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Attention, Consciousness, and Self-Cultivation in Sufi-Philosophical Thought

Sûfî ve Felsefî Düşüncede Dikkat, Bilinç ve Kişisel Gelişim

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Abstract

The topic of attention and consciousness has been a constant subject of debate for scholars of various disciplines from neuroscience to Sufism. Islamic philosophical ideas concerning selfhood, consciousness, and attention, similar to those of other comparable traditions, have a direct bearing on a person's ethical and spiritual formation. This is because our freedom to engage in moral decision-making is contingent upon the fact that we are conscious beings having a self. However, it is based on the knowledge of the true nature of the self that we hope to attain happiness, fulfilment in life, and better relations with others. Drawing on theories and practices of attention and consciousness in Islamic philosophy and Sufism, this paper argues that attention is not an isolated mental phenomenon, and hence it must be understood in light of the basic structure of consciousness. Moreover, it is shown that consciousness (in its most primitive form) is the defining feature of human subjectivity, without which it would be impossible to account for any mental events. The study then deals with Sufi meditative practices and the transformation of consciousness by showing how meditation trains our attention, redirecting it toward subtle forms of awareness that are laden with tranquility and inner peace.

Keywords: Attention, conciousness, Sufism, self-cultivation, meditative practices.

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Öz

Dikkat ve bilinç, nörobilimden tasavvufa kadar uzanan geniş bir yelpazede farklı disiplinlerden gelen akademisyenlerin üzerinde tartışmakta olduğu hususlardır. Benlik, bilinç ve dikkat kavramlarıyla ilgili İslâmî felsefî görüşler, diğer benzer geleneklerde olduğu gibi, bir kimsenin etik ve rûhânî formasyonu üzerinde doğrudan bir etkiye sahiptir. Zira ahlâkî kararlar alma özgürlüğümüz, benlik sahibi bilinçli varlıklar olduğumuz gerçeğine bağlıdır. Bununla beraber, yaşamda mutluluğa, tatmin duygusuna erişmeye ve başkalarıyla daha iyi ilişkiler kurmaya dair umuduğumuz, benliğin gerçek tabiatinin bilgisine dayanır. İslâm felsefesi ve tasavvuftaki dikkat ve farkındalığa dair nazarî ve amelî uygulamalardan yararlanan bu makale, dikkatin yalıtılmış bir zihinsel olgu olmadığını, dolayısıyla bilincin temel yapısı çerçevesinde anlaşılması gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Dahası, (en ilkel haliyle) bilincin, insan öznelliğinin belirleyici özelliği olduğu ve bu özellik olmaksızın herhangi bir zihinsel olayı açıklamanın imkansız olduğu gösterilmiştir. Çalışmanın ilerleyen bölümlerinde Sûfî meditasyon uygulamalarını ve meditasyonun dikkatimizi nasıl terbiye ettiğini, onu sükûnet ve iç huzurla dolu latif farkındalık biçimlerine nasıl yönlendirdiğini göstererek bilincin dönüşümünü ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dikkat, bilinç, tasavvuf, kişisel gelişim, meditasyon uygulamaları

The Problem of Attention

Attention is a central feature of human subjectivity. In everyday life, it is hard to underestimate the epistemic and moral significance of attention. As Jonardon Ganeri notes, attention improves our epistemic status, because it is in the nature of attention to find out what is real and to avoid what is unreal. Moreover, when attention is informed by expertise, it is sufficient for knowledge, which gives it a reach beyond the perceptual or being merely a "filter" for sense-objects.[1] In Ganeri's view, the determinables of attention include the episodic memory from which our narrative identities are made, the empathy for others that situates us in a social world, and the introspection that makes us self-aware. Ganeri further argues that empathy is other-directed attention, and empathetic attention is central to a range of experiences that constitutively require a contrast between oneself and others, all of which involve an awareness of oneself as the object of another's attention.[2] All of this suggests that attention is something desirable in our everyday life.

1 Jonardon Ganeri, *Attention, Not Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–5.

2 Ibid.

The positive appreciation of attention nonetheless, controversies surround the nature of attention as a "phenomenon." Is attention "an active power of the mind" as Saint Augustine states, or it is a "filter mechanism of sensory information" as Descartes argues, or, perhaps both?[3] Moreover, modern theories of attention point to the phenomenal character of attention, i.e., its being something we recognize from "what-it-is-like for" us.[4] That is to say, phenomenological investigation reveals that there is something it is like for me to focus my attention on reading a particular text of Islamic philosophy instead of directing it to the thought of what I should be doing tomorrow. Thus, we have a direct acquaintance with the phenomenon itself, since its "what-it-is-likeness" can only be ascertained

3 Deborah Brown, "Augustine and Descartes on The Function of Attention in Perceptual Awareness," in *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy,* eds. S. Heniämaa, V. Läthennemaki and P. Remes, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 153–175, 155–60, 168–73.

4 Sebastian Watzl, "The Nature of Attention," *Philosophy Compass 6,* 11 (2011): 842–853, at 843; cf. Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like To Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review 83* (1974): 435–50 and Sydney Shoemaker, "Phenomenal Character," *Nous 28* (1994): 21–38.

from the first-person view.[5] In general, the philosophical account of attention emphasizes its phenomenal quality, directedness, capacity to make clear objects of senses, and the fact that it can be controlled.[6]

