

## The examination of Transformation of Aristotle's idea on self-awareness in the views of Avicenna and Aquinas

*Seyyed Ali Hosseini<sup>1</sup>*

**Submitted:**

2021/3/8

**Accepted:**

2021/5/31

**Keywords:**

Avicenna,  
Aristotle,  
Aquinas, self-  
awareness,  
consciousness

**Abstract:** In the peripatetic philosophy, there are two views on self-awareness: the idea that claims self-awareness depends on the cognition of other things (cognition-dependent self-awareness) and the views that state self-awareness is a permanent phenomenon and can be directly accessed through introspection. The former idea is often attributed to Aristotle and the latter opinion stated by Avicenna who believed in the inseparability of human nature and self-awareness. Although Aquinas was a proponent of cognition-dependent self-awareness, he tried to preserve the benefits of the opponent view (eg. Preserving first person perspective, our introspective intuitions and ontological self-identity) and reduce deficiencies and ambiguities of Aristotle's theory by proposing Habitual and actual self-awareness. In my view, he was somehow successful in the second task, but he couldn't pass some objections on cognition-dependent self-awareness and benefit from the consequences of the first one due to the purported gap between the unconscious habitual self-awareness and the conscious actual one.

**DOI:** [10.30470/phm.2021.525287.1963](https://doi.org/10.30470/phm.2021.525287.1963)

**Homepage:** [phm.znu.ac.ir](http://phm.znu.ac.ir)

1. PhD student in Islamic Philosophy and Theology, Theology and Islamic teachings, Ferdowsi, Mashahd, [seyyedalihosseini@mail.um.ac.ir](mailto:seyyedalihosseini@mail.um.ac.ir).



**I**ntroduction: The ambiguous phrases of Aristotle on how we become self-aware, divide his commentators to two strands. Some of them claimed that according to Aristotle's view, we need some external form that activates our self-awareness and, thus, it cannot be direct knowledge.

But some others argued that self-knowledge must be realized directly through self-reflection. We supposed that the phrases stated by Aristotle are closer to the former view and take it as his original view, but anyway the critical views of latter commentators cannot be ignored. During the middle ages, this contrast between the views reemerged, especially in the 13th century (Cory, 2014: 30).

Due to the great influence of Avicenna on some thinkers of this century and the efforts of Aquinas for modifying Aristotle's view, our paper mainly focuses on Aristotle as a main figure of empirical-based view on self-awareness; Avicenna as a main critic of

Aristotle and Aquinas as a thinker who offers a third way.

**M**ethodology: We will use a descriptive and analytic method with a comparative approach. To do so, we used some detailed historical data about Aristotle's views along with the comments written on them.

**F**indings: Now we will examine the ideas of aforementioned thinkers briefly.

First of all, we must closely look at Aristotle's ambiguous phrases. Two phrases of Aristotle are important for our discussion:

1. "Once the soul knows individual things, just as man of science knows, it is in actual mode... after this actualization, the soul is able to think itself" (Aristotle, 1980: 73).

2. Intellectuality of Intellect is potential before it becomes actual by any perception. After becoming actual in this way, it is able to think itself (Aristotle, 1980: 74).

these phrases are read in two ways. Some commentators known as Neoplatonian commentators

(such as Avicenna) read it just in a way that it would be in agreement with constant direct self-awareness. But other commentators consider the idea of former commentators as distortion of Aristotle's original position (Cory, 2014: 23).

So in our preferred reading of Aristotle's view, intellectual self-awareness is just like thinking on other objects: "the soul is cognizable like other things" (Aristotle, 1980: 74).

Next, we considered Avicenna's view as a revolution against Aristotelian empiricism.

There are some turning points that separate Avicenna from Aristotle. First, he proposed his own dualism and rejected Aristotle's hylomorphism. In his view, although the soul needs body and bodily powers for the perfection of some faculties, it doesn't need them for rational soul activities (Ibn Sina, 1404 AH: 176). This anthropological principle also has a crucial effect on Avicenna's epistemology where he states that the rational soul is aware of itself essentially and this special knowledge which

is prior to experience and independent of it, is in contrast with any other knowledge (Ibn Sina, 1400 AH: 210-211).

To show this independence and the indispensability of self-awareness from human being's existence, he proposed the well-known floating man argument (Ibn Sina, 1375 AH: 26-27; 1375 AH: 348-350; 1381 SH: 233).

