

BOOK REVIEW

Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing, by Muhammad U. Faruque, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021, 328 pp., \$80.00

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It has long been recognized that without understanding ourselves, we are unable to fully comprehend the world around us and what transcends the empirical order of our sense-bound reality. This is demonstrated by the injunction of the oracle at Delphi: “Know thyself” (*Gnothi Seautón*), the Islamic philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā’s saying “Whoever knows himself attains the transcendent state of apotheosis” (*man ‘arafa dhātahu ta’allaha*, p. 62), and in the well-known *ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, “He who knows himself knows his Lord” (*man ‘arafa nafsahu faqad ‘arafa rabbah*). The notion of human identity or the “self” has captivated the greatest minds of the world and continues to do so; however, contemporary approaches that are restricted to empirical ways of knowing differ radically from the epistemological pluralism found in the diverse cultures of the world that are informed by their religious and spiritual traditions. This is where Muhammad Faruque’s *Sculpting the Self* breaks new ground by offering a new way forward: an integrative, “spectrum” model of the self that boldly addresses “what it means to be human” in a secular, post-Enlightenment world. Judged from its philosophical sophistication and extraordinary disciplinary breadth, the book must be regarded as a major study of selfhood, identity, and flourishing that brings to the fore an anthropocentric and anthropocosmic vision of human nature acutely needed in an age of increasing alienation and meaninglessness.

This book has been adapted from Muhammad Faruque’s doctoral dissertation, which has been substantially revised to include further research. It consists of five chapters. *Chapter 1: The Problematic of the Self* presents the theoretical challenges impeding the study of the self and a multidisciplinary framework for undergoing this study; *Chapter 2: The View from and beyond the “I”* analyzes the paradox of self-knowledge and the interrelationship of the subject-object relationship that unifies them; *Chapter 3: Self-Knowledge and the Levels of Consciousness* explores the epistemological errors of the self as advanced by Enlightenment philosopher David Hume (1711–1776), whose philosophy views human identity as merely a bundle of perceptions; *Chapter 4: Self, Body, and Consciousness* analyzes the relationship

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between consciousness and neuroscience; *Chapter 5: Sculpting the Self* deals with the issues of selfhood, self-cultivation practices, and human flourishing; *Chapter 6: Consummation: "I" or "I and I"* articulates the benefits and limitations of general conceptions or theories of the self.

Faruque begins his introduction to the book by emphasizing that "theories of selfhood and subjectivity are going through a major crisis today and have almost reached a dead end" (p. 1). Yet, what is this crisis? And why is it relatively unknown? This is precisely the question explored by this work.

The historical use of the term self as understood in the modern West originates with John Locke (1632–1704), to whom is also attributed to the development of empiricism and modern psychology itself. The author undertook this study to formulate a multidimensional model of the self so that it can be grasped in its most complete context. Faruque points out that the reason why there is so much disagreement among scholars regarding this question is because each one is examining selfhood from the purview of their narrow specialization, and neglecting to take into account that the self is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to one dimension such as the corporeal, psychological, or social.

Unless we recognize the intrinsic multimodality of human identity, which is rooted in the diverse cultures and their knowledge systems as informed by their religious and spiritual traditions, there is no way out of this current impasse. For this study, Faruque adopted an approach that he calls "culture and epistemic pluralism" defined as "the recognition that fundamental questions of philosophy have been addressed by major cultures, and that there are multiple valid epistemological frameworks to address the questions of truth, knowledge, and being" (p. 10).

Faruque proposes two distinct levels of the self, the "descriptive" and the "normative." The descriptive level pertains to the bio-physiological, sociocultural, and cognito-experiential dimensions, whereas the normative level relates to the ethical and spiritual. When both of these levels are taken into consideration, identity can be more fully understood, as these correspond to the tripartite structure of the human being comprising Spirit, soul, and body. A multidimensional framework allows for both levels to be considered so as to prevent reductionism.

The human being does not only consist of corporeal elements, but is a "composite of body and soul" (p. 16). Across the religious and spiritual traditions, we find a recognition that the human being is triadic in nature as indicated above. There are important distinctions between the *soul* and the *self*, as there are between our *psychological* and *spiritual* dimensions. Before the emergence of its modern Western form, the discipline of psychology was rooted in metaphysics and was known as the "science of the soul" or, in Islam, as *'ilm al-nafs*.

The author explains the distinction between sacred epistemologies that inform human identity in contrast with modern notions of selfhood, which are "marked by the awareness that the self is not something divinely formed and statically placed; it is rather changeable, constructible, and cultivatable through one's own creative agency" (p. 13). A central problem that modern science faces is that it "cannot give us access to subjectivity independent of itself. When we use a scientific method to investigate subjectivity, we are always necessarily objectifying it using and relying on our subjectivity" (p. 31). The paradox of human identity is that the subject cannot also be an object for the "I" always remains.

Ultimately, there is something fundamentally mysterious about human identity itself that eludes our attempts to reduce it to simple definitions or theoretical frameworks, no matter how inclusive they might be. This was and is something that the distinct cultures and their epistemologies understood, and should not be viewed as a limitation. Faruque explains, "The multidimensionality of the self also implies that certain residual ambiguities are meant to remain unresolved concerning its nature" (p. 44). However, this does not suggest that

definitions and models cannot be useful; far from it. In fact, the challenge lies in the use of words to describe what is beyond all words and descriptions.