However, in the past decades, attention has also been studied as an empirical phenomenon by numerous psychologists and cognitive scientists. Based on their empirical findings, these scientists have put forth a range of reductionist views of attention.[7] For instance, attention might be understood as: a filtering of perceptual information,[8] a feature binding mechanism,[9] a mechanism of selection of information for action-control,[10] a general purpose resource,[11] a broadcasting of information to working-memory,[12] or a bias-and-competition process.[13] In all, such a mechanistic picture identifies attention with a species of neuronal or computational processes. Moreover, in contrast to those attention theorists who attribute attention to the whole person, the proponents of reductionism delimit it to the sub-personal level. The reductionist conception, thus, shares with eliminativism the view that the most fundamental theory in the area will be a completely sub-personal computational or neuroscientific theory while disagreeing on whether that discredits ordinary, personal level talk of attention.[14] Understandably, philosophers hardly feel at home with such a reductionist picture. Sebastian Watzl, for instance, summarizes the caveats that characterize the reductionist account. To begin with, many of the mechanisms that in some contexts are closely associated with attention seem to operate in the absence of attention in other contexts. A reductionist theory of attention that identifies it with a certain mechanism would, thus, predict attention in cases where we do not seem to have it. Also, there is hardly anything common in the mechanisms that in various contexts seem to be associated with attention. While, for example, in some cases attention seems to be the mechanism that binds features together, in other cases it seems to be the mechanism by which infor-

5 Declan Smithies, "Attention is Rational-Access Consciousness," in *Attention: Philosophical and Psychological Essays,* eds. C. Mole, D. Smithies and W. Wu, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 247–73. See also Felipe De Brigard, "Consciousness, Attention and Commonsense," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 17, 9-10 (2010): 189–201; Christopher Mole, "Attention and Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 15, 4 (2008): 86–104.

6 Cf. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 400ff.

7 For more information on these views, see Watzl, "The Nature of Attention," 844ff.

8 Donald E. Broadbent, *Perception and Communication* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1958).

9 Anne Treisman and G. Gelade, "A Feature-Integration Theory of Attention," *Cognitive Psychology 12* (1980): 97–136.

10 Odmar Neumann, "Beyond Capacity: A Functional View of Attention," in *Perspectives on Perception and Action,* eds. H. Heuer and A. F. Sanders, (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 1987), 361–94; D. A. Allport, "Selection for Action," in *Perspectives on Perception and Action,* 395–419.

11 Daniel Kahneman, *Attention and Effort* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973).

12 Jesse Prinz, "Is Attention Necessary and Sufficient for Consciousness?," in *Attention: Philosophical and Psychological Essays,* eds. C. Mole, D. Smithies and W. Wu, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 174–203.

13 Robert Desimone and J. Duncan, "Neural Mechanisms of Selective Visual Attention," *Annual Review of Neuroscience 18,* 1 (1995): 193–222.

14 Watzl, "*The Nature of Attention,"* 845-48. This is reflected in Prinz's remarks: ''[w]e need not eliminate the folk construct; we have found a functional analysis.'' Idem., *Is Attention Necessary,* 185. For a wide-ranging critique (and its rebuttal) of the methodology of neuroscience and its treatment of mental phenomena as a function of various brain-states, see Maxwell Bennet et al., *Neuroscience and Philosophy: Brain, Mind, and Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 15-43. Bennet (who is a neuroscientist) and Hacker argue that neuroscientists' ascription of psychological attributes to the brain involve a methodological fallacy, since these attributes ought to be ascribed to the person as whole.

mation gets broadcasted to working memory.[15] Overall, it is highly unlikely that there are natural cognitive or neuronal mechanisms in place, with which various forms of attention might be identified.[16]

It is in light of the above concerns that this study aims to present further evidence, from the writings of Islamic philosophers, against the reductionist view of attention.[17] It argues that just as consciousness is not reducible to the spectrum of experiential qualities that characterize sense-differentiated objects of experience, sensory qualities, emotions, mood, memory, or the imagination, attention, too, is not reducible other mental phenomena. Rather, a correct understanding of attention should treat it as a qualitative, mental phenomenon that is explicable in terms of the various aspects of consciousness. In other words, Islamic philosophers argue against the view that attention can be explained without consciousness.[18] Moreover, mention has already been made of attention as something desirable. Hence, it is pertinent to ask how one can improve one's epistemic and moral standing through improving one's attention. Accordingly, this study also explores attention as a "virtue" that can be developed through what I call "techniques of attention."

Attention, Subjectivity and Consciousness

It was argued in the previous section that attention should be understood as a mental phenomenon in the larger matrix of our conscious experience. This is because for many Islamic philosophers such as Suhrawardī (d. 1191), consciousness (Ar. *shuʿūr*; Pr. *āgāhī*) is the defining feature of human subjectivity, so much so that any notion of attention should be mediated through it. This, however, does not mean consciousness acts as a sort of "witness-self" over and above each and every mental activity. Rather, for Suhrawardī, the most basic form of consciousness is what I call non-reflective, i.e., one in which there is no distinct sense of the self as an "I."[19] In what follows, I develop Suhrawardī's notion of non-reflective consciousness that will allow us to see how attention operates through the medium of consciousness. Such arguments concerning the nature of subjectivity will also help counter the proponents of "objective consciousness" (e.g., Michael Tye), who deny that humans have a subjective or phenomenal consciousness.

Suhrawardī, like Avicenna (d. 1037) before him, stresses the significance of the phenomenological approach when it comes to investigating the basic nature of human subjectivity. By making use of various phenomenological arguments Suhrawardi brings to light the following features of the first-personal indexical, "I:" it is simple, i.e. cannot be split in two; it is indivisible (as it cannot be a composite of genus and species); it must be self-given and no part of it can remain hidden from itself; it is self-referential; and finally, its consciousness is continuous and remains unbroken even during sleep.[20] Suhrawardī

15 Watzl, "The Nature of Attention," 848.

16 Ibid.

17 There are various terms that are used to discuss "attention" in Islamic thought, e.g., *tawajjuh, intibāh* and *iltifāt.* Also, it should be noted that by "Islamic philosophy" I intend to cover various forms of philosophical reflections that are found in different intellectual schools such as *falsafa* (philosophy), *kalām* (theology) and *ʿirfān* (philosophical Sufism).

