

From “I Am” to Incorporeality: The Educational Role of the Flying Man

“Ben”in Farkındalığından Gayri Cismaniliğe: Uçan Adam’ın Eğitsel Rolü

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Abstract: This article reinterprets Avicenna’s “Flying Man” not as a strict metaphysical proof, but as a experiential and heuristic exercise. By examining the three main versions Shifā’ Nafs I.5, Nafs V.7, and Ishārāt X), it shows that the thought experiment first establishes an immediate self-awareness, and then, starting from this finding, points to the non-corporeality of the soul. Avicenna brings the faculties of imagination and estimation into play to have the reader construct a scenario in their own mind. With sensory ties withdrawn, the reader directly experiences their own existence, and thus the process serves an instructive function. This experiential reading treats the Flying Man as an inward turn that makes the basic experience of the soul’s self-awareness visible, thereby linking it to Avicenna’s discussions of selfhood and the nafs-body relation in his philosophy of mind. From this perspective, the Flying Man is not a straightforward demonstrative proof (burhān), but a tanbīh, that is, a guiding indication. The first and reliable result of the experiment is self-awareness, non-corporeality is a secondary, subsequent step that emerges at the level of implication rather than as a conclusive proof. In this way, by foregrounding the experiential dimension of the experiment, its place within Avicenna’s philosophy of mind becomes clearer.

Keywords: Islamic philosophy, Avicenna’s psychology, nafs, flying man, self-awareness, incorporeality of nafs.



Introduction

Avicenna, a 10th century philosopher, wrote in many fields, he has a vast body of work. However, there is one particular example he uses many times throughout his different texts. This example is nothing but the famous thought experiment known as the “Flying Man”, which is usually taken to illuminate his dualism between mind/soul (or *nafs*, in his terms) and body (Avicenna, 1981; Druart, 1988; McTighe, 1988; Veltri et al., 2019), and has prompted numerous questions and objections¹. This article has one aim, to explain what the Flying Man thought experiment amounts to and, more specifically, what role Avicenna intends it to play. The central claim of this article is that Avicenna’s Flying Man is not offered as a strict metaphysical proof of the soul’s incorporeality, but as a experiential and pedagogical *tanbīh*. Read in this way, the thought experiment proceeds in two stages. First it elicits a basic, pre-reflective awareness of “I am”, and only in a second, derivative step does it suggest the independence of the *nafs* from the body. This re-reading matters for at least two reasons. First, it clarifies why the Flying Man resists standard objections that treat it as a straightforward argument from conceivability or as an instance of the masked-man pattern. Second, by shifting attention from the logical form of a proof to the guided use of imagination and estimation, it embeds the experiment in Avicenna’s broader psychology and pedagogy, and thus offers a more unified account of the Flying Man’s place in his philosophy of mind. Scholars have not reached a consensus, some read the argument as defending the *nafs*’ incorporeality, others its substantiality, and still others a thesis about self-awareness. This study argues that Avicenna’s Flying Man thought experiment is best understood not as a metaphysical proof, but as a psychological and pedagogical exercise. By focusing on how Avicenna invites the reader to use imagination and estimation to set up the scenario, I show that the experiment’s real significance lies in highlighting a basic,

¹ For critical discussions of Avicenna’s “flying man,” see above all Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who questions the psychological possibility of actual self-awareness under such radical sensory deprivation. Modern commentators such as Michael Marmura also argue that Avicenna illegitimately moves from a merely hypothetical thought experiment to a categorical ontological claim about the soul’s immateriality, while others liken his inference from “I know myself but not my body” to the classic “masked man” fallacy that illicitly infers real non-identity from a mere difference in what is known.



unmediated awareness of self. This perspective shifts the discussion from metaphysical demonstration to the overlooked role of the reader's own inner powers (*quwā*), offering a new way to interpret the Flying Man's place in Avicenna's philosophy. Thus, the experiment yields two conclusions, but the second (incorporeality) follows from and is therefore posterior to the first (self-awareness). To support this reading, I first examine multiple versions of the experiment -*Nafs I.5*, *Nafs V.7*, and *Isbārāt X*- all of which, I argue, converge on the same result: the immateriality of the nafs. In terms of method, this study examines Avicenna's Flying Man argument through a comparative textual analysis and conceptual analysis of these three core passages. The textual analysis seeks to clarify the intra-textual context and terminological nuances of each version, while the experiential reading aims to reconstruct the first-person experience Avicenna invites the reader to perform and to make explicit its pedagogical function. In this sense, the article situates itself between hermeneutic interpretation and experiential description, taking seriously the idea that the thought experiment functions not as a strict *burhān* but as a *tanbīh*, and analysing the Flying Man as a pedagogical exercise that prepares the ground for, rather than replaces, demonstrations of the nafs-body distinction. Then I move on to discuss on the finding of the textual analysis. In the third part of this study, I address the other interpretations of this thought experiment.

