), that my body isn't known directly? If I'm literally identical with my body, doesn't this claim just beg the question? I think Avicenna has a reasonable answer: what would *explain* this direct bodily knowledge? If, as the flying man's predicament suggests, bodily knowledge requires the exercise of either internal or external sensory receptivity, and knowledge based on that kind of receptivity is incompatible with the relevant sort of directness, then there's independent motivation to accept claim (v).

[34] As Alpina (2018, p. 208) points out, Avicenna took the Flying Man to be completely decisive (*qāti*ʿ) for an insightful reader.

does. In fact, it seems that if the argument fails at all, it fails for an interesting reason, one about which it would be good to get much clearer than we now are. And I take this conclusion to be a noteworthy virtue of the reading I've proposed. As I said at the outset, I assume we still have something to learn from Avicenna. The foregoing discussion appears to have vindicated that assumption. But I want to conclude with a point of criticism—not about my interpretation, but about the argument itself.

Couldn't our capacity for distinctively first-personal knowledge be normally unmediated, not requiring observation or inference, yet still essentially reliant on bodily faculties that are silenced by total sensory deprivation? If so, then the Flying Man wouldn't describe a genuine possibility. But how might we motivate this sort of position? Here is where the discussion in Evans (1982) seems particularly helpful.[35] It inspires the following line of thought: to have distinctively first-personal knowledge, even of an objectual sort, I must be in a position to appreciate the difference between thinking "I" and thinking "It"—as in the difference between Descartes's "I think" and Lichtenberg's "It thinks". What does the ability to appreciate this difference demand of a subject?

Perhaps it requires the ability to represent a space of potential action through which we can move and thereby distinguish ourselves as ourselves.

> … take the up-down directionality of the [perceptual] field. What is it based on? Up and down are not simply related to my body; up is not just where my head is and down where my feet are. For I can be lying down, or bending over, or upside down; and in all these cases 'up' in my field is not the direction of my head. Nor are up and down defined by certain paradigm objects in the field, such as earth or sky: the earth can slope for instance.
>
> Rather, up and down are related to how one would move and act in the field. For it is of course as a bodily agent functioning in a gravitational field that 'up' and 'down' have meaning for me. …My field has an up and a down because it is the field of an agent of this kind. It is structured as a field of potential action (Taylor 1978-1979 pp. 154-155, cited in Evan 1982).

And it may be that the ability to represent a space of potential action requires exercising the sensorimotor faculties that the Flying Man hypothetically veils. So, at the very least, it

[35] I don't mean to suggest that this is the only, or even the most promising, way to resist the Flying Man. Something closely resembling the approach in Lewis (1971) seems applicable and worth exploring. This strategy would accept the legitimacy of moving from 'Lady Gaga is known widely' to 'Stefani Germanotta is known widely', when given 'Lady Gaga is Stefani Germanotta', but it would reject the legitimacy of moving from 'I am known directly' to 'my body is known directly', even if the claim 'I am my body' is true. Spelling this out in detail, however, would require certain assumptions about the meaning of 'knows' and the nature of objectual knowledge—assumptions that, as far as I'm aware, have never been discussed by Avicenna scholars in this context. So, my central claims remain intact: recent commentaries have mishandled the logic of the Flying Man; and, if the argument fails, it fails for an interesting reason.

becomes unclear whether the man in flight can appreciate the difference between the two kinds of thought, and therefore whether he can have distinctively first-personal knowledge. Interestingly, Avicenna discusses the relationship between self-awareness and action in *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt* (Kaukua 2021, pp. 59-60), but the passage is exceedingly difficult and it's not clear whether it bears on the response I've sketched.

One of the provocative claims for which Evans (1982) is known is that reflection on the body, and the forms of thought it makes possible, is "the most powerful antidote to a Cartesian conception of the self" (p. 220). Ironically, even Descartes seems to have had some inkling of this, as Evans was well aware: "Nature teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am besides so intimately conjoined and intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity" (*Meditations* 6: 13). This remark wasn't a one-off blunder; similar statements are made elsewhere (Lähteenmäki 2021, pp. 106-109; cf., Chamberlain 2016 and Simmons 2017). But it's equally clear that Avicenna's understanding of the relationship between body and self was very different. He took the body to be a tool of the self, in some ways analogous to clothes one might shed or a vehicle one might exit (Druart 1988). But these analogies are, in some crucial respects, incomplete and misleading; they don't tell the full story.[36] And, unfortunately, neither will I. Instead, I'll close with this: from a modern point of view, the lessons of Nature are more worthy of affirmation than the admonishments of philosophers—even the foremost *shaikh* among them.

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