18 On attention without consciousness, see e.g., Robert Kentridge, "Attention without Awareness," in *Attention: Philosophical and Psychological Essays,* eds. Christopher Mole, D. Smithies and W. Wu, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 228-48.

19 For more information, see Muhammad U. Faruque, *Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2021), 111—20.

20 See Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, *Majmūʿah-yi muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Ishrāq,* eds. Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1976–7), passim.

begins his argument by asserting that the way one has knowledge of one's consciousness or one's "I" cannot be through a representation or a mental form because the representation always presents itself as an "it" (*hiya*) in relation to the "I." In other words, my "representation" of myself is something other than my "self," precisely because it is a "representation" in relation to my "I." Someone might object at this point by suggesting that perhaps the "representation" is exactly identical with the "I" so that one cannot differentiate the "I-it" dichotomy with regard to it. But Suhrawardī would then appeal to the self-evident, phenomenological premise that "one is never absent from oneself," which means the self's knowledge of itself is always presential (*ḥuḍūrī*) and not acquired through any form or image. That is, it is a bare fact of existence that consciousness simply is "present" to itself, and it *cannot be otherwise* if we are to make sense of anything in the world. This is because for there to be any proposition in the form of "I know X" or "X is Y" one must presuppose a self-conscious "subject" that knows something or makes judgement about something. This is true even of those propositions where the subject term does not directly involve any indexicals, e.g., every effect has a cause. In other words, one must presuppose a self-conscious subject which knows itself (i.e., possesses reflexivity) in order to make any meaningful statement about the world.[21] Suhrawardī says:

> The self-subsistent, self-conscious thing does not apprehend its essence by an image of its essence in its essence. If its knowledge is by an image and if the image of its self is not the self itself, the image of the self would be an "it" in relation to the self. In that case, that which was apprehended would be an image. Thus, it follows that while the apprehension of its self is precisely its apprehension of what it is itself, its apprehension of its essence would also be the apprehension of what it is itself, its apprehension of its essence would also be the apprehension of something else—which is absurd. This is not the case with external objects since the image and its object are each an "it."[22]

Another way to argue about why knowledge of our inner subjectivity cannot be through a representation is to say that one either *knows* that the representation is identical to one's self or one does not. However, if one says that one does not know oneself that implies a contradiction because it is still a form of cognition, and hence implies knowledge. So, this is ruled out. If, on the other hand, one knows that one's representation is identical to oneself, then one knows that it is "identical" to oneself. However, the twist in the argument, according to Suhrawardī, lies in the second-order consciousness[23] because I come to know that my "I" is identical with its representation, i.e., I know that my "I" is equal to its representation, which is sufficient to show that the "I" is other than its representation. Suhrawardī writes:

> Know that when you know yourself, you do not do so because of a form of thou-in-thou, because knowing your thou-ness by a representation can be in only of two ways: either you know that the representation of your thou-ness is equal to thou or you do not. If you do not know that the representation is the same as your thou-ness, then you would

21 See, e.g., Suhrawardī, *Muṭāraḥāt, in Majmūʿah-yi muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Ishrāq,* I: 484.

22 Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq (The Philosophy of Illumination),* edited and translated by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 85.

23 i.e., the awareness whereby we reflect on our conscious activities.

> not know your self, while we are here assuming that you do know it. If you do know that representation of your thou-ness is equal to thou, then you would have known yourself with the representation of your thou-ness so as to know that it is equal to your thou. Therefore, your knowledge of yourself is not by the representation. It can only be that your self is a self-subsistent entity, free from corporeality and always self-conscious.[24]

In his *Muṭāraḥāt*, Suhrawardī also argues that the most basic form of self-cognition is always characterized by its particularity. That is to say, if I were to know myself through a representation then that representation, insofar as it is a mental concept, has to be a universal (*kullī*) that does not individuate (universals such as animal can be predicated of several individuals at the same time), whereas my knowledge of myself as being a me is always particular and has the character of for-me-only-ness.[25] In other words, my knowledge of myself has the feel that it is only me who is the subject of this particular experience, and such an experience, for the reason of its particularity, will not be applicable to another self.

Moreover, Suhrawardī argues that we know ourselves directly through our consciousness that is the very nature of our subjectivity. This means I cannot be absent from my self because my reality is ever-present to myself through the uninterrupted self-consciousness that is indistinguishable from my mineness. Suhrawardī writes:

> Know that you are never absent from your self and never unaware of it. Even though you may be in a state of wild intoxication, and forget yourself and become unaware of your limbs, yet you know that you exist and your self too exists… every now and then your flesh and skin changes but your selfhood does not. In like manner, the knowledge of your parts, limbs, heart, brain and whatever is inside can only be obtained through dissection, without which you are hardly aware of their states. However, you become aware of yourself through self-perception. This shows that your reality lies beyond your bodily organs and your selfhood cannot be found in your body. Your selfhood cannot be found in something of which you are sometimes aware and sometimes forgetful. Know that what is indicated by your self is called "I," and whatever lies in the material world belongs to the realm of "it." And whatever is indicated by "it" can be either universal or particular, since you dissociated your selfhood from it by your I-ness.[26]

Several points can be noted from the above. In the first part of the passage Suhrawardī refers to what I call "the never-absent consciousness" of the self. At first blush, his statement that even in a state of intoxication where one forgets one's ordinary self, one is not really absent from oneself may strike us rather strange, since it is a commonplace that one's consciousness does seem to get cloudy in those moments. However, the argument starts to make much sense as soon as we discern the phenomenological differences that exist between various kinds of actions. For

24 Suhrawardī, *The Book of Radiance: Partow Nāma, trans. by Hossein Ziai* (California: Costa Mesa, 1998), 39 (trans. modified).

