

1-1-2005

The Agent Intellect as “form for us” and Averroes’s Critique of al-Fârâbî

Richard C. Taylor

Marquette University, richard.taylor@marquette.edu

Richard C. Taylor:

The Agent Intellect as “form for us” and Averroes’s Critique of al-Fârâbî¹

In his discussions of the nature of intellect in the *Long Commentary on the De Anima* Averroes sets forth his novel and controversial doctrine of the material intellect as a separately existing substance shared by all human beings for the sake of intellectual thought and understanding.² That teaching drew the attention of thinkers in the Latin West where it was the source of great controversy, especially concerning the nature of the individual human person in reference to such matters as personal immortality and personal moral responsibility, issues of great importance in Medieval European Christianity.³ However, concerns with that contentious teaching have eclipsed Averroes’s important views on the agent intellect, views developed in conjunction with the doctrine of the material intellect but in fact much more positively received in the Latin West. That conception of the agent intellect and of the role it plays in human understanding was developed out of explicit intellectual dialogue with the interpretations of Aristotle by Alexander of Aphrodisias, Theophrastus, Themistius, al-Fârâbî, and Ibn Bâjjah.⁴ From that dialogue Averroes emerged in the *Long Commentary*

¹ This article was first published in *Topicos* 29 (2005) 29-51 (Universidad Panamericana, Mexico City). It is published here with permission of the editors of *Topicos*. Some corrections have been introduced in the present version.

² For discussion of that doctrine, see Richard C. Taylor, “Separate Material Intellect in Averroes’ Mature Philosophy,” in *Words, Texts and Concepts Cruising the Mediterranean Sea. Studies on the sources, contents and influences of Islamic civilization and Arabic philosophy and science, dedicated to Gerhard Endress on his sixty-fifth birthday*, Ruediger Arnzen and Joern Thielmann, eds., pp.289-309. [Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta series] (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

³ See Zdzislaw Kuksewicz, *De Siger de Brabant à Jacques de Plaisance. La théorie de l’intellect chez les averroïstes latins des XIIIe et XIVe siècles*. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1968; “The Latin Averroism of the late thirteenth Century,” in *Averroismus im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, Friedrich Niewöhner and Loris Sturlese (eds.), (Zürich: Spur,1994) pp.101-113. For a short account of Latin Averroism, see Sten Ebbesen, “Averroism” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1998. Retrieved July 16, 2004, from <http://www.rep.routledge.com.libus.csd.mu.edu:80/article/B012>

⁴ Of course, Avicenna played a role but Averroes has little explicit discussion of his teachings. In the *Long Commentary on the De Anima*, Avicenna is mentioned only twice. At {441-2} he is cited as holding the material intellect must be a power unmixed with the body. At {470} Averroes ridicules Avicenna for not holding to proper Aristotelian teachings when he writes that Avicenna “followed Aristotle only in dialectics, but in other things he erred, and chiefly in the case of metaphysics...because he began, as it were, from his own perspective.” All citations of the *Long Commentary on the De Anima* are to *Averrois Cordubensis Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis De Anima Libros*, F. Stuart Crawford (ed.) (Cambridge: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953). This text is cited hereafter as LCDA with page

on the *De Anima* with the teaching that the only proper understanding of the agent intellect necessarily involves the agent intellect being “form for us” as “the final form for us” and “the final form belonging to us” in such a way as “to assert the agent intelligence to be in the soul”.⁵ What is more, Averroes came to view his own teaching on the agent intellect to be radically at variance with that of al-Fârâbî whom Averroes understood to hold the unacceptable doctrine of the agent intellect as agent cause only and not formal cause.