In this study I try to show that the real force of Avicenna's Flying Man lies not in squeezing a metaphysical proof out of a bare self-awareness, but in the way, Avicenna first asks us to imagine ourselves as that man suspended in air, setting the stage with our own *khayāl* (imagination) and *wahm* (estimation). These two powers work as a kind of purely preparatory role in the experiment, in which we build the scene with them, then watch as they are stripped away, and what remains is a stark, prereflective grasp of "I am." That moment is only a hint, no more than a *tanbīh*, and it never leaps straight to the claim that the nafs is incorporeal. By highlighting this choreography, my claim contributes to the discussion by explaining both how Avicenna avoids the usual masked-man fallacy and why the experiment is best read as an epistemological pointer rather than a full-blown proof. On this basis, the Flying Man is no longer just a test case for dualism, but the scene in which Avicenna presents the most primitive form of self-



awareness that underwrites his psychology. In shifting the focus from logical demonstration to the neglected psychological and pedagogical side of Avicenna's method, I hope to open a new way of understanding the Flying Man's place in his philosophy of mind.

More contemporary studies on Avicenna in a modern way as far as I can detect started around 1920's (Kaukua, 2014, pp. 34, 17th note). The thought experiment was not called as Flying Man until Étienne Gilson (Black, 2008, pp. 63, 3rd endnote). Even though there is an enormous literature on this matter, it still is subject of debate. Hasse (2000) suggests that there are five different alternatives of the purpose of this specific text (p. 81). Alpina (2021) presents 3 major thesis (p. 71). In this study, I will offer four main categories². These are:

- 1- The incorporeality of the nafs,
- 2- The independent existence of nafs from the body,
- 3- The substantiality of the nafs,
- 4- Nafs' being aware of itself.

Although the thought experiment can be read as supporting all four interpretations, its primary aim is singular. Which interpretation is primary depends on whether the experiment is treated as a metaphysical proof or as a *tanbīh*.

My interpretation starts from the Flying Man's initial insight; a basic, *prereflective* sense of *self*. This immediate introspective awareness, facilitated by Avicenna's careful use of imagination and estimation, serves only as a stepping stone. It hints, without yet conclusively proving, that the nafs is non-bodily, thus preparing the ground for a fuller metaphysical argument about incorporeality. This interpretation resonates closely with Kaukua's (2020) stance that Avicenna does not offer the Flying Man as a strict demonstrative argument, but rather as an epistemological pointer, guiding the reader towards subsequent philosophical reflection. However, I depart from Kaukua in taking the immediate result of the experiment to be an

² Other than these, there are some other interpretations as well. However, I will not mention every one of them one by one here in this section. However, Peter Adamson and Fedor Benevich 2018 offers the essentiality thesis. They focus on the nafs in its relationship with the body and they suggest that Avicenna was trying to understand whether this relation belongs to the essence of the nafs (p. 148).



even more modest, pre-reflective "I am"-experience, and in emphasizing the passage's literary form as a *tanbīh* and a guided exercise in imagination and estimation rather than a fully reconstructed argument for the soul's independent existence.

1. The Analysis of The Flying Man

Flying Man appears in five different texts of Avicenna. I will take the three of them to analyze and strengthen my point. Two of them in *Kitab al-Nafs of Shifa* (*The psychology part of Book of Healing*). The third one is from *Pointers and Reminders (al-Ishārāt wa-al-Tanbīhāt)*. The first one is the most explicit version of the Flying Man and hence it is the most commonly referred one.

1.1 Flying Man in *Kitab al-Nafs* 1.1

"We have now understood the meaning of the term that is applied to what is called "nafs" (soul) in relation to it. Therefore, it is more appropriate that we occupy ourselves with understanding the essence of this thing which has become, through rational consideration, a "nafs". And we must proceed in this context to prove the existence of the nafs that we have through the way of attention and reminder. This profound indication arises from a power that enables one to perceive the truth within oneself without needing external validation or support, beyond doubt or obscurity. We say that one of us should imagine as if they were created instantly and created perfect, but their sight was veiled from observing external things, and created floating in the air or void in such a way that the air does not touch or move against them, preventing any sensation of it. And differentiated between their limbs so that they do not meet or touch, then they contemplate: do they prove existence of their *dhāt*? They would not doubt in affirming existence of their *dhāt* as self-evident, yet they would not affirm along with that any limb of their body, nor any internal organ, nor heart, nor brain, nor anything from external things. Rather, they would affirm their *dhāt* without affirming it to have length, width, or depth. And if it were possible for them in that state to imagine a hand or another limb, they would not imagine it as part of their *dhāt* or a condition of their *dhāt*. And you know that what is affirmed is other than what is not affirmed, and what is known is other than what is not known. Therefore, the *dhāt* whose existence they affirmed as specifically being themselves is other than their



body and limbs which were not affirmed. Thus, the one who is alert has a way to be aware that the existence of the nafs is something other than the body, and that they know it and are aware of it. If they were unaware of it and needed to be struck with a stick.”³ (Avicenna, 1959, pp. 15-16)

If we reconstruct the Flying Man experiment step-by-step from the perspective of the reader, it becomes evident that Avicenna does not present just one conclusion, but rather two interconnected results:

a.i We are looking for the *essence* or *quiddity* of the nafs,

a.ii The proof will be given in the form of admonition, not a demonstration,

a.iii I imagine that there is one of us -let’s say me- who has no access to my sense organs,

a.iv I have a mature (perfect) mental capacity,

a.v In such a situation floating me can affirm that my *dhāt* exists,

a.vi This *dhāt* that I affirmed is different than the thing that I did not affirm which is the body,

a.vii The thing that I affirmed is not material⁴,

a.viii Hence *dhāt*, which is affirmed is, not material.

