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DESCARTES AND AVICENNA ON THE SOUL-BODY PROBLEM A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In comparative studies between the Islamic and European traditions of philosophy, no two arguments have received more attention than Avicenna's (d. 1037) Floating Man and Descartes' (d. 1650) Cogito. This paper contributes to the rather extensive literature on this topic by revisiting these two arguments and offering novel insights into how they read in relation to each other. In contrast with much of the existing literature, this paper argues that doubt is not an exclusively Cartesian feature and also factors into Avicenna's reasoning in the Floating Man. Next, it argues that the prevalent characterization of the Floating Man in the existing literature as a thought-experiment becomes problematic when this epithet is applied exclusively to the Floating Man. If a thought-experiment is defined as a process of reasoning carried out within the context of a well-articulated imaginary scenario, with the aim of confirming or denying a proposition, there seems to be no reason to suppose the Floating Man to be more or less 'thought-experimental' than the Cogito. Furthermore, the paper shows that the conclusions of the two arguments show more overlap than has typically been observed: three of the four conclusions reached in the Floating Man are in common with the Cogito. The overall methodology employed is that of descriptive philosophical criticism, but effort is made to read the authors in their own terms and proper historical and cultural contexts. Finally, the paper draws upon a range of primary material from both authors: For the Floating Man, the two sources used are Avicenna's Kitāb al-Shifaʾ and his Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt. For the Cogito, the discussion is limited to the only two works in which the argument makes a full appearance, which are *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Keywords: Soul-body problem, Dualism, Descartes, Avicenna, Islamic philosophy

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As its title indicates, the present study is on one of the oldest problems of philosophy, namely the soul-body problem. Throughout history, the soul-body problem has generated a vast quantity of literature in both the European[1] and non-European traditions of philosophy. Today, it still is a central topic in contemporary philosophy of mind, although, over time, it has largely shed from its name the word soul and replaced it with words such as mind, consciousness, and, more recently, behavior, and the word body with brain. As a result, it is sometimes referred to in contemporary scholarship as the mind-brain or consciousness-brain problem.

In the European tradition, René Descartes (d. 1650) is often credited with having invented the mind-body problem as it is presently discussed.[2] Because Islamic philosophy has often been construed as falling outside the boundaries of the European tradition, and because, regrettably, most twentieth-century historians of philosophy preferred to write Eurocentric histories, the contributions of Islamic philosophers on the soul-body problem have been, on the whole, overlooked. One philosopher within the Islamic tradition who wrestled with the soul-body problem was Avicenna (d. 1037). Avicenna had a full-scale theory of soul in which he improved significantly upon the Aristotelian theory of soul as first articulated by Aristotle himself in his *De Anima* and later developed in the Aristotelian tradition.[3] His discussions of the human soul's innate self-awareness in the psychological part of his Kitāb al-Shifā', in particular, are of direct relevance to the soul-body problem.

One argument that appears repeatedly in these discussions, namely the so-called flying, floating, or suspended man argument (henceforth the Floating Man), has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention in recent decades. The chief reason behind the growing interest the Floating Man, generally speaking, has been its affinity to Descartes' argument leading up to his celebrated dictum "Cogito ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I am" (hereafter the Cogito). The various similarities the Floating Man bears to the Cogito, combined with a tendency on the part of scholars to read seventeenth-century European modes of philosophizing into

Avicenna, has led some to view it as a forerunner or precursor to the latter. The more careful readers of Avicenna, however, have been skeptical of such comparisons and, without denying parallels between the two philosophers, recognized their fundamental differences.[4]

The present paper undertakes a comparative study of Avicenna's Floating Man and Descartes' Cogito and offers a novel account of how the two arguments read in relation to each other. It is divided into two parts, which respectively seek to locate and introduce the arguments as they appear in the original texts and to identify their main points of convergence and divergence. The second section mostly discusses their method and conclusions. The paper draws upon a range of primary material from both Avicenna's and Descartes' writings. The principal sources used for Avicenna's discussion of the Floating Man are his Kitāb al-Shifā' and his Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt.[5] For the Cogito, discussion will be limited to the only two works in which the argument makes a full appearance, which are *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy.*[6]