Agent intellect in the *Short and Middle Commentaries on De Anima*

The views of Averroes on the nature of human intellectual powers changed several times as he worked carefully and thoughtfully through the issues before reaching his final position in the *Long Commentary on the De Anima*. All three of his commentaries on the *De Anima* evidence intensive study of the works of philosophical psychology by Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius.⁶ In the *Short Commentary* Averroes was guided by Ibn Bâjjah in his understanding of the nature of intellect and conceived of the material intellect as a power for reception of intelligibles attached to the forms of the imagination as its subject.⁷ On the understanding of Averroes each human being

numbers to this Latin text given in brackets. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. Averroes was aware of Avicenna’s teaching on the separate agent intellect as “giver of forms” (*wâhib al-Buwar, dator formarum*) in the case of substantial change in the natural world. See *Averroès Tafsīr mâ ba‘d at-ṭabî‘at*, Maurice Bouyges (ed.), in 4 vols (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1938-1952) pp. 882, 1496-1498; and *Aristotelis Metaphysicorum Libri XIII cum Averrois Cordubensis in eisdem commentariis et epitome in Aristotelis Opera Cum Averrois Commentariis*. Venetiis Apud Iunctas, 1574, v. 8, 181rA, 304rA-vG; *Ibn Rushd’s Metaphysics. A Translation with Introduction of Ibn Rushd’s Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Book Lâm* by Charles Genequand (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1984) pp.107-109. Also see Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.245.

⁵ LCDA{445} and {485}; {485} and {490}; and {438} respectively.

⁶ Averroes had the *De Anima* and the *De Intellectu* of Alexander, of which only the second is extant in Arabic. For the Arabic see J. Finnegan, S.J., (ed.) in "Texte arabe du PERI NOU d'Alexandre d'Aphrodise," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph* (Beirut) 33 (1956) pp.159-202; and Abdurrahman Badawi, (ed.), pp.31-42 in *Commentaires sur Aristote perdus en grec et autres épîtres*, (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1971). For the Greek versions, see Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De Anima Liber Cum Mantissa*, Ivo Bruns (ed.). Berlin: Typis et Impensis Georgii Reimer, 1887. [Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca, Suppl. II, pt.1]; and *De Anima Liber Cum Mantissa*, ed. Ivo Bruns (Berlin 1887) [Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca, Suppl. II, pt.1] pp.106-113. He also had the Paraphrase of the *De Anima* by Themistius which is only partially extant in Arabic today. See *An Arabic Translation of Themistius' Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, M. C. Lyons (ed.). Columbia, South Carolina, and Oxford, England: Bruno Cassirer Publishers Ltd.,1973. For the Greek, see Themistius, *In Libros Aristotelis De Anima Paraphrasis*, R. Heinze (ed.). Berlin: G. Reimeri, 1899) [Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca, 5.3].

⁷ The material intellect “is a form having as its matter the intermediate spiritual forms of the imagination.” Ibn Bâjjah, *Risâlat Ittiṣâl al-‘Aql bi-l-Insân*, Miguel Asín Palacios (ed. and trans.) in "Tratado de Avempace sobre la Union del Intelecto con el Hombre," *al-Andalus* 7 (1942) pp. 1-47. Arabic p. 13, Spanish p. 30; *Risâ‘il Ibn Bâjjah al-Ilâhiyah (Ibn Bâjjah (Avempace). Opera Metaphysica)*, Majid Fakhry (ed.) p.160; Vincent Lagardère, tr. “L’Épître d’Ibn Bâjja sur la conjonction de l’intellect avec l’esprit

possesses this receptive power called material intellect individually and each is responsible for supplying the content of the imagination through individual efforts at understanding the world. That is, in this work Averroes holds for a plurality of material intellects, one for each human being, by which the intelligibles of human understanding are apprehended in some fashion by human beings. “With this disposition which exists for human beings in the forms belonging to the imagination, the imaginative soul of human beings is distinguished from the imagination of animals....”⁸ In the *Short Commentary* the material intellect, not a substance in itself but a disposition attached to the forms held in the imagination of the individual human being, is described as “the disposition which is in the forms of the imagination for receiving intelligibles”⁹ The sensed intentional forms from the world received into the internal senses and provided to the imagination remain intelligibles in potency and require a mover to make them go from potency into act, from being potential intelligibles to being intelligibles in act. “For the material intellect, insofar as it is material, necessarily needs in its existence that there be here an intellect existing in act eternally, even when the material [intellect] does not exist.”¹⁰

