

Muhammad Umar Faruque: *Sculpting the Self. Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing*. University of Michigan Press. 2021. 328 pp. ISBN 978-0-4721-3262-1.

Reviewed by **Mona Jahangiri**

Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

A deep understanding of oneself is essential for grasping the wider world. This idea is echoed in the ancient wisdom of the Delphic oracle's phrase, "Know thyself" (*gnōthi sauton*). Likewise, Mullā Ṣadrā's statement, "Whoever knows himself attains apotheosis" (*man 'arafa dhātahu ta'allaha*, 62), conveys a similar message. Both emphasize that self-knowledge is key to reaching higher states of understanding and transcendence. The question of human identity and the self has captivated some of the greatest minds throughout history and continues to be a source of fascination. Yet, modern approaches often focus solely on empirical methods of cognition, departing significantly from the more diverse and pluralistic epistemologies found in various cultural and philosophical traditions around the world.

It is thus unusual in modern philosophical literature to find a work that addresses a subject with such depth and a global outlook. Muhammad Faruque's monograph stands out for its wide-ranging scope, engaging with primary philosophical texts across multiple traditions. Moreover, it enhances its exploration by integrating the latest developments from scientific and historical research. The study offers not only a thorough analysis of selfhood but also sets a standard for philosophical inquiry, surpassing the limitations of traditional academic treatises that are often characterized by narrow viewpoints. Faruque's *Sculpting the Self* offers a fresh perspective by introducing an integrative "spectrum" model of the self. This innovative approach courageously tackles the question of "what it means to be human" in a secular, post-Enlightenment age. Through its philosophical depth and interdisciplinary scope, Faruque's book emerges as a significant study of selfhood, identity, and human flourishing. The work promotes a human-centered vision, particularly relevant in today's world of growing alienation and existential doubt. It explores a distinct concept of the self in Islamic philosophy, carefully analyzing various terms like *nafs*, *rūḥ*, *dhāt*, and *khūd*, among others.

Faruque begins his inquiry by addressing the problematic nature of the concept of the self. From the start, it is emphasized that contemporary theories of selfhood and subjectivity are facing a profound crisis. This crisis stems, in part, from the fact that thinkers such as William James, Carl

Jung, Dan Zahavi, and Galen Strawson affirm the existence of the self, while others like Daniel Dennett, David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Anthony Kenny deny its existence. This fundamental disagreement over the existence of the self is a key factor contributing to the crisis. According to Faruque, a key reason for the disagreement about the self is that many scholars focus on just one aspect of the concept while overlooking others. He relates this idea to the parable of the “elephant and the blind man,” originally told by Rūmī and Sanā’ī. In this parable, each blind man touches a different part of the elephant and believes that part represents the whole, leading to contradictory views. To resolve this issue, Faruque proposes a “spectrum” theory of the self, which encompasses both descriptive and normative dimensions. The self is viewed as a complex, multifaceted entity, similar to the parable of the “elephant and the blind man.” The author also integrates perspectives from philosophy, social anthropology, phenomenology, and neuroscience to support and strengthen his arguments.

The book consists of a preface, introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, focusing on one of life’s central questions: the exploration of the self. In the Introduction, Faruque outlines the various philosophically important aspects of selfhood. In Chapter 1, the author explores the theoretical barriers to understanding selfhood, suggesting a multidisciplinary approach to address these issues. Chapter 2 focuses on differentiating between “reflective self-knowledge” and a deeper form of awareness beyond the subject-object distinction, which is described as “self-presence” (78). To elaborate on this concept, Faruque draws on the works of Avicenna, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā. For him, self-presence refers to a direct, non-inferential awareness of oneself, which underpins perceptual activities and cognitive processes (77). He further argues that perceptual activities like thinking, reflecting, or doubting rely on an inherent self-awareness that exists before any reflective or conscious act, whether mental or physical. He cites Mullā Ṣadrā to support the idea that the human self does not have a static identity; instead, it consists of various levels and dimensions, with prior and subsequent modes of existence. At each stage or realm, the self assumes a different form (45). In discussing different aspects of self-knowledge, the author argues that self-knowledge is a form of non-reflective self-awareness that goes beyond mere reflection and introspection.

The early sections of the book set the stage for examining the different aspects and complexities of selfhood. As the discussion unfolds, it highlights both the Kantian view and the Humean challenge regarding the self. So, in Chapter 3, the discussion centers on the epistemological misunderstandings related to the self, particularly those stemming from the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume. Hume portrays human identity as merely a collection of perceptions. This chapter expands on the idea of non-reflective self-knowledge, emphasizing self-presence. Faruque critiques Hume’s “bundle theory”, which reduces the self to an object of reflective awareness. Drawing on Mullā Ṣadrā, Faruque argues that a level of consciousness exists beyond reflection and reflective inquiry (115). In Chapter 4, the relationship between consciousness and neuroscience is examined in detail, while Chapter 5 explores themes like selfhood, methods of self-cultivation, and the pursuit of human flourishing. This chapter delves into various approaches within spirituality and philosophy, engaging in a dialogue between Islamic philosophy and other philosophical traditions, thereby offering cross-cultural relevance. He describes the process of self-perfection and self-cultivation as a conduit to inner peace, which transforms the ordinary self – a process he refers to as “sculpting the self.” The aim of this process through philosophical and spiritual practices is not to achieve divinity but to realize one’s full humanity. However, he ultimately critiques the views of

Iqbal and Nietzsche on the self for their failure to support the spiritual transformation required for true human flourishing (265). Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the strengths and limitations of various conceptual frameworks about the self vis-à-vis the book's own spectrum model.

Overall, this multidimensional study of the self offers profound and thorough philosophical insights into the current epistemological challenges of understanding human nature. Throughout the book, insights from neuroscience and cognitive studies are integrated into the analyses of the self. However, combining insights from different philosophical and scientific traditions can be complex. The concept of "sculpting the self" might be critiqued for its practical applicability. One could argue that while the philosophical and spiritual ideals discussed are valuable, the practical steps or methods for achieving this transformation might be unclear for readers looking for concrete guidance. Nevertheless, Faruque's work is to be praised for its valiant efforts.