As human beings are a microcosm of the macrocosm, all levels of reality (along with the corresponding modes of knowing) also exist within a person. The Divine being both transcendent and immanent is at once totally beyond all human knowing while, at the same time, dwelling within the human mind and heart. Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240) elaborates on this principle:

The waystation includes the fact that God deposited within man knowledge of all things, then prevented him from perceiving what He had deposited within him. Man is not alone in this. On the contrary, the whole cosmos is the same. This is one of the divine mysteries which reason denies and considers totally impossible. The nearness of this mystery to those ignorant of it is like God’s nearness to His servant, as mentioned in His words, “We are nearer to him than you, but you do not see” (Q. 56:85). . . . In spite of this nearness, the person does not perceive and does not know. . . . No one knows what is within himself until it is unveiled to him instant by instant. (p. 57)

In traversing the spiritual paths found within the religions, human beings may become purified and prepared to access these integral modes of knowledge that consist of distinct levels of reality, corresponding to the transpersonal dimension.

According to Mullā Ṣadrā (1571–1636), “Knowledge of the self is the same as the self itself” (p. 79). That human identity cannot be known through objectified knowledge is noted by the eighth-century Vedantic sage Shankara:

[I]t is logically impossible to search for knowledge of knowledge. If knowledge were initially unknown, like the object of knowledge, then we should have to seek knowledge of knowledge, just as we seek knowledge of an object. In the case of an object of knowledge, like a pot, the knower seeks to encompass the object with his knowledge. If this were also the case with knowledge [itself], the knower would seek to encompass every cognition with another cognition. But this would lead to an infinite regress and we do not find this to be the case. Knowledge, therefore, is immediately evident, as also is the knower. Hence no effort has to be made to gain knowledge of the self (*ātman*). (p. 89)

The self can only be known through the self, but it cannot become an object of knowledge as human identity is always the subject.

All religions affirm that there is an inseparable link between the human and the Divine. The task of the world’s religions, and their inner dimension, is to awaken to our primordial nature (*fiṭrah*), the “image of God” (*imago Dei*), Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*), or Self (*Ātmā*), our true identity *in divinis*. This traditional doctrine can be found across all spiritual traditions and is closely related to the image one has of Reality itself. It is the metaphysical order that restores harmony to a consciousness that has been bifurcated into mind and matter, or subject and object. Religion is seen by every tradition as imperative in helping us awaken to who we truly are and to realize our full potential as human beings. The philosophical arguments that forged the schism between sacred and profane ways of understanding human identity predate the European Renaissance. Likewise, the emergence of humanism, the Scientific Revolution, and the secular outlook of the Enlightenment project—marked by the gradual decline in religion in the modern West—all contributed to a ruptured view of human identity bereft of metaphysics. It is through this trajectory that the contemporary world has fashioned a desacralized outlook on human identity, or the self, and its ways of knowing.

As a counterpoint to the modern bifurcated self, one needs a “science of the soul,” as informed by metaphysics, through which the separate self or empirical ego can be reintegrated into the Divine so as to allow the true transpersonal self to emerge; yet this requires an

alchemical process or what Mullā Ṣadrā describes as “annihilation of the self” (p. 215) in God (*fanā’ fi-llāh*). The true self can emerge as “subsistence” (*baqā’*) only after the individual’s “annihilation” (*fanā’*) in the Divine, a transformative process that is found, not only within the Islamic tradition and its mystical dimensions, but within all religions that provide unique instruction on how to “sculpt the self.” The founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus (pp. 204–270), provides a vivid description of this process:

Go back into yourself and look; and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop “working on your statue” till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you, till you see “self-mastery enthroned upon its holy seat.” If you have become this, and see it, and are at home with yourself in purity, with nothing hindering you from becoming in this way one, with no inward mixture of anything else, but wholly yourself, nothing but true light, not measured by dimensions, or bounded by shape into littleness, or expanded to size by unboundedness, but everywhere unmeasured, because greater than all measure and superior to all quantity; when you see that you have become this, then you have become sight; you can trust yourself then; you have already ascended and need no one to show you; concentrate your gaze and see. (pp. 220–221)

Faruque writes that “the goal of sculpting the self through philosophy and spiritual practices is not divinity, but full humanity,” (p. 260) which is an allusion to the famous Sufi doctrine of the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*). Paradoxically, to realize our full humanity requires an agency that transcends the limitations of our human condition; it is this integral connection to the Divine manifested through love, beauty, and compassion that completes our identity. The author also adds: “The realization of spiritual perfection entails not divinity but complete humanity, which implies the perfection of all-too-human qualities such as humor, simplicity, and childlike purity” (p. 262).

This cross-cultural analysis of human identity or the self provides a brilliant and wide-spanning philosophical understanding of the current epistemological challenges in understanding selfhood. Faruque has amassed an extraordinary amount of source material in several European and Islamic languages by bringing the Islamic tradition into dialogue with the metaphysics of the East and West, including modern disciplines such as cognitive science, consciousness studies, evolutionary theory, and neuroscience—that offer a remarkable study of selfhood. The author not only explores the existing epistemological barriers that prevent a cross-cultural and integral understanding of selfhood, but also successfully advances a multidimensional model to overcome the crisis that a more reductionist approach has brought about.

It is precisely such a framework that fosters epistemological pluralism, which is vitally needed to reconcile and unify theories of the self that prevail today. This integrative approach is also something that the discipline of modern Western psychology is sadly missing. This work will be important for mental health professionals seeking to better understand human identity as it is informed by the diverse cultures and their knowledge systems. What is lacking in contemporary science is an ontological foundation in metaphysics; without it, there cannot be a complete understanding of the self, or knowledge for that matter. In restoring modern science, including psychology, to its metaphysical roots, we can glean the true meaning of the dictum “Know thyself” or the saying of the Prophet Muhammad, “He who knows himself knows his Lord.”

Author Note

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