In contrast to that material intellect which is multiple in number and is only a disposition of the forms in the imagination, the agent intellect in the *Short Commentary* is a unique entity with its own existence independent of things of the world. Averroes writes that “it is apparent that this agent intellect is more noble than the material [intellect] and that it is in itself existing in act as an eternal intellect, whether or not we have intellectual understanding of it.”¹¹ The agent intellect is both intellect and also intelligible in every way, since it is a form and it is an agent, writes Averroes. Yet, while the agent intellect must be ontologically separate from individual human material intellects, the actualization of intelligibles in potency in the forms of the imagination and the realization of those intelligibles in the individual human in another higher mode of being in the material intellect for intellectual understanding require that the agent intellect somehow be present in us. Hence, Averroes writes,

humain,” *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 49 (1981) pp. 175-196, see p.185. For an explanation of the doctrine, see p. 194 of Arthur Hyman, “Averroes’ Theory of the Intellect and the Ancient Commentators” in *Averroes and the Aristotelian Tradition. Sources, Constitution and Reception of the Philosophy of Ibn Rushd (1126-1198). Proceedings of the Fourth Symposium Averroicum* (Cologne, 1996), Gerhard Endress and Jan A. Aertsen with the assistance of Klaus Braun (eds.) (Leiden: Brill, 1999) pp.188-198.

⁸ *Talkhis Kitāb al-Nafs*, Ahmed Fouad El-Ahwani (ed.) (Cairo: Imprimerie Misr, 1950) p.87. Hereafter this text will be referred to as SCDA (*Short Commentary on the De Anima*). Another edition is found in *Epitome de Anima*, Salvador Gómez Nogales (ed.). Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas Instituto “Miguel Asín” Instituto Hispano-Arabe de Cultura, 1985. Also see *La Psicología de Averroes. Comentario al libro sobre el alma de Aristóteles*, Salvador Gómez Nogales (trans.). Madrid: Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, 1987. For an account of the contents of the *Short Commentary*, see Alfred L. Ivry, “Averroes’ *Short Commentary* on Aristotle’s *De anima*,” *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione filosofica medievale* 8 (1997) pp. 511-549.

⁹ SCDA p.86.

¹⁰ SCDA p.88.

¹¹ SCDA pp.88-89.

For this reason it is clear that its intellect can belong to us ultimately (*bi-ākhirah*). I mean insofar as it is form for us (*sūrah li-nā*) and it is such that it has generated for us as necessary an eternal intelligible. Since it is itself an intellect whether or not we have intellectual understanding of it, it is not the case that its existence as intellect is from our activity as is the case in regard to material intelligibles.¹²

Thus, in intellectual understanding or theoretical knowing, the agent intellect has to become in some sense a form belonging to us in the ultimate or complete act of knowing since it is we who come to be knowers. As such it provides to the individual human being the formal perfection of the intelligibles in potency present in the forms of the imagination such that those intelligibles now known in act in the human being's mind are themselves the realization of a disposition connected to the forms of the imagination. Averroes is not altogether unambiguous in his description. Still, it seems fair to say that this disposition, the material intellect, which is described by him as a disposition of the forms of the imagination, allows for an apprehension *in us* of the intelligibles at the level of universals characteristic of knowledge at the highest level. It is for this reason that Averroes states that "This state is what is known as union (*al-ittiḥād*) and conjoining (*al-ittiṣā*)."¹³ This, however, is not language used in the sense that mystics use, but rather language dependent on Alexander's account of the union of the agent intellect with us in intellectual understanding yielding the acquired intellect. Our conjoining and union with the agent intellect is nothing but the extraction of forms from material subjects and the generation of intelligibles, the very perfection of the human material intellect.¹⁴ In themselves, the intelligibles in potency and the material intellect are insufficient for the generation of intelligibles in act belonging to human conceptualization: "When this has come about, this conceptualization is the ultimate perfection of man and the end sought."¹⁵ The end of human beings, then, is highest intellectual conceptualization which is attained by a uniting and conjoining of the individual human being providing intelligibles in potency with the agent intellect so as to realize in the individual human material intellect intelligibles in act as conceptualized.¹⁶