25 Modern philosophers also talk about the feature of "what-it-is-likeness" that is irreducible to anything further, see Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review 83,* 4 (1974): 435–450. For views that oppose Nagel's perspective, see P. M. S. Hacker, "Is There Anything It Is like to be a Bat?," *Philosophy* 77, 300 (2002): 157-174.

26 Suhrawardī, *Būstān al-qulūb in Majmūʿah-yi muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Ishrāq,* III: 363–64.

instance, when my eyes focus very attentively on the pages of the Harry Potter book in front of me, there are three components that can be analyzed distinctly from one another: 1) the subject (my eyes), 2) the object (the pages), and 3) the experience of reading. Now under normal circumstances when we operate with our ordinary awareness, we can always identify these components as being distinct from one another. However, what happens when my eyes are too focused on the pages because I have just found something extremely interesting? Immediately after having that kind of experience, we come to a momentary realization that it seems as though for a few moments I lost myself in that experience, or as though I was not there for a while! It feels this way because I was so focused on reading Harry Potter that I was doing it rather non-reflectively. But can it really be granted that I was not there while the act of reading took place? Can there be an act without presupposing the bearer of that act, i.e., a subject? If the obvious answer is "no," how else might one explain the fact that there are indeed those moments, e.g., being completely absorbed in something when one seems to lose one's awareness? One would explain such phenomena by asserting that in the absorbed or focused moments the "subject of experience" and the "experience" itself merge with one another, giving one the impression that the subject or the underlying consciousness somehow disappeared from the scene, which cannot be the case because of its ontological impossibility. That is to say, even when one is intoxicated, there is a background, non-reflective consciousness that is operative in those moments, even though the intoxicated person may not be aware of that awareness. This is because without this non-reflective awareness it makes little sense to say that there is the experience or the phenomenon of intoxication, while there is no one (i.e., subject) to experience it![27]

If this is now established, Suhrawardī can say that one's consciousness of oneself is continuous and un-interrupting. However, one may still point out that our ordinary experience of the first-order and second-order consciousness is never uninterrupted, and Suhrawardī must be aware of this commonplace observation. Thus, the background consciousness to which he alludes must be *non-reflective*, i.e., one that does not involve conscious reflection.[28]

The seventeenth-century Persian philosopher, Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) accepts Suhrawardī's distinction between representational knowledge (*al-īlm al-ḥuṣul al-irtisāmī*) and presential knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī*), and affirms that self-knowledge can be both representational and presential. When knowledge of the self is obtained through its faculties, e.g., the imagination it is mediated and repre-

27 See also Faruque, *Sculpting the Self,* 71–74.

28 A number of modern philosophers have also developed a similar concept, which is called "pre-reflective awareness," though via a different route than the one Suhrawardī had pursued. More importantly, some of these recent philosophers (e.g., the early Sartre) draw a non-egological concept of self from the phenomenon of pre-reflective awareness, which, however, is not the case with Suhrawardī or other Islamic philosophers. On non-egological self, see A. Gurwitsch, "A Non-Egological Conception of Consciousness," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 1,* 3 (1941): 325–38; J. P. Sartre, *La transcendance de l'ego* (Paris: Vrin, 1936); *The Transcendence of the Ego,* trans. F. Williams and R. Kirkpatrick, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), 67ff. In addition to Sartre, many other phenomenologists, including Husserl, Stein, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Henry have defended the view. For a comprehensive critical discussion, see Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-person Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), passim; see also Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana 18: Logische Untersuchungen. Erster Band. Prolegomena zur reinen Logik* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 35ff./ *Logical Investigations* (Trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 41–247. For the difference between pre-reflective and non-reflective consciousness, see Faruque, *Sculpting the Self,* 70, 73, 111–20, 117, 119.

sented, while when it is obtained as presence it is direct and unmediated (without involving any representation) because the self is identical with its presence. Ṣadrā writes:

> Knowledge of the self (*ʿilm al-nafs*) is the same as the self itself (*dhātihā*)…[29] It has been shown that the perception of a human being's identity (*huwiyyat al-insān*) and the attaining of his own self (*dhātihi*) through presential unveiling (*bi-l-kashf al-ḥuḍūrī*) is different from the perception of his quiddity (*māhiyya*).[30]

Mullā Ṣadrā argues even more forcefully the first-personal character of phenomenal consciousness, which can only be experienced by a particular "I." Ṣadrā says:

> When a human being comes back to his self (*rajaʿa ilā dhātihi*) and feels his inner reality, he sometimes become unaware of all universal concepts (*al-maʿānī al-kulliyya*) even the notion of being a substance, or a person (*shakhṣ*), or the one governing the body. When I attend to my self (*dhātī*) I only perceive the being which perceives itself in a particular way (*yudriku nafsihi ʿalā wajh al-juzʾiyya*). Whatever is other than that particular identity (*al-huwiyya al-makhṣūṣa*) to which I refer by "I" is external to myself, including even the very concept of "I," (*mafhūm anā*) the concept of existence (*mafhūm al-wujūd*), the concept of the perceiver itself, the concept of the one governing the body or the self, and so forth. All of these consist of types of universal knowledge, and each one of them is indicated by an "it," whereas I refer to myself as an "I" *(ilā dhāti bi-anā).*[31]

That is to say, when the self turns its gaze inward and attend to itself it has the subjective experience of what-it-is-like-to-be-me which is non-representational and non-universal, and which excludes all other Is. Put another way, the self can think of the quiddity of a human being, i.e., humanness, to identify itself, or other universals such as substance, person, or even the very concept of "I" (which is a universal as a concept) to refer to itself, but in such cases it would be universal knowledge, and as such, would fail to refer because each "I" experiences itself as a concrete and particular "I."[32] Hence, even the concept of "I" would be an "it" in relation the particular "I," or the owner of a given subjectivity. So true knowledge of the self can only be presential (*ḥuḍūrī*), where "knowledge of the self is the same as the self itself."[33] Moreover, in knowledge by presence, the self experiences its distinct subjectivity directly, which is independent of any conceptual or definitional knowledge that consists of a genus (*jins*) and a differentia (*faṣl*). Hence Ṣadrā says: "[T]he

29 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Ajwibat al-masāʾil al-kāshāniyya, in Majmūʿa-yi rasāʾil-i falsafi-yi Ṣadr al-Mutaʾallihīn,* ed. Ḥāmid Isfahānī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ḥikmat, 1990), 127.