Apparently the two aforementioned views are in conflict with each other and Aquinas tries to make them closer. He believes in hylomorphism in mind-body relation, but with a slightly different interpretation than Aristotle. In his view, though the soul is in potential mode in the beginning, ontologically exists in reality and just in an epistemological sense cannot be intelligible (Aquinas, 1951, Book III, Chapter IV, Lectio 9, 727; Pasnau, 2004: 334). This belief leads him to hold an innovative view about two types of self-awareness which are respectively related to two modes of soul (potentiality and actuality):



Habitual self-awareness and actual self-awareness. By proposing this dichotomy, he intends to keep dependent self-knowledge of Aristotle who doesn't believe in constant, prior self-awareness and Avicenna's constant self-awareness that is independent of any external medium (Cory, 2014: 3, 17, 37-38, 53).

Habitual self-awareness is a mysterious mode in which the soul is neither purely potential nor purely actual (Brown, 2001: 25).

As every other habit, habitual self-awareness prepares the soul for an actual attribute (here, actual self-awareness). Yet, despite other habits, it is not an accident, rather the very potential existence of the soul, acts as a habit (Aquinas, 2020: 312-313). This habit, by equipping the soul subjectively, satisfies one of the conditions for acquiring actual self-awareness. Another condition is objective and will be met by facing the external objects (Cory, 2014: 128). Note that external received forms have two functions: representing external things; actualizing the soul by involving it in the process

of receiving form, and the latter participating in actual self-awareness (Aquinas, 2020: 1771).

### **D**iscussion and Conclusion:

In one of the extremes of this discussion, Avicenna's view states that neither the body causes the existence of the soul nor there is any gap between soul's existence and its self-awareness. In the other extreme, Aquinas believes in the necessity of the participation of senses and external objects for realizing actual self-awareness. Accordingly, there's a gap between the soul's existence and its self-awareness. The very habitual self-awareness is not aware in itself and it's only considered as one of the conditions in the actualization of self-awareness. As such, its relationship with the actual self-awareness is under question and there isn't any string that connects these two in a satisfying way that keeps the advantages of Avicenna's view. The objective condition also faces a similar problem: whether the act of soul (which leads to actual self-awareness) is done by an aware

soul or it is alien from it and only works as a non-aware medium that leads to awareness. The first option would lead to the constant self-awareness of Avicenna and the second one poses this question: how the alien act of non-aware thing can lead to the self-aware subject?

Despite an apparent failure of Aquinas in the aforementioned problem, in comparing his idea to Aristotle's view, as the original source of these controversies, we find that he presented more acceptable opinion than other commentators of his camp. He notes that the content of what is perceived by soul and, then, activated its actual self-awareness has nothing to do with the process of actualizing the awareness, but its very mediation, regardless of what is represented, is enough.

## References:

- Ibn Sina (1381 SH). *Al-isharat wa al-tanbihat*. Qom: Bustan-e ketab [In Arabic].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1404 AH). *Al-ta'liqhat*. Qom: Maktab al-a'am al-eslami [In Arabic].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1400 AH). *Rasa'el-e Ibn-e sina*. Qom: Bidar [In Arabic].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1405 AH). *Al-shefa (Tabieiat)* (vol.2 Al-nafs). Qom: Ayatollah mar'ashi Najafi library [In Arabic].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1405 AH). *Al-shefa (Tabieiat)* (vol.3 Al-haywan), Qom: Ayatollah mar'ashi Najafi library [In Arabic].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1371 SH). *Al-mobahethat*. Qom: Bidar [In Arabic].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1375 AH). *Al-nafs min kitab al-shifa*. Qom: Maktab al-a'am al-eslami [In Arabic].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1978). "Al-ta'liqat ala hawashi kitab al-nafs le Arastatalis". In: Badawi, Abdalrahman. *Arastoo end al-arab*. Kuwait: wekalat al-matbuat [In Arabic].
- Aristotle (1980), *Fi al-nafs wa yalihe al-aarae al-tabieiah wa al-hass wa al-mahsus wa al-nabat*. Beirut: Dar al-ghalam [In Arabic].
- Eshaghinasab, Asma; Zamaniha, Hossein (1394 SH), "Studying and Analyzing the Relationship between Self-Consciousness and Metaphysical Foundations in Avicenna's Philosophy". *Javidan Khirad*, 12 (28): 41-60 [In Persian].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1399 SH). "The relation between Self-Consciousness and Objective Consciousness in Aristotle and Avicenna's Philosophy". *Zehn*, 21 (82): 109-134 [In Persian].