With the appearance of the *Middle Commentary* (ca.1174-1180) Averroes had substantially rethought his views on the nature of imagination as a power transcending the body. Earlier in the *Short Commentary* Averroes did not conceive the material intellect as a power directly in a body insofar as it was not imagination – a bodily power – but rather a disposition having the forms of the imagination as its subject. Yet now imagination seems to be conceived as a power too mixed with the body to permit it to

¹² SCDA p.89.

¹³ SCDA p.89.

¹⁴ SCDA pp.88-89.

¹⁵ SCDA p.90.

¹⁶ As indicated below, in the *Long Commentary* Averroes asserts this emphasizing the difference between his view and that of Ibn Bājjah whom he describes as holding that conceptualization and intellectual knowing are not the end but the means to a higher unity and conjoining with the separate agent intellect.

be subject for a disposition which must be so unmixed as to be open to the reception of any and all intelligibles without distortion or interference. Averroes has conceived a new model for understanding the relation of the material intellect to the human soul. As completely unmixed, the material intellect cannot properly be considered to have a subject which is a body or a power in a body. Apparently using the celestial bodies, souls and intellects as his model, Averroes now conceives the material intellect as a disposition with the soul as subject but with the special understanding that it is in its subject without being in a composed union with it, not involving the sort of composition found in the being of material substances or accidents. Instead the material intellect is made by the agent intellect to exist in association with each individual after the manner of the celestial soul which has an association with a celestial body but exists separately. In this sense, then,

...the material intellect is something composed of the disposition found in us and of an intellect conjoined to this disposition. As conjoined to the disposition, it is a disposed intellect, not an intellect in act; though, as not conjoined to this disposition, it is an intellect in act; while, in itself, this intellect is the Agent Intellect, the existence of which will be shown later. As conjoined to this disposition, it is necessarily an intellect in potentiality which cannot think itself but which can think other than itself (that is, material things), while, as not conjoined to the disposition, it is necessarily an intellect in act which thinks itself and not that which is here (that is, it does not think material things).¹⁷

Thus, in the *Middle Commentary* the material intellect is a power made to exist in immaterial association with individual human beings by the separate agent intellect. This allows for sensed intentions intelligible in potency to be transformed by the intellectual power of the agent intellect and deposited in individual and immaterial receptive intellects belonging to distinct human beings. Again, as with the *Short Commentary*, Averroes is concerned with the issue of materiality and so separates the human receptive intellect from body and powers of the soul existing in the body as in a subject. What is more, Averroes avoids what he calls here in the *Middle Commentary* an absurd position of locating the “material intellect” in the nature of a separately existing intellectual substance, a position absurd for two reasons. First, it would mean that disposition and potentiality, characteristics of material things, would be said to exist in separate, immaterial intellectual substances which are as such fully active in their being. Secondly, it would mean that our first actuality and perfection as human beings qua rational animals, namely our capacity for intellectual development called “material intellect,” would be something eternal, while our realization of this capacity would be generable and corruptible, taking place through time. That is to say, the fulfillment of an eternal entity would be through temporal and generated activities, something which is unacceptable because these entities are not in the same genus.¹⁸ Still, it is this “absurd” position that Averroes will later adopt in his *Long Commentary*.

¹⁷ Averroes. *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima. A Critical Edition of the Arabic Text with English Translation, Notes and Introduction*, by Alfred L. Ivry. (Provo, Utah 2002) pp. 111-112. Hereafter this will be cited as MCDA, Ivry tr. Translation slightly modified.

¹⁸ MCDA, Ivry tr. p.111.