30 Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-masāʾil al-kāshāniyya,* 128; *al-Ḥikma al-mutaʿāliya fī l-asfār al-ʿaqliyya al-arbaʿa,* eds. Aavani, Ghulāmriḍā et al. (Tehran: Bunyād-i ḥikmat-i Islāmi-yi Ṣadrā, 2001-5), VIII: 50–51. Cf. Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq, in Majmūʿah-yi muṣannafāt-i Shaykh-i Ishrāq,* II: 110–116.

31 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār,* VIII: 50-51, III: 315. Cf. Avicenna, *Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt,* ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1947), II: 343-345; Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, 85–86.

32 The self does not have a quiddity and one can point to every quiddity as an "it." But to the reality of the self one can only point to by the indexical "I," which implies that its reality is without a quiddity. However, this does not mean the self's existence is an intellectual existence. A huge number of studies exists in analytic philosophy concerning the true referent of the "I," see e.g., Elizabeth Anscombe, "The First Person," in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 21ff.; Sydney Shoemaker, "Self-reference and Self-awareness," *The Journal of Philosophy 65* (1968): 562ff.; Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference,* ed. J. McDowell (NY: Oxford University Press, 1982), passim.

33 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Ajwibat al-masāʾil al-kāshāniyya,* 127.

existence of the self (*nafs*) that is denoted by everyone by the first-personal pronoun "I" is other than what is denoted by the word "it" (i.e., mental form of the self). So, it is possible to witness the one while remaining unaware of the other."[34]

The analysis thus far has shown that consciousness (in its non-reflective form) has to be accepted as an indubitable feature of our subjectivity, if we are to make sense of any mental attitudes or phenomenal states, including attention. If Islamic philosophers such as Suhrawardī or Ṣadrā are right, it would be difficult to accept proposals that put forth theories of attention involving no consciousness. Kentridge, for example, claims that the core of attention, according to cognitive psychologists, is the *use of information* to facilitate the execution of a task to which many stimuli might potentially provide the solution. In his view, the information that is used via attention need *not inform the subject* anything about what the solution to the task is, as the use of that information is facilitative, which excludes some irrelevant stimuli from consideration.[35] In other words, Kentridge assumes that it is possible to perform a mental activity without tying it to the underlying, non-reflective consciousness. As Suhrawardī's and Ṣadrā's arguments demonstrate above, this is untenable because every mental phenomenon is accompanied an underlying awareness, either at the non-reflective level when one is not reflectively aware, as in a state of drunkenness, or at the reflective level, when one is conscious of one's mental activities. Moreover, Kentridge's view of attention would entail that there is hardly any difference between mental actions (that involves a human mind) and natural happenings such as wind-blowing because it seems to deny any phenomenal quality to the subject of experience. It seems safe to affirm that natural entities such as air or water do not have the feeling of what-it-is-like-ness or for-me-ness to their actions, whereas humans do.[36]

It should be noted, however, that many philosophers refuse to grant any validity to phenomenal consciousness. For example, Michael Tye upholds realism concerning the first-personal experience of consciousness because in his view, phenomenal properties are experienced independently. The argument begins with the premise that the only experiences of which we are introspectively aware are qualities of external things. That is to say, there is no pure or unmediated experience of consciousness if it is not already presented with some data from the outside. So, the phenomenal character of a perceptual experience consists in, and is no more than, what is out there in the world, which is the experience represents.[37] Tye's argument seems to imply that consciousness is characterized by a peculiar passivity in that in itself it does not reveal anything, since its phenomenal quality is contingent upon experiencing the world out there. But this is contradicted by those phenomena in which the subject does not experience any object, e.g., dreamless sleep and yet maintains its non-reflective consciousness (which is also continuous) as Suhrawardī argues above.

Moreover, Mullā Ṣadrā argues that no phe-

34 Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Shawāhid al-rubūbiyya fī manāhij al-sulūkiyya,* ed. Muḥaqqiq Dāmād (Tehran: Bunyād-i Ḥikmat-i Islāmi-yi Ṣadrā, 2003), 254. Although in a completely different context, Martin Buber has a fascinating discussion on the "I-it" relation. For Buber, the "I" of the "I-It" (Ich-Es) relation, in contrast to the "I" of "I-thou" (Ich-Du) relation, is a limited, solitary individual (der Einzige) that takes itself as the subject of experience against a world of objects. For more information, see Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* translated by Ronald G. Smith (New York: Scribner, 1984), passim.

