

Abstract for FASS summer internship

Title of Research: "Socially Extended Selves and an Islamic theory of Personhood" by Adham El Shazly

One of the products of the modern era is a new conception of individuals and how they relate to society. Underlying this novel conception are three assumptions, all of which still shape most theoretical discussions on personal identity as well as structure our contemporary self-conception. The first of these assumptions is what Rawls calls the "separateness of persons". Second, that persons are constituted by higher-order cognitive functions. Third, society is a mode of instrumental cooperation that is irrelevant to the constitution of persons.

In the first part of my research, I wanted to dismantle and examine these three assumptions using the lens of the philosophical domain of personal identity and personhood. Two questions, then, drove my inquiry: What is the fundamental nature of human beings? And what are the individuation (synchronic) and persistence (diachronic) conditions of each individual person, that is, what makes us unique individuals and how does this uniqueness continue over time? Against the background of psychological and animalistic theories of personal identity, I contributed to recent accounts arguing for the primacy of the social elements in the constitution of persons, which serve as our fundamental nature and fulfil our individuation conditions. These social elements take the form of (i) the capacity for shared intentionality and a second-person perspective in early infancy from which the first-person perspective emerges, (ii) the social embeddedness of persons in a social structure that makes them recipients of person-directed practices before they develop any capacity for reason, and, (iii) the developmental dependency of the higher-order psychological capacities in question on social interaction facilitated by the basic capacity for shared intentionality. Based on these conditions, I argued that if the constitution of persons is dependent on factors that extend beyond the boundaries of the body, then it is plausible to view persons as having extended selves, fused in interesting ways with these external factors. This argument opens up new avenues for the possibility of group agency and responsibility that don't impose intricate cognitive functioning as a condition for their possibility. Moreover, this view can form the analytic base from which to develop a relational model grounded in shared intentionality that generates impartial reasons constitutive of the moral status of persons.

The second part of my research focused on the same questions regarding personhood and identity but from the lens of the Muslim intellectual tradition, both philosophical and theological. One of the key concepts I investigated was that of "Fitra". Though synonymous with (human) nature, historically, the concept was conceived as being the "the original state in which humans are created by God"<sup>1</sup> which was then understood as being Islam (in the general sense of submission to God). Later on, it was interpreted as a more general innate inclination to monotheism. What distinguishes all these views is that they focus on the conglomeration of innate properties that defines human beings, while at the same time disregarding the social conditions that might be involved in Fitra and hence in the fundamental nature of persons. In line with the first part of my research, I suggested an alternative (social) understanding of Fitra as the basic normative structure of human lives which is grounded in social and spiritual relations. Specifically, the Islamic notion of entrustment, with its constituent concepts "Amana" and "Takleef", plays a constitutive role

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<sup>1</sup> "Fitra." In The Oxford Dictionary of Islam. Ed. John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online.

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in understanding this structure. I suggested that these two notions combined might serve as the ontological conditions constitutive of persons in an Islamic framework.