The overall methodology employed in the paper is that of philosophical criticism. The authors are read in tandem, but in their own terms and proper historical and cultural contexts. This is not a work of comparative philosophy, so its comparative approach is descriptive rather than constructive, and it does not seek to advance or develop philosophy through some kind of cross-traditional engagement.[7] It seems impossible to prove a historical connection between

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1   Here, I use the term "European" more in a geographical than a cultural or historical sense. For a summary discussion of the issues surrounding naming and categorizing philosophies and a critique of the European/non-European dichotomy, see Peter Adamson, "Out of Europe," *Philosophy Now*, October/November 2016.

2   See Frederick C. Copleston, "Descartes (3)," in *A History of Philosophy*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1977), 4:121. The view that Descartes marks a shift from the soul to the mind is fairly standard and uncontroversial. For the purposes of this paper, however, the true significance of Copleston's work would lie not in its assessment of Descartes' place in the history of ideas, but rather in its convenient treatment of centuries of philosophical activity in the Islamic world in the space of only fifteen pages in an eleven-volume History of Philosophy.

3   Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 342.

4   On Descartes and Avicenna, see: Giuseppe Furlani, "Avicenna e il 'Cogito, ergo sum' di Cartesio," *Islamica* III (1927-28): 53-72.; Emilio Galindo-Aguilar, "L'Homme volant d'Avicenne et le 'Cogito' de Descartes" *Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes: IBLA* 21 (1958): 279-95.; Roger Arnaldez. "Un précédent Avicennien du 'Cogito' cartésien?", *Annales Islamologiques* 11 (1972): 341–49.; Thérèse-Anne Druart, "The Soul and Body Problem: Avicenna and Descartes," in *Arabic Philosophy and the West*, ed. T. A. Druart (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1988), 27–48.; T. P. McTighe, "Further remarks on Avicenna and Descartes," in *Arabic Philosophy and the West*, ed. T. A. Druart (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1988), 51-54.; Ahmed Hasnaoui, "La Conscience de Soi chez Avicenne et Descartes," in *Descartes et le Moyen* Âge, ed. J. Biard and R. Rashed (Paris: Vrin, 1997), 283–91.; Jean Jolivet, "L'épistémologie de Descartes dans les Regulae et celle d'Avicenne" in *Descartes et le Moyen* Âge, ed. J. Biard and R. Rashed (Paris: Vrin, 1997), 187–97.; Hülya Yaldır, "Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and René Descartes on the Faculty of Imagination," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 247-78.; Hülya Yaldır, "Ibn Sina and Descartes on the Origins and Structure of the Universe: Cosmology and Cosmogony," *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 5 (2009), 3-57.

5   Two other important works of Avicenna in which the topic of self-awareness makes an appearance are his Kitāb al-Mubāḥaṯāt and Kitāb al-Taʿlīqāt. For English translations of their relevant passages, see Deborah Black, "Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing that One Knows" in *The Unity of Science in the Arabic Tradition*, ed. Rahman S., Street T., Tahiri H., (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2008).

6   All references to both *Discourse on Method* (henceforth *Discourse*) and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (henceforth *Meditations*) in this paper are to René Descartes, *Descartes: Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000).

7   For a discussion of the potential limitations of comparative philosophy with regard to Islamic philosophy, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Comparative Method and the Study of the Islamic Intellectual Heritage in the

Avicenna and Descartes, that is, to prove that Avicenna was the latter's direct or indirect source. Hence, the desire to relate Avicenna's context to the much more advanced field of European intellectual history, or vice versa, is strongly resisted to avoid anachronistic and tendentious interpretations of the texts.