Flying Man thought experiment is yielding two distinct epistemic stages; first, (*a.v*) an immediate affirmation of the existence of my *dhāt* (self-awareness), and second, (*a.viii*) a further indication though importantly not a rigorous demonstration that this self-aware *dhāt* could be immaterial.

Following Kaukua’s important caution⁵, we should emphasize that the Flying Man itself provides a secure epistemological result (the existence of

³ Translation belongs to mine although I got some help from: (Adamson & Benevich, 2018)

⁴ Hence what is affirmed (*dhāt*) is different than what is not affirmed (body and anything material). This is an obvious fallacy that is called Masked Man Fallacy. For further remarks on this see: (Kaukua, 2020)

⁵ Kaukua (2020) cautions that the Flying Man should not be treated as a direct proof of the soul’s immateriality, because such a reading commits the classic masked man fallacy. It moves illegitimately from what the subject can conceive, namely a self that exists without a body, to what is metaphysically true, that the self is not the body. He argues that the episode delivers only first-person certainty, expressed as “I exist without sensing a body,” and that any conclusion about incorporeality must be secured through additional argument rather than through the thought experiment itself.



dhāt), yet the metaphysical claim about the *nafs*' immateriality emerges only as an indicative, preliminary result rather than a strictly demonstrated metaphysical conclusion. In other words, Avicenna's experiment directly secures self-awareness, but metaphysically it only "points toward" incorporeality, leaving the rigorous metaphysical argumentation to later philosophical inquiry.

1.2 Flying Man in *Kitab al-Nafs* V.7

In this section, two parts are especially pertinent to our discussion:

"For I would be 'I' even if I did not know that I have a hand and a foot or a member of these organs [as previously mentioned in other places]. Rather, [I think that these are my followers] and I believe that they are instruments that I use for needs - were it not for these needs, I would not need them - and I would also be 'I' and not them."

"...if a human was created at once and created with different limbs and did not see his extremities, and it happened that he did not touch them nor were they in contact, and did not hear a sound, being ignorant of the existence of all his organs while being ignorant of all that, he would know the existence of his 'I'⁶ as one thing. And the unknown is not identical to the known. In reality, these organs are like clothes which [have become], due to their constant wearing, like parts of us. And when we imagine ourselves (أنفسنا), we do not imagine ourselves naked, but rather we imagine ourselves as clothed bodies. The reason for this constant association is that we have become accustomed to clothes in abstraction and discarding in a way we have not become accustomed to with organs. Thus, our assumption that organs are parts of us is stronger than our assumption that clothes are parts of us." (Avicenna, 1959, p. 255)

Decomposing the text, we can identify the following claims:

b.o. I do not need to have my organs to be "I"

b.i I am imagining that I was created in such a way that I do not have any contact with my organs and do not have any sense perception,

b.ii I would know my existence as "I",

b.iii. Known and unknown are two distinct things,

⁶ Avicenna uses "anniya" here instead of "*dhāt*".



b.iv My organs -hence- my body are like clothes that I think as my parts because of wearing all the time.

b.v Hence my assumption that my organs-body is a part of me is not justified.

This version of the Flying Man occurs in the passage where Avicenna argues that what we take to be the *dhāt* cannot be corporeal (Avicenna, 1959, pp. 253–254). In step *b.ii* we again read as a (sub)conclusion of the self-awareness. In step *b.v* Avicenna warns us about our assumption of the association our organs/body and ourselves.

1.3 Flying Man in *al-Ishārāt* Third Class

It is particularly hard to give the exact part about the Flying Man in *al-Ishārāt* as Avicenna discusses this issue in a couple of pages. However, the most compact part of this text would be the following:

“Further, if you imagine yourself at the beginning of its creation with a healthy intellect and a healthy disposition, and supposedly it is altogether in such a position and disposition as not to perceive its parts nor have its members in contact but separate and suspended for a certain moment in free air, you find that it ignores everything except the assertion that it is (*that existence of yourself*).⁷

Is that which apprehends [yourself] one of your external senses, is it your intellect, or a faculty other than your senses and what belongs to them? If it is your intellect or a faculty other than your senses by which you apprehend [yourself], then do you apprehend [it] by means of an intermediary or without an intermediary?

I do not believe that in that case⁸ you are in need of an intermediary. Thus, it is without an intermediary [that you apprehend yourself]. It remains, therefore, that you apprehend yourself without the need for another faculty or an intermediary.” (Avicenna, 2014, p. 95)

Broken into steps, the argument proceeds as follows:

c.i I will be created in such a way that I do not have access anything bodily or material.

c.ii I cannot ignore the existence of myself.

c.iii Would I apprehend myself with an intermediary?