The agent intellect in the *Middle Commentary* is again conceived as an entity ontologically separate from and independent of the physical world and individual human material intellects. Yet, on this account it is the agent intellect which provides all human beings at birth with the initial capability for intellectual understanding, that is, the power called material intellect, and it is also the agent intellect which provides the actuality for the realization of intelligibles in the material intellects of human beings. This leads Averroes to hold that these “two functions [or activities] exist in our souls”¹⁹ and that “there will be an intellect in us which is intellect with respect to [its ability to] receive every intelligible, and an intellect in us with respect to [its ability] to actualize every intelligible.”²⁰ Hence, he can conclude,

It is clear that, in one respect, this intellect is an agent and, in another, it is form for us (*ṣūrah li-nā*), since the generation of intelligibles is a product of our will. When we want to think something, we do so, our thinking it being nothing other than, first, bringing the intelligible forth and, second, receiving it. The individual intentions in the imaginative faculty are they that stand in relation to the intellect as potential colors do to light. That is, this intellect renders them actual intelligibles after their having been intelligible in potentiality. It is clear, from the nature of this intellect – which, in one respect, is form for us (*ṣūrah li-nā*) and, in another, is the agent for the intelligibles – that it is separable and neither generable nor corruptible, for that which acts is always superior to that which is acted upon, and the principle is superior to the matter. The intelligent and intelligible aspects of this intellect are essentially the same thing, since it does not think anything external to its essence. There must be an Agent Intellect here, since that which actualizes the intellect has to be an intellect, the agent endowing only that which resembles what is in its substance.²¹

Insofar as the activity of the actualization of intelligibles in potency comes to be in the soul of the individual human being in a realization of the individual material intellect as containing intelligibles in act and insofar as this activity requires individual human will and effort, Averroes finds it appropriate to say that the agent intellect is “form for us” (*ṣūrah li-nā*), just as he had in the *Short Commentary*. Again, similar to what is found in the *Short Commentary*, Averroes views the generation of these intelligibles in individual human material intellects to take place thanks to the provision of individual intentions in the human imagination consequent to sense perception. The content intelligible in potency in the human imagination is then made to be intelligible in act by the power of the agent intellect acting to bring about that content now on another level, the level of intellectual understanding, in the material intellect. It does this insofar as it is itself an intellect in act and intelligible in act, since only what possesses such intellectual actuality can bring to intellectual actuality both the intelligibles in potency provided by the individual’s imagination and the individual’s material intellect in potency to receive those generated intelligibles in act. In this sense, then, the agent intellect not only must be an agent raising intelligibles in potency in the imagination to intelligibles in act in the material intellect but also must be “form for us” since it is a

¹⁹ MCDA, Ivry tr. p. 112.

²⁰ MCDA, Ivry tr. p.116

²¹ *ibid.*

power acting intrinsically to the human soul which both provides intelligibles in potency and receives intelligibles in act. For this reason Averroes can then say in the *Middle Commentary* that the ontologically separate agent intellect is nevertheless an essential part of human intellectual understanding and its ultimate fulfillment: “This Agent Intellect, our final form (*al-ṣūrah al-akhirah li-nā*) does not think at one time and not at another, nor does it exist at one time and not at another; it is, rather, unceasing, and will not cease. Thus, when separated from the body, it is immortal, necessarily.”²²

Agent intellect in the *Long Commentary on De Anima* and Averroes’s critique of al-Fârâbî