EXPOSITION

In the *Discourse*, Descartes reaches his celebrated conclusion, I think, therefore I am,[8] in the following passage:

> … since then I desired to attend only to the search for truth, I thought it necessary that I do exactly the opposite, and that I reject as absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, so as to see whether, after this process, anything in my set of beliefs remains that is entirely indubitable. Thus, since our senses sometimes deceive us, I decided to suppose that nothing was exactly as our senses would have us imagine. And since there are men who err in reasoning, even in the simplest matters in geometry, and commit paralogisms, judging that I was just as prone to err as the next man, I rejected as false all the reasonings that I had previously taken for demonstrations. And finally, taking into account the fact that the same thoughts we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any of the latter thoughts being true, I resolved to pretend that everything that had ever entered my mind was no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterward I noticed that, during the time I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it was necessary that I, who thought thus, be something. And noticing that this truth — *I think, therefore I am* — was so firm and so certain that the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were unable to shake it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.[9]

Here, Descartes is engaged in a search for truth and the method of his search is universal doubt. He defines truth as absolute certainty, or what is to him the same thing, as complete absence or privation of doubt. Any statement that admits of the slightest doubt is to be discarded as false. First to be rejected are beliefs based on sense-perception. Because the senses misperceive things all the time, their testimony is not indubitable. Rational proofs come next. Since incorrect inferences, invalid syllogisms, etc. occur quite often, demonstrations (i.e. syllogisms) cannot be considered indubitable either. Lastly, all thoughts and feelings that enter the conscious mind are thrown out wholesale since they can all be dreamt while asleep. This last step marks Descartes' arrival at a peculiar epistemic state that is defined by universal doubt. In such a state, Descartes argues, nothing remains certain but the thinking activity itself. Therefore, the 'I' who does the thinking and reflects upon itself (i.e. the statement "I think" or "Cogito") emerges as the only 'truth' that survives the systematic process of doubting. Having discovered the one proposition with absolute certainty, Descartes establishes "I think therefore I am" as the first principle of all philosophy.

In the *Meditations*, Descartes' argument is essentially the same as in the *Discourse*, except that here he introduces a deceptive evil demon:

> But how do I know there is not something else, over and above all those things that I have just reviewed, concerning which there is not even the slightest occasion for doubt? Is there not some God, or by whatever name I might call him, who instills these very thoughts in me? But why would I think that, since I myself could perhaps be the author of these thoughts? Am I not then at least something? But I have already denied that I have any senses and any body. Still I hesitate; for what follows from this? Am I so tied to a body and to the senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have persuaded myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world: no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Is it then the case that I too do not exist? But doubtless I did exist, if I persuaded myself of something. But there is some deceiver or other who is supremely powerful and supremely sly and who is always deliberately deceiving me. Then too there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement "I am, I exist" is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind.[10]

West," in *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, (London; New York: Longman, 1975), 25-57.

8   The famous formulation "I think, therefore I am" first appears in the *Discourse* in its French form "Je pense donc je suis". The Latin phrase "Cogito ergo sum" appears both in the *Meditations* and *Principles of Philosophy*, which were both originally published in Latin. The French translation of the *Meditations* used in this paper was done by the Duke of Luynes with Descartes' supervision in 1647 as *Méditations Métaphysiques*.

9   Descartes, *Discourse,* 60-61.

10 Ibid, 108.

The appearance of the evil demon does not really affect the thrust of Descartes' argument. It is introduced simply as another hypothesis (the first being the self-induced doubt of the Discourse) that can generate universal doubt. The evil demon (or deceiving God) is a supremely powerful and malicious being that deliberately deceives Descartes in all his judgments, even in matters that seem most evident (such as that the earth *is*). The existence of such a being dictates that all judgments about the world, whether grounded in sense-perception or rational proof (or whatever else they may be grounded in), must always be false. In this way, Descartes reaches the same epistemic state as he did in the *Discourse*, namely to a state of ultimate, universal doubt. Again, as in the Discourse, the argument goes on to say that even after such a full-scale epistemic demolition, the 'I' who does the thinking (i.e. that it is being deceived) continues to persist. Hence the slightly modified Cogito proposition: "I am, I exist."