⁷ Highlights belong to me.

⁸ In the case of Flying Man.



c.iv I can apprehend myself (*dhāt*) without any intermediary.

The main conclusion reached in the section I have addressed is the direct, unmediated access of self-awareness. However, in the following paragraphs of the text, Avicenna points out that the *nafs* is a substance distinct from the corporeal.⁹ Even though this specific part of the text is mainly about self-awareness, *c.ii*, before arriving at the direct-access conclusion, he treats self-awareness as a premise.

2. The Purpose of The Flying Man

Across these texts, self-awareness is not presented as the ultimate result. Instead, it functions as an intermediate conclusion, a stage in the argument that supports a further objective. In the first text, in step *a.v* Avicenna concludes that a person knows their own essence (self-awareness). However, Avicenna proceeds from this point to reach another conclusion in step *a.viii*, namely the immateriality of this essence. In the second text, which begins with the assertion that I do not need my organs to be myself, in step *b.ii*, the intermediate conclusion is even if I were the "Flying Man" I would still be aware of my existence as myself. Yet, Avicenna did not end the discussion at this very point. He used this intermediate conclusion to arrive at the main conclusion that the belief that my body or organs are a part of me is merely an illusion formed due to prolonged association. In the third text, in step *b.ii*, the conclusion is even in the case of the "Flying Man", I could not disregard my existence under any circumstances. Another notable outcome in this text is my unmediated access to myself. Although it is not possible to present the entire text here, Avicenna (2014) again presents the thesis of immateriality as the main conclusion in the continuation of the paragraphs above (pp. 96–98). What is common in these texts is that self-awareness is always in the middle of the text, not at the end of it. Hence, I take it in a way that Avicenna uses the self-awareness to point something else in his philosophical agenda. Self-awareness is one of the important results however it is not the main objective of the Flying Man thought experiment. He treats immediate self-awareness as the evidential hinge on which his argument for immateriality turns. This line of reasoning has often been taken to support a strong form of *nafs*-body dualism. Since the self can be aware of itself without attending to any

⁹ I am unable to give the whole text here, please see: (Avicenna, 2014, pp. 96–98.)



bodily feature, it is inferred that the self must be ontologically distinct and non-bodily (Druart, 1988; Hasse, 2000). Critics, however, have argued that this move risks collapsing into a version of the “masked-man” fallacy or a mere conceivability-to-reality inference, and that the Flying Man at most establishes an epistemic asymmetry between our knowledge of ourselves and our knowledge of bodies, rather than a full-blown substance dualism (Kaukua, 2020; Marmura, 1986). On my reading Avicenna indeed treats immediate self-awareness as the evidential hinge on which his argument for immateriality turns, but precisely by placing it as an intermediate step within a broader psychological framework rather than as the final aim of the Flying Man thought experiment. Even though Avicenna has a dualist conception of nafs-body relation, his dualism does not follow directly from the Flying Man passage taken in isolation.

Self-awareness has a crucial place in Avicenna’s discussion on *nafs*. He believes that self-awareness is immediate. He thinks that even a sleeping person or a drunk person possesses self-awareness (Avicenna, 2014, p. 94). He defines it as an *a priori* knowledge (Ibn Sina, 2019, p. 152). Hence it is possible that he wanted to strength the self-awareness thesis in the Flying Man thought experiment without a demonstration. In *Taliqāt* and *al-Ishārāt* he discusses more about the self-awareness. However, it appears that even though it is an important step for the Flying Man, it does not seem as the ultimate objective of it. This tension between the centrality of self-awareness in Avicenna’s psychology and its non-final status in the experiment becomes especially clear once we consider how the Flying Man has been read as a demonstrative metaphysical proof in the modern literature.

To construe Avicenna's Flying Man purely as a demonstrative metaphysical argument risks misrepresenting its purpose and method. Such an interpretation would entail that an empirical or introspective observation leads directly to a metaphysical claim something rightly flagged by critics such as Marmura (1986) and Kaukua (2020) as fallacious. Marmura (1986) notably argues that this approach moves illicitly from transparency to opacity, suggesting that while the experiment may have epistemological force, it does not justify a metaphysical conclusion about the nafs’ incorporeality (pp. 388, 392).



However, there is a dimension that warrants further exploration, concerning Avicenna's strategic deployment of psychological faculties, specifically imagination (*khayāl*) and estimation (*wahm*), in guiding the reader's engagement with the experiment. It is true, as Kaukua and others emphasize¹⁰, that Avicenna explicitly refers to the Flying Man as a *tanbīh* (pointer) not a *burhān* (strict demonstrative proof). This should be understood as a claim about the passage's literary form and immediate function, not as a denial that the immaterialist and independence theses it gestures toward can be grounded in demonstrations elsewhere in his psychology (for instance in *Nafs* V.2). In Avicenna's broader pedagogical approach, *tanbīh* (pointers) is not merely a formal label but a distinct didactic device. In works such as *al-Ishārāt wa'l-Tanbīhāt* he reserves *ishārāt* and *tanbīhāt* for advanced readers who are expected to catch a brief indication and complete the argument themselves, rather than being led through a fully explicit demonstration (Wisnovsky, 2018, pp. 115–116). A *tanbīh* thus presupposes underlying burhānic reasoning while at the same time training the reader's own cognitive powers by forcing her to supply the missing steps. Reading the Flying Man as a *tanbīh* situates it within this educational strategy where the passage does not replace Avicenna's demonstrative psychology of the *nafs*, but functions as a carefully crafted exercise that awakens and guides a first-person experience of self-awareness on which later arguments can build. On the reading defended here, the Flying Man episode itself operates as an epistemological reminder and an exercise in self-awareness, using *khayāl* and *wahm* to prepare the reader for those more explicit demonstrations.