35 Kentridge, *Attention without Awareness,* 229.

36 See also Faruque, *Sculpting the Self,* 74–77.

37 Michael Tye, *Consciousness Revisited: Materialism without Phenomenal Concepts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 119ff.

nomenal states of mind, even though it may in the form of the "I," can bear testimony to the existence of the self as an "I." This is because any phenomenal states or mental events that the self ascribes to itself already presupposes an *underlying consciousness.* For this reason, Ṣadrā says that even instinctive actions such as quickly withdrawing from something too hot or too cold bear witness to an underlying awareness of the self which is identical with one's I-ness. That is why it would be wrong to argue for the existence of the self on the basis of any general actions (*al-fiʿl al-muṭlaq*) such as attending, believing, or even doubting because they are not self-subsisting phenomena, and so, presuppose *an underlying subject to which they occur.*[38] Another way to explain Ṣadrā's argument would be to say that if knowledge of my action functions as a cause of my knowledge of myself, it leads to circularity because knowledge of my self is already implied in and serves as the cause of the knowledge of my very action. This is so because the moment I try to infer existence or knowledge of my self through a perceptual act such as doubting, I notice that it would not be possible for me to know my act of doubting, except after having knowledge of my self. And if I did not know myself except after knowing myself, it would result in a vicious circle. So no matter how I try to infer my knowledge of myself through *thinking*, it is bound to fail, since such performative actions already presuppose an underlying subject that makes *thinking* possible first. The only way to avoid this vicious circle would be to assert that I am already acquainted with my self in some *a priori* fashion, which is existentially identical with the very being of the reality of my self. In other words, I know my self directly through my consciousness which is the very nature of the self because the essence of my self at its most basic level is this very consciousness. If this is granted, then one does not need to perform perceptual acts such as attending or thinking in order to infer self-consciousness.[39]

38 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār,* III: 505.

Attention and Epistemic Standing

Mention has been made of attention's positive role in enhancing our epistemic standing. In this context, the Islamic philosophers, much like Saint Augustine, point to the mind's epistemic loss if it does not exercise its power of attention (*tawajjuh*) properly. As we shall soon see, they posit attention as one of the conditions of acquiring knowledge. This is because as Augustine asserts, attention is "the power that fixes the sense of sight on the object that is seen as long as it is seen, namely the attention of the mind."[40] What makes attention such an effective epistemic tool, Augustine notes, is that it can voluntarily be directed due to our natural incentives to pursue or avoid certain things, incentives which make some stimuli more salient or relevant than others.[41] Deborah Brown fleshes out the Augustinian conception of attention by highlighting the importance of attention for our ability to rationally manipulate sensory data, since without attention and the associated functions of memory, we would not be able to recall what it is that we have seen or experienced, and what, therefore, could function as a basis in our deliberations or object of scientific inquiry.[42]

39 There is an intriguing parallel between Ṣadrā's arguments above and a contemporary reflection on the topic, see Shoemaker, "Self-reference and Self-awareness," 561–563 and "Personal Identity: A Materialist's Account," in *Personal Identity,* eds. Shoemaker and Swinburne, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 105. For more information, see Faruque, *Sculpting the Self,* 75–78.

40 Augustine, *The Trinity,* trans. S. Mckenna (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1963), 11.2; cited in Brown, "Augustine and Descartes," 161.

41 See Brown, "Augustine and Descartes," 161–63.

42 Brown, "Augustine and Descartes," 165.

In a similar fashion, Islamic philosophers discuss a variety of ways which can cause epistemic loss, since we fail to make use of attention (*tawajjuh)* properly. Although Islamic philosophers talk about knowledge and the criteria for obtaining knowledge from multiple standpoints,[43] in general, it is accepted that knowledge about some matters are obtained without deliberation and thinking because the mind may simply obtain them if only it can direct its attention to them.[44] The acquisition of this kind of knowledge, which does not involve any operation of reason, is called necessary knowledge (*īlm ḍarūrī*).[45] Examples of necessary knowledge (i.e., the self-evident facts) include concepts of terms such as being, and, statements such as "the whole is greater than the part." According to these philosophers, human ignorance concerning necessary knowledge arises from the mind's lack of attention (*tawajjuh*) to them. They enumerate several attention related factors that affect our epistemic standing:[46]

1. Attentiveness (*intibāh)*: This is generally applicable and unavoidable in the case of axioms and self-evident propositions *(badīhiyyāt)*.[47] The most evident facts remain unnoticed by the inattentive.
2. Soundness of the mind *(salāmat al-dhihn)*: This is also generally applicable. Those of poor reasoning ability[48] doubt even the most evident matters or they fail to grasp them.
3. Soundness of the senses *(salāmat al-ḥawāss)*: This is specific to perceptual axioms *(badīhiyyāt al-maḥsūsa)*, i.e., those dependent on the five senses. Therefore, the blind or those with visual impairment would be unable to see properly, while the deaf would have issues with hearing.
4. Lack of doubt *(fiqdān al-shubha)*:[49] Doubt arises when the mind produces an incorrect argument, which contradicts an axiom due to sophistical reasoning (*mughālaṭa*). Thus, it may doubt an axiom or believes in its non-existence.[50] This occurs frequently in philosophy and dialectical reasoning (*jadaliyyāt*).[51]

43 Ibrahim Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mullā Ṣadrā on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Like many other pre-modern philosophers such as Augustine and Aquinas, Islamic philosophers too bring up attention in the context of their theories of perception. However, a detailed analysis of these theories is far beyond the reach of the present study. For more information, see Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy,* 102–85.

44 It should be noted that Islamic philosophers approach "knowledge" from multiple standpoints, some of which radically transcend the standard Aristotelian perspective. Mullā Ṣadrā, for example, places knowledge in the context of being (*wujūd)*, and defines it as a "mode of existence" *(naḥw al-wujūd)* by asserting that the ultimate object of knowledge is not facts, concepts, relations or even a priori judgments but existence, see Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy,* 168.

45 Muḥammad Riḍā al-Muẓaffar, *al-Manṭiq* (Beirut: Dār al-Taʿāruf li-l-Maṭbūʿāt, 2006), 23–25.

46 The following is based on Muzaffar's well-known book on Logic (mentioned in 37n), which was adapted into accessible Arabic by Sayyid ʿAlī Murtaḍā in his *ʿIlm al-manṭiq.* The latter has been translated into English recently, see Mehdi Baghi, *Introduction to Logic as Developed by Muslim Logicians* (London: ICAS, 2016), 35-40. The references are from Baghi, *Introduction to Logic,* 35-36. Cf. al-Muẓaffar, *al-Manṭiq,* 22-23.