Before moving on to Avicenna's Floating Man, it is necessary to note the lack of a distinction between the 'I' and the 'soul' in Descartes' conceptual framework. In his conceptualization, the 'I' and the soul refer to one and the same entity; they mean and are the same thing. Two short passages from the *Meditations* and the *Discourse* establish this point:

> Then, examining with attention what I was, and seeing that I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world nor any place where I was, I could not pretend, on that account, that I did not exist at all; and that, on the contrary, from the very fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed very evidently and very certainly that I existed; whereas, on the other hand, had I simply stopped thinking, even if all the rest of what I had ever imagined had been true, I would have had no reason to believe that I had existed. From this I knew that I was a substance the whole essence or nature of which is simply to think, and which, in order to exist, has no need of any place nor depends on any material thing. Thus this "I," that is to say, the soul through which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body and is even easier to know than the body, and even if there were no body at all, it would not cease to be all that it is.[11]

I am therefore precisely nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason—words of whose meanings I was previously ignorant. Yet I am a true thing and am truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thinking thing.[12]

11 Ibid, 61.
12 Ibid, 109.

It is important to stress this equivalence between the 'I' and the soul in Descartes as it makes sure that the conclusions reached in this paper are not based on what is essentially an irrelevant analogy. In other words, it makes sure the comparisons are valid and compare different conceptions of the same concept, namely the soul. It is also important to stress, in this connection, Descartes' reference to the substantiality of the soul and its absolute independence from matter. This, of course, follows straightaway from the Cogito. The 'I', or the soul, is a substance because it is that which is known by itself, that is, that which survives every doubt and hence does not require knowledge of some other thing. While it is closely associated with the body in that it initiates bodily motions, it exists independently and the body's destruction in death does not preclude the possibility of the soul's continued existence.

Like the Cogito, the Floating Man makes multiple appearances in Avicenna's different works. Unlike the former, however, the different versions of the Floating Man show considerable variation. This paper looks at a total of three versions, two of which are found in his Kitāb al-Shifaʾ and one in Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt.[13] The first version occurs at the end of the first chapter of Avicenna's treatment of soul in the Shifaʾ and reads as follows:

> The one among us must imagine [*yatawahhama*] himself as though he is created all at once and created perfect, but that his sight has been veiled from observing external things, and that he is created falling in the air or the void [*khal*] in a manner where he would not encounter air resistance, requiring him to feel, and that his limbs are separated from each other so that they neither meet nor touch. He must then reflect as to whether he will affirm [*yathbutu*] the existence of his self [*wuj d dh tihi*].
>
> He will not doubt [*yashukku*] his affirming his self-existing [*li dh tihi mawj datan*], but with this he will not affirm any limb from among his organs, no internal organ, whether heart or brain, and no external thing. Rather, he would be affirming his self [*dh tuhu*] without affirming for it length, breadth and depth. And if in this state he were able to imagine [*yatakhayyala*] a hand or some other organ, he would not imagine it as part of his self [*dh tihi*] or a condition for its existence [*shar an f dh tihi*].

13 The translations from Avicenna used in this paper come from Michael Marmura, "Avicenna's 'Flying Man' in Context," *The Monist* 69, no. 3 (1986) and are all M. Marmura's. Any [bracketed] transliterations and/or comments are my own and refer to the critical editions Avicenna, *Avicenna's De Anima (Arabic Text)* Being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifaʾ (henceforth Shifaʾ), ed. F. Rahman (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) and Avicenna, *Kita b al-Ish r t wa al-Tanb h t* (henceforth *Ish r t*), ed. J. Forget (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1892).

You know that what is affirmed [*al-muthbat*] is other than what is not affirmed [*lam yathbutu*] and what is acknowledged [*al-maqraba*] is other than what is not acknowledged [*lam yaqrabuhu*]. Hence the self [*dh t*] whose existence he has affirmed has a special characteristic of its being his very self [*huwa bi aynihi*], other than his body and organs that have not been affirmed.

Hence the one who affirms [is alert; *mutanabbih*] has a means to be alerted [*yatanabbaha*] to the existence of the soul as something other than the body—indeed, other than body—and to his being directly acquainted [*a rifun*] with [this existence] and aware of [*mustash'irun*] it. If he is oblivious to this, he would require educative prodding.[14]