The *Long Commentary on the De Anima* which contains Averroes’s most mature and influential teaching on the nature of human intellect sets forth the famous account of the material intellect as a unique entity shared by all human beings who attain intellectual understanding. As I have argued elsewhere,²³ this doctrine is the consequence of a new consideration by Averroes of the requirements of intelligibles in act now based on two foundational principles of a metaphysical sort. The first concerns the material intellect which must be such as to receive and contain intelligibles in act insofar as the material intellect is “that which is in potency all the intentions of universal material forms and is not any of the beings in act before it understands any of them.”²⁴ It is not possible for the material intellect itself to be a particular or definite individual entity since the received intelligibles would then be contracted to the particular nature of their subject, the material intellect. The material intellect then must not be a particular entity as a member of a species but rather must be a unique entity which constitutes its own distinct species. As such it can be an existing immaterial intellect yet it must also be receptive in nature without contracting what it receives into particularity. Averroes marks the unusual nature of the material intellect by calling it “a fourth kind of being,”²⁵ other than matter, form or a composite of these. The second principle concerns the requirements of the intelligibles in act themselves. The problem with the accounts of the earlier commentaries was that their plurality of immaterial receptive intellects meant a plurality of intelligibles in act without the same intelligible being understood by each human being. If two humans are thinking of the same intelligible, for example, a teacher and a student, then they cannot be thinking about two different intelligibles. Indeed a third intelligible, over and above those in their individual intellects, would be required to explain why they are in fact thinking about the same intelligible. Consequently, it is necessary that the intelligible in act exist separately from

²² MCDA, Ivry tr. pp. 116-117.

²³ See Richard C. Taylor, “Cogitatio, Cogitativus and Cogitare: Remarks on the Cogitative Power in Averroes,” in *L’elaboration du vocabulaire philosophique au Moyen Age*, ed. J. Hamesse et C. Steel (Turnhout, Brepols, 2000) pp. 111-146. (Rencontres de philosophie Medievale Vol. 8.)

²⁴ LCDA {387}.

²⁵ LCDA {409}.

particular or definite individual entities in the single transcendent material intellect shared by all human beings.

As with the earlier commentaries, the agent intellect here again functions as what moves intelligibles in potency in the forms of the imagination to becoming intelligibles in act in the receptive material intellect now viewed as shared by all human beings. What was indicated in the earlier commentaries is now made more evident by Averroes, namely, that his account of Aristotelian intellection is an unambiguous doctrine of the abstraction of intelligibles from the content of human experience. In contrast to Avicenna who held that human intellectual understanding involved the preparation of the individual human intellect for the ‘reception’ of the content of intellectual understanding from the agent intellect which contains in itself all forms,²⁶ Averroes makes explicit his doctrine of intentional transference by which the intention in the imagination derived from sense is, by the intellectual power of the agent intellect, “transferred” in “being from one order into another,”²⁷ from intelligible in potency to intelligible in act. In this natural process of conjoining the agent intellect and material intellect are united with the knower such that the agent intellect is “the final form belonging to us,”²⁸ that is, our formal cause and perfection, and the material intellect is our intellect. Again, as seen in the earlier commentaries, in this process the agent intellect is “form for us”²⁹ both because we are the ones who individually initiate the process of knowing and also because in knowing the agent intellect is intrinsic to us, not something external emanating intelligibles out of itself. In the formation of knowledge from experience, the agent intellect does not give intelligibles from its own nature to some distinct entity but only functions as an abstractive and imprinting power, actualized as such only in the presence of denuded intelligibles provided by individual human beings. Since humans are deliberate initiators of the process of knowing, the separate agent intellect belongs to them as formal cause and the separate material intellect also belongs to them as the receptive power as shared human intellect actualized in abstraction.

²⁶ Dimitri Gutas and Dag Hasse rightly argue against the traditional notion that forms are literally emanated from the agent intellect into human intellectual souls in Dimitri Gutas, “Intuition and Thinking: The Evolving Structure of Avicenna’s Epistemology,” in *Aspects of Avicenna*, Robert Wisnovsky (ed.) (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001; Reprinted from *Princeton Papers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. IX), pp. 1-38; and Dag Nikolaus Hasse, “Avicenna on Abstraction,” *ibidem*, pp. 39-72. Nevertheless, Avicenna does not hold that intelligibles are abstracted from experience of the world. See Meryem Sebti, “Le Statut ontologique de l’image dans la doctrine avicennienne de la perception,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 15 (2005) pp. 109–140.