- Bahmanyar ibn marzban (1375 SH), *Al-tahsil*, Tehran: Tehran university press [In Arabic].
- Khademi. Hamidreza; Beheshti, Ahamad (1391 SH). "Self-Consciousness in Avicenna's Philosophy". *journal of philosophical theological research*, 14 (54): 5-17 [In Persian].
- Dibaji, Seyyed mohammadali; Janmohammadi, Mohammadtaqi (1387 SH). "Aqle fa'ale ibn-e sina dar nazar-e Thomas Aquinas". *Ayeneh ma' refat*. 8 (4): 21-42 [In Persian].
- Mesbahyazdi, Mohammadtaqi (1366 SH). *Amoozesh-e falsafe*. Tehran: Islamic Development Organization [In Persian].
- Nasir al-din Tusi (1386 SH). *Sharh al-esharat wa al-tanbihat*. Qom: Bustan-e ketab [In Arabic].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015). *Aristotle and the Arabic tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alwishah, Ahmed. (2006). *Avicenna's philosophy of mind: self-awareness and intentionality*. dissertation for Ph. D., Los Angeles: University of California.
- Amadio, Anselm; Kenny, Anthony. (2020). Aristotle. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, URL= <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aristotle/Philosophy-of-mind>>.
- Aquinas, Thomas. (1951). *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima* translated by Kenelm Foster and Sylvester Humphries, New Haven: Yale University Press, URL= <<https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/DeAnima.htm>>.
- Aquinas, Thomas. (2020). *Collected Works of Thomas Aquinas*. Hastings, East Sussex: Delphi Publishing Ltd.
- Bakker, Paul J J M; Thijssen, Johannes M M H. (2007). *Mind, cognition and representation : the tradition of Commentaries on Aristotle's De Anima*. Aldershot; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate.
- Beakley, B., & Ludlow, P. J. (Eds.). (1992). *The philosophy of mind: Classical problems/contemporary issues*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.
- Brown, Deborah J. (2001). Aquinas' missing flying man. *Sophia*, 40 (1): 17-31.
- Cory, Therese Scarpelli (2014). *Aquinas on human self-Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cory, Therese Scarpelli. (2009). *Thomas Aquinas and the Problem of Human Self-Knowledge*. A dissertation for Ph. D., Washington: School of philosophy of the catholic university of America.
- Dougherty, M. V.. (2011). *Moral Dilemmas in Medieval Thought From Gratian to Aquinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Gilson, Etienne. (2002). *Thomism; the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*. Translated by Laurence K. Shook and Armand Maurer, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 6th edition.
- Haldane, John. (1992). Aquinas and the active intellect. *Philosophy*, 67 (260): 199-210.
- Kaukua, Jari. (2015). *Self-awareness in Islamic philosophy: Avicenna and beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klima, Gyula; Hall, Alex. (2018). *Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Medieval Philosophy: Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics*. Vol. 14, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Lambert, Richard. (2007). *Self Knowledge in Tomas Aquinas: The Angelic Doctor on the Soul's Knowledge of Itself*. Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse.
- Lewis, Frank A. (1996), Self-Knowledge in Aristotle, *Topoi*, 15: 39-58.
- Owens, Joseph.; Catan, John R. (1981). *Aristotle, the Collected Papers of Joseph*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Pasnau, Robert. (2015). Review of Aquinas on human self-knowledge by Therese Scarpelli Cory. *Mind* 124: 623-626.
- Pasnau, Robert. (2004). *Thomas Aquinas on human nature: a philosophical study of Summa theologiae 1a 75-89*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robinson, Howard. (2020). Dualism. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/dualism/#HisDua>>.
- Rahman, Shahid; Street, Tony; Tahiri, Hassan. (2010), *The unity of science in the Arabic tradition science, logic, epistemology and their interactions*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Sanguineti, Juan José. (2013). The ontological account of self-consciousness in Aristotle and Aquinas. *The Review of Metaphysics*, 67 (2): 311-344.
- Thiel, Udo. (2011). *The early modern subject: self-consciousness and personal identity from Descartes to Hume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Toivanen, Juhana. (2015). The fate of the flying man; medieval reception of Avicenna's thought experiment. in: Robert Pasnau, *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, Volume 3: 64-98.
- Van Dyke, Christina. (2009). Not properly a person: the rational soul and Thomistic substance dualism. *Faith and philosophy*, 26 (2): 186-205.