Avicenna begins by explicitly instructing the reader to *imagine yourself* in the Flying Man scenario suspended in air and deprived of all sensory input. This imperative seems paradoxical at first glance, considering Avicenna himself removes all imaginative and estimative faculties from the hypothetical Flying Man's experience. The paradox dissolves when we recognize that Avicenna carefully distinguishes between two perspectives, the internal perspective of the Flying Man, who experiences a complete

¹⁰ Adamson-Benevich, "The Thought Experimental Method"; Marmura, "Avicenna's 'Flying Man' in Context"; Black, "Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing That One Knows."



sensory blackout, and the external perspective of the reader, who must initially employ imagination and estimation to construct and mentally simulate the scenario.

This distinction gives a clarity to Avicenna's epistemological strategy. Imagination and estimation, both ordinarily linked with bodily and sensory cognition (Ibn Sina, 2021, pp. 299-303; 361-365), are utilized pedagogically to set up the thought experiment. They act as instruments, necessary to build the scenario vividly enough for the reader to appreciate the insight Avicenna aims to convey. Yet, once the scenario is imaginatively established, Avicenna's intention is precisely to show that when these faculties are stripped away, what remains is a bare, immediate awareness of existence, unmediated by any bodily or sensory reference.

This pedagogical use of imagination and estimation does more than merely avoid an apparent contradiction. It sharpens the introspective force of the Flying Man experiment. Avicenna effectively employs the reader's sensory-dependent faculties against themselves, using them as tools to reveal a level of self-awareness that transcends sensory mediation entirely. The epistemological conclusion thus reached the knowledge of self-existence is immediate and undeniable because it is not inferred but directly recognized through introspection.

2.2. Terminological Remarks on the Flying Man

An additional point that strengthens my reading concerns Avicenna's choice of language in the Flying Man thought experiment. In the second version of the text, he uses the first-person pronoun "I" instead of the more technical terms *ammiya* or *dhāt*, both of which are ambiguous in his philosophical writings and have been the subject of much scholarly debate. The interpretative challenge becomes apparent when examining *Kitāb al-Nafs* I.I, where Avicenna's use of *dhāt* has generated substantial scholarly debate regarding whether he intended to convey "essence", "self", or "core entity". (Hasse, 2000, p. 83) His subsequent employment of "I" in the Flying Man thought experiment may offer valuable insights into this hermeneutical question. By shifting to "I", Avicenna draws the reader directly into a personal and immediate self-awareness, sidestepping the ambiguities of his technical vocabulary. This move fits with my claim that the Flying Man thought experiment is less about settling a metaphysical dispute and more



about guiding the reader to a direct experience of selfhood, before any philosophical definitions come into play. Further evidence comes from the third version of the "Flying Man" thought experiment, where Avicenna again uses "*dhāt*" to mean "yourself". Here, he delves deeper into what constitutes the self and how one can know oneself. He concludes that even without certain organs or the ability to see, one would still be oneself. He use of "I" thus works alongside Avicenna's psychological and pedagogical strategy, it anchors the experiment in first-person experience, setting up self-awareness as an intermediate, experiential step. Only after this does Avicenna push toward his dualist conclusions. In this way, his choice of terminology reinforces my argument that self-awareness is not the final objective, but a necessary stage in the path to his broader philosophical aims. By emphasizing self-awareness in the "Flying Man" and then questioning the *nafs*, which he identifies with "me" (Avicenna, 2014, p. 97), as a substance, Avicenna aims to persuade the reader toward his dualistic view. This perspective holds that the self or *nafs* is distinct from the physical body.

A potential methodological concern regarding these texts might arise from their apparently distinct contexts. However, this interpretative challenge finds its resolution in Avicenna's own texts. In the opening paragraph of the second text, Avicenna directly references his previous exposition of the Flying Man argument, thereby establishing a clear textual and conceptual continuity between these discussions. Significantly, in the second text, proposition *b.o* (the initial premise of his argument) receives its justification through an explicit reference to the earlier Flying Man thought experiment.

Concerning the distinction between *nafs* and body in Avicenna's thought, a careful terminological analysis of the Flying Man versions reveals significant nuances. In the first version, Avicenna employs the Arabic term *jism* (body/corporeal substance), notably refraining from explicit reference to the "personal body." While *jism* can denote the human body in certain contexts, its usage here appears more expansive.