In recent years, a number of studies have described the Floating Man as a thought experiment. Some even have gone so far as to postulate a thought-experimental method[15] of Avicenna. This is, admittedly, an appropriate characterization of the Floating Man inasmuch as it has many features in common with arguments that are widely referred to as thought experiments: a hypothetical situation is set up in the imagination, then an operation is carried out, and, finally, a conclusion is drawn. Besides, it is not meant to simply entertain but often fulfils a specific function within a theory. This characterization does become problematic, however, when, within a comparative context, it is exclusively applied to the Floating Man. For reasons difficult to discern, all previous comparisons of the Floating Man and the Cogito seem to have followed this pattern by consistently refraining to use the term 'thought-experiment' to describe the latter. In the absence of a technical definition, there is no obvious reason to suppose one argument to be more 'thought-experimental' than the other. In fact, the Cogito carries all the typical features of a thought experiment, unless, of course, one considers unlimited universal doubt caused by an evil demon to be a real-world phenomenon.

The first version of the Floating Man is also the most detailed. Avicenna invites the reader to imagine himself created as a full human being but with his faculties of perception switched off. It is important to observe that the floating man has both his external and internal senses[16] rendered inert. He cannot use any of his five external senses because, first, his vision

is taken away, and second, he is suspended in an airless vacuum so that he cannot use any of the remaining four either. Likewise, he is unable to use any of his internal senses since he is created anew and with no previous memory or experience. In short, the floating man is in a state of complete sensory deprivation, internal and external, and hence alone, as it were, with his rational faculty or intellect. Avicenna then goes on to question whether, in such a state, the floating man would have self-awareness. Note, however, that even at this stage the resemblance to the Cogito is unmistakable. Before their respective affirmations, both the floating man and the doubter of the Cogito are subjected to a sort of epistemic paralysis, resulting in extremely tight restrictions on knowledge.

Even under such circumstances, that is, despite his inability to perceive anything and complete lack of memory, the floating man, Avicenna argues, would still affirm (*yathbutu*) the existence of his self (*dh tuhu*), and not not doubt (*yashukku*) it. The similarity of the statement "He will not doubt his affirming his self-existing…" to the Cogito simply cannot escape attention. This being established, Avicenna takes the following steps before drawing the conclusion that the soul is independent from the body: First, the Floating Man affirms the existence of his self without affirming anything bodily (*jism*),[17] including, of course, his own body. This self whose existence has just been affirmed must be other than body (*ayr jism*) since "what is affirmed is other than what is not affirmed." Therefore "the existence of the soul [is] something other than the body" and the soul knows[18] its existence directly and without mediation of anything bodily.

The second appearance of the Floating Man in the *Shifa* is in the seventh chapter of Avicenna's treatment of the soul:

> … I know that I am myself [I were 'I'; *aku na ana*] even if I do not know that I have a leg or one of the organs. Rather, I believe these things to be attachments to my self and believe that they are instruments of mine which I use for certain needs. Were it not for such needs, I would dispense with them. I will still be 'I' [*aku nu aydan ana ana*], when they are not.

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14 Avicenna, Shifa', 16.

15 Peter Adamson, and Fedor Benevich. "The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna's Flying Man Argument", *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4, no. 2 (2018): 147-64.

16 For a detailed account of Avicenna's theory of perception in general and his theory of internal perception in particular, see Jari Kaukua, "Avicenna on the Soul's Activity in Perception," in *Active Perception in the History of Philosophy*, ed. José Filipe Silva and Mikko Yrjönsuuri (Berlin: Springer, 2014), 99-117.

17 For an overview of Avicenna's conception of body, see Jon McGinnis, "Ibn Sina's Natural Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified Fall 2018, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/ibn-sina-natural/. For a more extensive treatment of this subject, see Andreas Lammer, *The Elements of Avicenna's Physics: Greek Sources and Arabic Innovations* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 111-212.

18 Notice at the very end of the passage that Avicenna uses *a rifun* and *mustash'irun* as opposed to ālimun to stress the unmediated character of this knowledge.

Let us repeat what we've said earlier [in the first chapter]. We say: If a human is created [*khalaqa*] all at once, created with his limbs separated and he does not see them, and if it so happens that he does not touch them and they do not touch each other, and he hears no sound, he would be ignorant of the existence of the whole of his organs, but would know [ʿalima] the existence of his individual being as one thing [existence of his 'I'ness as one thing; *wuj d anni yatuhu shay an w idan*], while being ignorant of all the former things. What is itself the unknown is not the known.