47 They consist of primitive propositions (*awwaliyyāt), a priori* propositions, intuitive propositions *(ḥadsiyyāt),* transmitted propositions *(mutawātirāt),* empirical propositions *(mujarrabāt),* and publicly observable propositions *(mushāhdāt).*

48 It may happen due to natural impairment, certain sickness, or poor upbringing and education.

49 Consideration of lack of doubt as a factor of attentiveness is not free from indulgence, since it precisely arises from lack of impediment rather than a cause and requirement.

50 Thus, it is evident that it is specific to axioms by judgement. They are also generally applicable to them.

51 Rationally perceived axioms affirm that existence and non-existence are contradictory and that contradictory statements are mutually exclusive. However, some theologians doubt the veracity of such ax-

5. Non-intellective operation (*ʿamaliyya ghayr ʿaqliyya*): This is applicable to many axiomatic data, instances of which include listening to many individuals who are in disagreement concerning the validity of a given set of transmitted data; experiments in empirical data; and human endeavors to visit different places. They occur when human beings are in need of knowing something through experiment for a long time and undergo technical difficulties. Theoretical knowledge is not obtained unless thinking and intellective operations have also been undertaken.

Techniques of Attention

I agree with Watzl when he says that thinking attention in terms of a set of neuronal or psychological mechanisms tends to ignore normative concerns such as good or bad forms of attention, or how attention figures in moral considerations, especially in the assessment of the character of a person. Watzl also suggests that the mechanistic picture of attention tends to push its normative assessment out of view because normative questions concern the whole person (e.g., does having good character matter for developing attention), while attention as a sub-personal phenomenon is not constitutively bound to the person as such.[52] Others such as Iris Murdoch points out that there are forms of attention that play an essential role in the exercise of the virtues.[53] In his book on Zen meditative practices and the transformation of consciousness, James Austin shows how meditation trains our attention, reprogramming it toward subtle forms of awareness that are more openly mindful. This is because those who practice meditation gradually learn how to replace excessive reactivity and emotionality with calm and objective comprehension.[54] In what follows, I draw on the works of a few Indian Islamic thinkers who wrote extensively on the subject of developing attention (*tawajjuh*) and concentration (*tamarkuz*) in order reach a transcendent state of peace and tranquility.[55] As with most Indian philosophers, the goal of writing philosophy for the Islamic philosophers was to eventually address practical questions such as "how should one ought to live" and "how can one attain eternal bliss (*saʿāda abadī*)."

In his *Bawādir al-nawādir*, the Sufi metaphysician Ashraf ʿAlī Thānavī (d.1943) explains the inner architecture of thought patterns that often prevents the neophytes from reaching their ultimate spiritual goal. He identifies various features of the inner life such as perpetual soliloquy, sub-vocal thinking, indecision etc. as great impediments to the fulfillment of spiritual subjectivity.[56] In order to combat such obstacles on the spiritual

ioms since they regard existence and non-existence a means which they term "state" (*ḥāl),* but when it emerges in the line of argument and they fail to discover the fallacy, they negate it, stating that it contains doubt or uncertainty serving the opposite of axiomatic propositions.

52 Watzl, "The Ethics of Attention: An Argument and a Framework," in *Salience,* ed. S. Archer, (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 90.

53 See Christopher Mole, "Attention, Self, and the Sovereignty of Good," *in Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment,* ed. A. Rowe, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 72–84.

54 James Austin, *Selfless Insight: Zen and the Meditative Transformations of Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 3-30, 223-245. On the relation between meditation and self-control, see Noa Latham, "Meditation and Self-Control," *Philosophical Studies 173,* 7 (2016): 1779–1798.

55 See also, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī's (d. 1273) treatise on the "perfection of attention" (*Risālat al-tawajjuh al-atamm),* which has been rendered into French by Michel Valsan. Idem., "L'Épitre sur L'Orientation Parfaite," *Études Traditionnelles 67,* 398 (1966): 241–268.

56 Thānavī, *Bawādir al-nawādir* (Lahore: Shaykh Ghulām ʿAlī, 1962), 94, 109, 129, 131, 165, 177, 454–64.

path, Thānavī develops several strategies, which I call "techniques of attention." These techniques play a central role in almost all the spiritual practices, but most notably in the practice of the invocation (the practice of uttering a certain sacred formula repeatedly as in Japa yoga and Nembutsu) during the retreat (*khalwa*). In his capacity as a spiritual master Thānavī observes that the neophyte on the spiritual path has the most difficulty in developing attention (*tawajjuh*). Thānavī relates that in most Sufi orders the disciple is given a specific formula of invocation (*dhikr*) to repeat as a spiritual practice. However, while engaged in this practice, the neophyte may have to give up many other virtuous acts, like supererogatory prayers, listening to sermons, etc. Anticipating that some exoteric scholars would be critical of such practices, Thānavī explains that the reason behind such a practice is that in the beginning, the neophyte's inner state is subordinate to her external state. Over a period of time, however, the opposite will come about, so that the external state will be subordinate to the neophyte's internal state. Therefore, Thānavī argues, if the neophyte, at the beginning of her spiritual journey, occupies herself with several different practices, it will be nearly impossible for her to achieve the mental and spiritual attention that is a sine qua non in all spiritual disciplines.[57]