The second version of the argument marks a notable shift in terminology, where Avicenna specifically employs the phrases "my organs" and the first-person pronoun "I" (*ana*). This terminological distinction suggests



that the first version's use of *jism* more likely refers to materiality as a general category rather than to the specific human body. This interpretation gains further support from the text's structure: Avicenna (1959) provides a comprehensive examination of the body-nafs relationship in subsequent chapters (p. Book 5), suggesting that the Flying Man argument serves primarily to establish a preliminary conceptual distinction rather than to fully articulate the nature of the body-nafs relationship.

3. Evaluating the Other Possible Objectives of Flying Man

Having previously examined four potential objectives of the Flying Man thought experiment and having shown that Avicenna's principal aim in the Flying Man is to pave the way for the nafs' incorporeality, we must now evaluate the remaining three interpretative possibilities. Of particular significance is the question of self-awareness, which constitutes the fourth proposed objective of the thought experiment.

While the self-awareness thesis represents a crucial component of Avicenna's philosophy of mind and emerges as one of the significant outcomes of the Flying Man argument, careful textual analysis reveals that it functions as an intermediary conclusion rather than the argument's ultimate aim. This distinction is crucial for understanding the structural logic of Avicenna's evidence which is self-awareness serves as a necessary step in establishing the nafs' incorporeality rather than standing as the argument's primary objective.

Michael Marmura (1986) does not regard the Flying Man as a rigorous philosophical proof. While he briefly notes the immortality of the nafs, he maintains that the experiment's primary role is to show the nafs is immaterial and its secondary role is to supply an experiential basis for self-awareness (p. 387). By contrast, a step-by-step analysis shows that the first explicit conclusion Avicenna draws is self-awareness, and from this experiential fact he proceeds to infer the nafs' immateriality.

Deborah Black (2023) reinforces and expands Marmura's epistemic interpretation by insisting that the Flying Man's main aim is to isolate and reveal primitive self-awareness as the necessary, foundational condition for any further cognition or knowledge, making the metaphysical implications secondary. Black in her recent article suggest that self-awareness which she called primitive self-awareness is the main purpose of the Flying Man (p.



821). She uses different versions of the Flying Man and separates self-awareness and consciousness. So, according to Black (2008) what we see in the Flying Man is a primitive self-awareness that is always with us even when we're sleeping (pp. 65–67). Black's discussion sheds valuable light on the experiment's psychological core; my interpretation simply adds the next step, explaining how Avicenna builds on that insight to argue for the nafs' immateriality.

In contrast, Dag Nikolaus Hasse (2000) positions the Flying Man mainly as establishing the nafs' ontological independence from the body, asserting that other conclusions, like immateriality, substantiality, or primitive self-awareness, flow naturally but secondarily from this primary insight. According to him, Avicenna is not simply trying to prove the nafs' bare existence or its incorporeality, nor is he primarily focused on self-awareness or substantiality in this passage. Instead, the Flying Man is crafted to draw attention to a core entity ("my essence") that can be meaningfully affirmed even in complete bodily isolation, with all sensory and imaginative faculties suspended (p. 83). Hasse takes into consideration different texts where the Flying Man occurs separately. He surveys multiple loci of the experiment and focuses on two key terms, *dhāt* and *amniyya*, concluding that Avicenna is pointing to the "core entity" or "being".

Moreover, Hasse (2000) is clear that the Flying Man should not be read as a strict philosophical proof; Avicenna presents it as a *tanbīh* (pp. 86–87). He shows that while later Latin thinkers often interpreted the Flying Man as a proof for incorporeality or self-awareness (2000, p. 92), Avicenna's original context is more modest, it is fundamentally about awakening an intuition of the nafs' separateness from the body, providing the groundwork for further metaphysical arguments developed elsewhere in Avicenna's work. In this sense, Hasse places the emphasis on the methodological and preparatory role of the Flying Man, positioning it as the starting point for a deeper investigation into the nature of the nafs.

Tommaso Alpina (2018) stresses that Avicenna's Flying Man chiefly establishes the nafs' incorporeality, substantiality, and independence from the body, presenting the nafs as an immaterial substance clearly distinct from bodily faculties (p. 206). He treats the experiment as a pivotal point that shifts Avicenna's psychology from empirical observation to



metaphysical reflection (Alpina, 2018, p. 208). While Alpina highlights this architectural role in redirecting the object and method of Avicenna's inquiry, my focus remains on the psychological and experiential dimension, the immediate prereflective self-awareness Avicenna seeks to evoke in the reader. In short, Alpina underscores the experiment's structural importance for the treatise as a whole, whereas I emphasize its function as a moment of direct self-discovery that supplies the indispensable basis for Avicenna's subsequent metaphysical reasoning.