These organs belong to us in reality only as garments which due to constant adherence to us have become as parts of our selves. When we imagine our selves [*takhayyalna anfusana*], we do not imagine ourselves unclothed, but imagine them possessing covering garments. The reason for this is constant adherence, with the difference that with clothes we have become accustomed to taking them off and laying them aside something we have not been accustomed to with the bodily organs. Thus our belief that the organs are parts of us is more emphatic than our belief that garments are parts of us.[19]

The chapter of the *Shifa* in which Avicenna introduces this version is dedicated to a discussion and dismissal and of the different classical theories of the soul. One of these theories is the theory that the human soul cannot be one entity and that the vegetative, animal and rational souls are numerically distinct. In rejecting this theory, Avicenna argues that there must be a non-bodily binding entity for the different kinds of soul and that this entity. He emphasizes the unifying role of one's 'I'ness[20] (*anni ya*), and then introduces the Floating Man because it serves precisely as a proof for the existence of such an 'I'ness. The difference from the first version, therefore, is that while the first version was meant to show the existence of one's self (*wuj d dh tihi*), this version is meant to show the existence of one's 'I'ness as a principle of unity (*wuj d anni yatuhu shay an w idan*). Notice, however, that the setup of the experiment remains unchanged, which could mean either that the same argument proves both conclusions or the ambiguous concepts *dh t* and *anni ya* are very closely related, if not identical.

The third and last version of the Floating Man is the most brief of all three. It appears in the chapter of the *Ish r t* entitled "On the Terrestrial and Celestial Soul" as one full *tanb h*:

[*Tanb h*]: Return to your self [*nafsika*] and reflect whether, being whole, or even in another state, where, however, you discern a thing correctly, you would be oblivious to the existence of your self [*wuj d dh tika*] and would not affirm your self [*nafsaka*]? To my mind, this does not happen to the perspicacious—so much so that the sleeper in his sleep and the person drunk in the state of his drunkenness will not miss knowledge of his self [his self would not depart from himself; *la taghrubu dha tuhu 'an dha tihi*], even if his presentation of his self to himself does not remain in his memory.

And if you imagine your self [*tawahhamta dha taka*] to have been at its first creation mature and whole in mind and body and it is supposed to be in a generality of position and physical circumstance where it does not perceive its parts, where its limbs do not touch each other but are rather spread apart, and that this self is momentarily suspended in temperate air, you will find that it will be unaware of everything except the "fixedness" of its individual existence [fixity of his 'I'ness; *thubu ti anni yatiha*].[21]

The relative brevity of this version is characteristic of the overall literary style of the *Ish r t*. It is delivered in the form of *tanb h*, a compact reminder serving to alert the mind. Thus, Avicenna's intention with the Floating Man here is not to prove or demonstrate an argument, but rather to point to or hint at at it.[22] As with the second version, however, the Floating Man is once again deployed to support a new conclusion. The question posed is whether there exists a state in which one could fail to affirm his self (*nafs*). Avicenna answers in the negative and says that the self (*dha t*) persists in and through change. One's self does not leave oneself (*la taghrubu dha tuhu 'an dha tihi*) even when one is in a state of sleep or intoxication. The Floating Man is evidence that one's awareness of his 'I'ness is fixed and immutable.

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19 Avicenna, *Shifa* ', 255.

20 My translation of *anni ya* as 'I-ness' (and not as 'thatness') is only to stress the self-referential character of this term in the context of the Floating Man. It merely refers to the thatness of the 'I'. For a more detailed discussion of *anni ya* and other related Arabic technical terminology, see Jari Kaukua, "Arabic Terminology Related to Self-awareness" in *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 233-37.

21 Avicenna, *Ish r t*, 119.

22 For a discussion of the bearing of the *tanb h* format on the logical status of the Floating Man, see Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul, 1160-1300* (London: The Warburg Institute, 2000), 80-87. Hasse argues that the Floating Man is a *tanb h*, not a proof. For a detailed critique of Hasse's views on this subject, see C. P. Hertogh, "Ibn Sīnā's Flying Man: Logical Analyses of a (Religious) Thought Experiment," *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 9, (2003): 54-74.