Thānavī draws on the rich legacy of Indian Sufism, especially the Chishtī and the Naqshbandī Sufi orders to elaborate on the techniques of attention. Prior to Thānavī, Indian Sufis have developed very sophisticated methods of practicing meditation (fikr) and invocation (dhikr). For instance, in his *Kashkūl-i Kalīmī (Kalīmī's Alms Bowl)*, Kalīm Allāh Shāhjahānabādī (d. 1729) of the Kalīmī order (which has its roots in the Chīshtī tradition) lays out twelve rules that should followed when one performs meditation.[58] Kalīm Allāh recommends that one should sit cross-legged while engaged in meditation. One should place both hands on the knees. One should fill the atmosphere with incense. The place of meditation should be a dark room. One should wear clean clothes while meditating or invoking and keep one's eyes and ear openings closed. One should visualize one's spiritual guide. One should be absolutely truthful and sincere in what one is doing, so that one is not affected by hypocrisy. One should choose formulae that express God's unity. And finally, one should pay close attention to the meaning of the invocatory formula in order to dispel any vain or sub-vocal thoughts that might distract one's concentration.[59] Kalīm Allāh also describes two breath-control techniques that are used during meditation. The first technique, known as suspension of breath (*ḥabs-i nafas*), is used to kill off stray thoughts and wandering of the mind, while the second technique, known as restraining of breath (*ḥashr-i nafas*), refers to taking breaths shorter than the normal so as to regulate heat in the body.[60] Kalīm Allāh then goes on to delineate the minutiae of this process that involves making use of various organs of the body, which need not concern us here.[61]

57 Thānavī, "Haqīqat al-tarīqa," in *al-Takashshuf ʿan muhimmāt al-taṣawwuf* (Multan: Idāra-yi Taʾlīfāt-i Ashrafiyya, 2006), 464-65.

58 Kalīm Allāh Shāhjahānabādī, "*Kashkūl-i Kalīmī,"* translated by Scott Kugle in *Sufi Meditation and Contemplation: Timeless Wisdom from Mughal India* (NY: Omega, 2012), 40-41.

59 Kalīm Allāh, *Kashkūl-i Kalīmī,* 41–42.

60 Ibid. On the negative consequences of mind-wandering that prevents us from achieving daily goals, or may make us feel bad about ourselves, see the empirical study by Matthew Killingsworth & D. Gilbert, "A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind," *Science 330,* 6006 (2010): 932–932.

61 Kalīm Allāh, *Kashkūl-i Kalīmī ,* 45-47. *Ḥabs-i nafas* is a popular method among the Chishtī, Kubrawī, and Qādirī Sufi orders.

As noted earlier, the aim of such exercises is to develop attention and concentration, which is a key component in meditation and invocation. Thānavī asserts that the purpose of various spiritual disciplines practised by the Sufis is to enhance the powers of concentration and develop one-pointed focus on a single object.[62] He explains that through such techniques Sufi masters aim to instill a certain presence of mind or oneness of concentration which, once it has become one's second nature, will greatly facilitate one's attention to the sole object of meditation, which is God.[63] Thānavī is also aware that to achieve such a state of one-pointed focus on one's spiritual practices, one requires a great deal of effort and spiritual will because the mind is usually cluttered with disparate thoughts that are difficult to dissolve.[64] He devotes pages to talk about the negative effects of distracting thoughts (*khawāṭīr*), which stifle the mind during the course of meditation, and destroy the neophyte's concentration.[65] In order to calm the mind and control distractions, Sufi masters also ask their disciples to take long periods of seclusion known as retreat or khalwa, in which they are supposed to engage in meditation and invocation for the entire period.[66] The purpose of such practices is to attain the paradisal state of mind, called the tranquil self (*nafs-i muṭmảinna*) in the Qur'an.

Conclusion

This study critiqued reductive theories of attention. While reductive, scientific theories of attention are useful in bringing out the multifarious relationship between the qualitative phenomena of the mind and various neuro-physiological processes, they seem to pass over the phenomenological, non-quantifiable experiences in silence that often underlie our mental processes. A more balanced approach would be to incorporate philosophical theories into one's experimental research so that one is able to maintain conceptual consistencies and avoid falling into the trap of private language fallacy. In any event, it was argued that attention is not an isolated mental phenomenon and must be understood in light of the basic structure of consciousness. Moreover, it was shown that consciousness (in its most primitive form) is the defining feature of human subjectivity, without which it would be impossible to account for any mental actions. Also, the "self" involved at this level of consciousness must be non-reflective, i.e., one that does act as a witness over its miscellaneous activities.[67]

A theory of attention that incorporates consciousness and subjectivity in its account is important in several regards. It helps us to see that mental phenomena are interconnected; hence they should be ascribed to the self as a whole. This means one should also be wary of heedlessness (ghafla) and forgetfulness (nisyān), which are the opposite of attention, but which affect the whole person. So, in

62 Thānavī, *Haqīqat al-tarīqa,* 535.

63 This is also expressed by Augustine, although in a slightly different manner. According to Augustine, true empirical knowledge consists not in uniting, through attention, an image and a form present in memory, which is sufficient for a veridical perception, but an active attending to itself of the mind (*c. Acad.* 1.23) or turning towards God *(ord.* 1.22), see Brown, *Augustine and Descartes*, 166.

64 Thānavī, *Haqīqat al-tarīqa,* 455-56.

65 Thānavī, *Haqīqat al-tarīqa,* 444ff. Cf., Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *On Disciplining the Soul & On Breaking the Two Desires: books XXII and XXIII of The Revival of the Religious sciences = Kitāb riyāḍat al-nafs, & Kitāb kasr al-shahwatayn: Iḥyā' ʿulūm al-dīn,* trans. by T. J. Winter (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1995), LXVII.

66 For a classic treatment of the practice of *retreat* in Sufism, see Najm al-Dīn Kubrā's *Risāla fi-l-khalwa* translated by Gerhard Böwering. Gerhard Böwering, "Kubrā's Treatise on Spiritual Retreat, "Risāla fi-l-khalwa," *al-Abhath* 54 (2006): 7–34.

67 However, it should be noted that the self of the philosophers discussed in this study contains other dimensions which is able to account for moral decisions involving freewill.

order to cultivate attention as an epistemic and moral virtue, one must learn the art of living (techne tou biou) and think of life as a sort of art-work requiring a beautiful form.

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