Jari Kaukua (2014) offers a cautious and critical interpretation, strongly emphasizing the Flying Man's demonstration of immediate self-awareness but challenging its use as a direct metaphysical proof. He is skeptical of interpreting epistemological insights as necessarily entailing ontological conclusions like incorporeality and substantiality, warning specifically against logical missteps such as the Masked Man Fallacy. Thus, while Alpina and Hasse embrace more metaphysical implications, Kaukua (2014) restricts his interpretation primarily to experiential claims about the nature and immediacy of self-awareness (p. 50) My reading is close to Kaukua's "modest" interpretation (Kaukua, 2020, p. 295) in that I also deny that the Flying Man, taken on its own, delivers a demonstrative proof of the nafs's quiddity or substantiality. However, it differs from his view in two important respects. First, I take the immediate deliverance of the experiment to be even weaker, what the Flying Man first secures is a primitive, pre-reflective awareness of "I am", together with an epistemic asymmetry between self and body, while the soul's existential independence and immateriality require further premises and arguments that Avicenna develops elsewhere (for example in Nafs V.2). Second, whereas Kaukua reconstructs the passage as a valid argument designed to answer the question whether the soul exists independently of the body, I emphasize its literary form as a *tanbīh* and read it primarily as an experiential exercise: a guided use of *khayāl* and *wahm* that stages a first-person experience of selfhood and thereby prepares the ground for subsequent demonstrative reasoning. Mehmet Ata Az (2023) also highlights the main goal of Avicenna's Flying Man is to show that the soul not only exists independently of the body, but also possesses an innate, non-sensory self-awareness which is a direct and



essential consciousness of its own existence that does not rely on perception, memory, or bodily experience.

A closely related contemporary reading is Almotahari's (2025). Like the present account, it treats the Flying Man as a *tanbīh* that first yields a non-inferential, prereflective self-awareness rather than a finished metaphysical proof. Where my emphases diverge is in formulation. Almotahari casts the deliverable in terms of objectual self-knowledge and the referential transparency of 'I'-ascriptions, from which a non-identity result follows by indiscernibility of identicals, whereas I foreground Avicenna's use of *khayāl* and *wahm* in their preparatory role, together with the experiment's pedagogical choreography that stages this basic self-awareness. Read together, these angles are complementary that the same experiential starting point both avoids masked-man worries and opens a subsequent route toward incorporeality without making it the experiment's destination.

Peter Adamson and Fedor Benevich (2018) affirms the experiment's role in demonstrating the *nafs*' self-awareness and incorporeality although they prioritize epistemological immediacy, the directness of self-awareness, as its most significant contribution (p. 148). They interpret Avicenna's Flying Man as a conceptual test designed to disclose the *nafs*' essence. Avicenna invites us to imagine a person created fully formed, suspended in air, and deprived of all sensory input and bodily awareness. Under these conditions the Flying Man can still affirm his own existence, though he cannot affirm the existence of his body. According to Adamson and Benevich, this shows that the *nafs*' essence does not depend on the body; the connection to the body is accidental rather than essential. The experiment therefore indicates that self-awareness and the *nafs*' existence are conceptually independent of bodily existence.

Rahman argues that Avicenna's foremost intention is to establish the substantiality of the *nafs*, though he also thinks that the incorporeality of the *nafs* illustrated as well. He thinks that the substantiality thesis is in harmony with the entire "context of the section" (Avicenna, 1981, p. 10–Rahman's introduction). He argues that, in terms of the context in which the text is situated, the thesis that the *nafs* is a substance is a more primary thesis. As I mentioned above, the main conclusion that the texts and the flying man thought experiment will ultimately reach is *nafs*-body dualism.



In his dualism Avicenna (2014) will conclude that the *nafs* is a substance. In *Pointers and Reminders* Avicenna in a very obvious way states that the “soul which is you is a substance” (p.97). Yet this strong dualist reading of the Flying Man has been widely questioned: several authors argue that, taken in isolation, the experiment yields at most an immediate, non-sensory self-awareness and an epistemic asymmetry between self and body, and that the step from this to a fully-fledged substance dualism is far from trivial (Druart, 1988; Kaukua, 2014; Marmura, 1986). In what follows, I side with this more cautious line and argue that the substantiality of the *nafs* cannot be derived from the Flying Man passage alone.

While Avicenna explicitly states in *al-Ishārāt* that the *nafs* is a substance (*jawhar*), accepting this thesis without qualification requires careful consideration. When examining the Flying Man texts in isolation, none of the argumentative steps we have analyzed explicitly emphasizes or establishes the *nafs*’ substantial nature. Therefore, we cannot legitimately conclude that the primary purpose of the Flying Man thought experiment is to demonstrate the *nafs*’ substantiality.¹¹

Although the substantiality of the *nafs* may be derivable from Avicenna’s broader philosophical framework and may align with the ultimate implications of the Flying Man argument, this conclusion cannot be drawn solely from the thought experiment itself. When analyzing the Flying Man example in isolation, its immediate conclusion appears to establish immateriality rather than substantiality.

If Rahman’s interpretation is correct, we should expect to find at least one explicit statement within the steps of the experiment asserting either “the *nafs* is a substance” or “the *dhāt*” is nothing other than the *nafs*, which is a substance”. However, such declarations only appear several pages after the conclusion of the Flying Man example. This temporal and textual separation suggests that the substantiality thesis, while important to Avicenna’s overall psychology, is not the direct or primary conclusion of the Flying Man thought experiment.