COMPARISON

A number of past studies have characterized Descartes' method of universal doubt as the chief distinguishing feature of the Cogito.[23] In light of the foregoing, such a characterization seems to be only partially correct and in need of qualification. While Descartes does use hyperbolic doubt in developing the Cogito, this does not mean that doubt does not factor at all into Avicenna's reasoning in the Floating Man. In fact, Avicenna's statement in the first version "[The floating man] will not doubt (*yashukku*) his affirming his self-existing…" is clear evidence that it does. Interestingly, many previous studies seem to have overlooked this fact.[24] In the context in which it appears, another way to put this statement would be to say that the floating man could doubt everything else, but he could never doubt "his affirming his self-existing." This, of course, is not to say that Avicenna is using doubt here in a methodical way, but only that doubt is not an exclusively Cartesian feature. Perhaps a better distinction would be to say that only the Cogito is based on methodological skepticism, that is, only in the Cogito the entire argument depends on a systematic application of doubt. Descartes' doubt is self-induced, systematic, and teleological. It is a conscious "willing away", of the self of any degree of certainty it may already possess in order to strike an indubitable proposition on which all else can be founded. That none of these really apply to Avicenna's *shakk* in the Floating Man is quite obvious.

Having said this, as was mentioned previously, both Avicenna's setup of the Floating Man and Descartes' self-induced doubt are to engender conditions of extreme epistemic deprivation. Here, it is safe to argue that the two arguments share a strategy of large-scale elimination of common forms of certitude in pursuit of certainty. In the former case, Avicenna achieves this by postulating a state of complete sensory paralysis. In the latter case, Descartes does it by, again, postulating a state of universal doubt attainable through self-induced skepticism.

A consequence of this is that, by the time Descartes proclaims the cogito, it is not only the first truth, but also the only truth— to survive Descartes' full-scale epistemic destruction. The price Descartes has to pay for this absolutely certain foundation of knowledge is, of course, solipsism. In the course of methodological doubt, all knowledge has been negated, including knowledge of the senses, the memory, rational proofs, and God too. He has to establish all

knowledge anew on the basis of the Cogito, now the first principle of all philosophy. On the other hand, it is not clear whether Avicenna's complete turn-off of the senses in the Floating Man is meant to result in an absolute zero of knowledge. Even though his sensory apparatus is paralyzed, the floating man retains his rational faculty or intellect intact. It is not clear, for instance, whether and to what extent the floating man would doubt the truth of propositions based not on sense-perception but on self-reflection (*qad a ya i tiba riyya*), which "are due to the observation of faculties other than sense-perception, like our realization that we have thought … and that we are aware of our selves and of the acts of our selves."[25]

As briefly mentioned earlier, the Floating Man has often been described by scholars as a thought-experiment, but without a clear definition. Now, if a thought-experiment is defined as a process of reasoning carried out within the context of a well-articulated imaginary scenario, with the aim of confirming or denying a proposition,[26] then Avicenna's argument obviously fits this definition and can safely be characterized as such. But, again, so can the Cogito.[27] This characterization only becomes problematic, when, within a comparative context, it is exclusively applied to the Floating Man. If one adopts the definition just cited, then there seems to be no reason to suppose one argument to be more thought-experimental than the other. Both arguments introduce an imagined scenario, carry out a process of reasoning within the limits of that scenario, and draw a conclusion from, again, that scenario. In the case of the Floating Man, the imagined scenario is that of the floating man suspended in an airless vacuum with zero sensory input. In the case of the Cogito, it is that of the doubting self. It was probably the historical and philosophical success of the Cogito that caused scholars to overlook this point, but whatever the cause, the possibility of universal doubt is by no means obvious, and needs proof if the Cogito is to go beyond a thought-experiment.

At this point it is appropriate to shift the focus of the comparison to the conclusions of the two arguments. Avicenna draws a total of four major conclusions from the Floating Man. Note that (A) is ancillary to (B):

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23 See, for instance, Ahmed Hasnaoui, "La Conscience de Soi chez Avicenne et Descartes" in *Descartes et le Moyen Âge*, ed. J. Biard and R. Rashed (Paris: Vrin, 1997), 283–91.