This distinction carries significant implications for our understanding of Avicenna’s philosophical methodology and the specific role the Flying

¹¹ Although in Avicenna in his *De Anima* presents an individual discussion where he suggests that *nafs* is a substance, see Avicenna Kitab al-Nafs Book I.3



Man argument plays within his broader psychological theory. It suggests that the thought experiment serves primarily as an additional support for the nafs' independence from materiality, while the argument for its substantiality relies on additional philosophical premises and arguments developed elsewhere in his corpus, especially in Book V.2 of the *Kitāb al-Nafs* in the *Shifā'*.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Avicenna's Flying Man is best read not as a stand-alone metaphysical proof, but as a introspective and pedagogical *tanbīh*. A close comparison of the three main versions of the experiment shows that immediate self-awareness consistently appears as an intermediate result rather than as the final conclusion. In each case, Avicenna moves from the first-person experience of "I am" to further claims about the nafs's immateriality and independence, and he reserves explicit statements about its substantiality for passages outside the Flying Man itself. On this basis I suggested that the experiment yields two levels of conclusion. First, a primitive, pre-reflective awareness of self and second, a merely suggestive, non-demonstrative indication of the nafs's non-bodily status.

Viewed in this way, the Flying Man has a more modest but also more precise philosophical role than is sometimes assumed. It does not, on its own, justify strong dualist theses about the nafs as a separate substance. Rather, it sharpens an epistemic asymmetry namely that I can be immediately aware of myself without representing my body, whereas my awareness of bodily features is always mediated and fallible. This asymmetry can then be integrated into Avicenna's wider account of the nafs, where independent demonstrative arguments for immateriality and substantiality are developed. The Flying Man thus mediates between first-person experience and metaphysics. It provides a lived starting point on which later, more abstract demonstrations rely, while at the same time indicating the limits of what a thought experiment of this kind can establish.

The experiential emphasis of this reading also has consequences for how we understand Avicenna's philosophy of mind. By isolating a bare "I am" in which all representational content is stripped away, Avicenna brings into focus a form of immediate, non-representational self-awareness that cannot be reduced to ordinary sense-perception or to higher-order



reflection. On this reading, the Flying Man does not aim primarily at a definition of the *nafs*, but at bringing to light a basic form of selfhood that underlies the operations of the *nafs*. On this reading, self-awareness emerges as a structural feature of the *nafs* in Avicenna's psychology, rather than a secondary or incidental phenomenon.

Finally, interpreting the Flying Man as a *tanbīh* situated within Avicenna's wider educational approach helps explain its distinctive literary form. In works such as *al-Ishārāt wa'l-Tanbīhāt*, *tanbīhāt* (pointers) are brief indications aimed at readers already trained in *burhān*, who are expected to catch the point and supply the missing steps themselves. On the present reading, the Flying Man plays exactly this preparatory role. By having the reader construct the scenario through *khayāl* and *wahm* and then imaginatively subtract these very faculties, Avicenna uses the reader's own powers to lead them to a non-sensory awareness of self. The experiment thus trains the reader to move from imaginative simulation to intellectual insight, and from psychological description to metaphysical reflection. Rather than being merely an illustration of a dualist thesis, the Flying Man can thus be seen as a deliberately constructed exercise that relies on the reader's inner faculties (*khayāl* and *wahm*) to prepare a clearer grasp of the soul's non-bodily self-awareness.

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Öz: Bu makale, İbn Sînâ'nın "Uçan Adam"ını kesin bir metafizik kanıt değil, tecrübi ve pedagojik bir alıştırma olarak yeniden yorumlamaktadır. Şifâ'daki Nefs I.5 ve V.7 ile İşârât X'teki üç temel versiyonu inceleyerek, deneyin önce dolaysız bir öz-farkındalık tesis ettiğini, ardından bu bulgudan hareketle nefsin gayri cismaniliğine işaret ettiğini göstermektedir. İbn Sînâ, hayal ve vehim yetilerini devreye sokarak okurun zihninde bir senaryo kurmasını sağlamaktadır. Duyusal bağların geri çekilmesiyle okur, kendi varlığını doğrudan tecrübe etmekte ve böylece bu süreç öğretici bir işlev görmektedir. Bu fenomenolojik okuma, Uçan Adam'ı nefsin temel öz-farkındalık tecrübesini görünür kılan bir içe dönüş olarak ele almakta ve bu sayede onu İbn Sînâ'nın zihin felsefesindeki benlik ve nefis-beden ilişkisi tartışmalarına bağlamaktadır. Bu açıdan Uçan Adam, doğrudan bir burhânî kanıt değil, tembih yani yönlendirici bir işaret niteliği taşımaktadır. Deneyin ilk ve güvenilir sonucu öz-farkındalıktır, gayri cismanilik ise bundan sonra gelen, ama kesin bir kanıt olarak değil, bir ima düzeyinde ortaya çıkan ikinci aşamadır. Böylece deneyin fenomenolojik boyutu öne çıkarılarak, İbn Sînâ'nın zihin felsefesindeki yeri daha açık hale gelmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam felsefesi, İbn Sînâ'nın psikolojisi, nefis, uçan adam, öz-farkındalık, nefsin gayri cismaniliği.