24 Adamson (2018), for instance, does not refer to the Cogito as a thought-experiment and uses the term exclusively for the Floating Man.

25 Avicenna, *Ish r t*, 56.

26 Tamar Gendler, *Intuition, Imagination, and Philosophical Methodology* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55.

27 For a recent study that considers the Cogito a preeminent example of a logical thought-experiment, see C. P. Hertogh, "Thought Experiment Analyses of René Descartes' Cogito," *Trans/Form/Ação* 39, no. 3 (2016): 9-22.

(A) The soul is self-aware, that is, it affirms (*yathbutu*) the existence of itself (*wuj d dh tihi*) in and through itself, without bodily (*jism*) mediation.

(B) The soul's existence is altogether independent of that of the body since that whose existence is acknowledged (*al-maqraba*) is other than that whose existence is not acknowledged (*lam yaqrabuhu*).

(C) The soul is one and not composite since it knows the existence of its 'I'ness as one thing (*wuj d anni yatuhu shay an w idan*).

(D) The soul is self-aware permanently and not intermittently. One's self (*dha t*) persists in and through change and does not ever leave (*la taghrubu dha tuhu 'an dha tihi*).

All three versions of the Floating Man reach conclusions (A) and (B). Despite his inability to perceive anything and complete lack of memory, the floating man still affirms its existence and does not doubt (*yashukku*) it. Therefore, the soul exists independently of the body. Conclusion (C) is only reached in the second version, in which Avicenna is at pains to show the existence of one's 'I'ness as a principle of unity (*wuj d anni yatuhu shay an w idan*) in the soul. Next, conclusion (D) is only reached in the third version, the only version that delivers the argument in the form of a *tanb h*. The soul is not only independent of the body and numerically one, but is permanently aware of its 'I'ness (*thubu ti anni yatiha*).

With regard to the conclusions (A) and (B), it can safely be argued that both are shared conclusions with the Cogito. That the soul does not need the body to affirm itself is a point demonstrated by both arguments. One way in which the Cogito goes beyond the Floating Man is its affirmation of the proposition "I think…" not only as absolutely certain but also as foundational— as the first principle of all philosophy. With regard to (C) Descartes has many things to say about the unity of the soul elsewhere, but none in the Cogito. It does not follow, or at least does not follow so immediately, from the Cogito that the soul is numerically one and not many. Finally, conclusion (D), that is, the soul's permanent awareness of itself or the fixity of his 'I'ness (*thubu ti anni yatiha*) is also clearly a shared conclusion.

A caveat needs to be made concerning conclusion (B). The two ways in which Avicenna and Descartes go on from conclusion (A) to conclusion (B) are very different and, as such, deserve a few words. Avicenna turns to a logical principle when he discriminates between the soul and the body as respectively what is affirmed (*al-muthbat*) and what is not affirmed (*lam yathbutu*), and claims that the two must be distinct. He repeats this in the second version when

he says: "… what is itself the unknown is not the known."[28] Descartes needs a similar principle to proceed from the soul's independence from the body to affirming that the two are really distinct. Unlike Avicenna, however, he has doubted everything, so he must first demonstrate the existence of God to be able to acquire the principle that will allow him to arrive at a real distinction. The reader of the *Meditations*, for instance, has to wait until the very end of the treatise to get to this point.

CONCLUSION

A number of conclusions present themselves on the basis of this study. First, contrary to what a number of past studies have claimed, doubt is not an exclusive feature of the Cogito. While Descartes does use hyperbolic doubt in developing the Cogito, this does not mean that doubt does not factor at all into Avicenna's reasoning in the Floating Man. Next, caution needs to be exercised when characterizing the Floating Man as a thought-experiment *vis-à-vis* the Cogito. There is no reason to suppose one argument to be more thought-experimental than the other. Both arguments introduce an imagined scenario, carry out a process of reasoning within the limits of that scenario, and draw a conclusion from, again, that scenario. Finally, the conclusions of the two arguments seem to show significant overlap. Three out of the four conclusions reached in the Floating Man are in common with the *Cogito*.

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