²⁷ ... invenimus idem transferri in suo esse de ordine in ordinem, scilicet intentiones ymaginatas.... LCDA {439}

²⁸ ...forma postrema nobis.... LCDA {490}; ... ultima forma nobis.... LCDA {485}.

²⁹ ...forma nobis.... LCDA {485}. Averroes finds this notion present in both Alexander and Themistius. See LCDA {489} and {445} respectively.

For the central notion in this doctrine, intentional transference, Averroes relies on considerations raised by al-Fârâbî in his *Letter on the Intellect*.³⁰ In that work al-Fârâbî sets forth a doctrine which gives every appearance of being a form of abstraction of intelligibles from sense experience.

... [W]hen there come to be in it the intelligibles which it abstracts (*intazâ'at*) from the matters, then those intelligibles become intelligibles in actuality. Before they were abstracted from their matters they were intelligibles in potentiality, but when they were abstracted, they became intelligibles in actuality, because they became forms for that essence... The intelligibles which are intelligibles in potentiality are, before they become intelligible in actuality, forms in matter outside the soul (*khârij al-nafs*).³¹

Al-Fârâbî's further remarks on this abstraction and the nature of the intelligibles in act would seem to have him in accord with what we have seen for Averroes, namely, that abstraction is genuinely grounded fully in sensory experience. He writes,

But when they become intelligibles in actuality, then their existence (*wujûdu-hâ*), insofar as they are intelligibles in actuality, is not the same as their existence insofar as they are forms in matters. And their existence in themselves [as forms in matters] is not the same as their existence insofar as they are intelligibles in actuality. Now, their existence in themselves [as forms in matters] follows the rest of that which is joined to them, namely sometimes place, sometimes time, sometimes position, at times quantity, at times being qualified by corporeal qualities, at times acting and at times undergoing action. But when these forms become intelligibles in actuality, many of those other categories are removed from them, so that their existence becomes another existence, different from this existence.³²

For al-Fârâbî, this difference in existence means a difference in the intellect between the intelligibles as first thought and abstracted from matter and the intelligibles

as thought a second time in such a way that their existence is not that previous existence, but their existence is separate from their matters, according as they are forms which are not in their matters and according as they are intelligibles in actuality. When the intellect in actuality thinks the intelligibles which are forms in it, insofar as they are intelligibles in actuality, then the intellect of which it was first said that it is the intellect in actuality, becomes now the acquired intellect.³³

At the stage of acquired intellect, the human intellect leaves behind the body and the soul's external and internal senses and also the stage of intellect in actuality which came

³⁰ al-Fârâbî. *Alfarabi. Risâlah fî al-^laq*, ed. Maurice Bouyges, S.J. (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq Sarl, 1983²). There is a partial English translation by Arthur Hayman in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1973) pp. 215-221. On the dependence of this work on al-Fârâbî's study of Alexander rather than on a direct reading of the Aristotle's *De Anima*, see the careful and insightful study of Marc Geoffroy in "La tradition arabe du *Peri nou* d'Alexandre d'Aphrodise et les origines de la théorie farabienne des quatre degrés de l'intellect," in *Aristotele e Alessandro di Afrodisia nella Tradizione Araba*, Cristina D'Ancona and Giuseppe Serra (eds.) [Subsidia Mediaevalia Patavina 3] (Padova: Il Poligrafo casa editrice s.r.l., 2002) pp. 191-231.

³¹ *Risâlah fî al-^laq*, Arabic pp.15-16; English p. 216.

³² *Risâlah fî al-^laq*, Arabic pp. 16-17; English p.216.

³³ *Risâlah fî al-^laq*, Arabic pp. 19-20; English p. 217.

about in the initial abstraction of intelligibles simply because, as intellect contemplating immaterial intelligibles, it no longer has need of abstraction. The intellect ascends above the body and beyond intellect in actuality, becoming acquired intellect and finally reaching the point of associating with the agent intellect itself.

But if one ascends from prime matter step by step, then one ascends to the nature which is the corporeal forms in hylic matters until one ascends to that essence [the intellect in potentiality], afterwards to that which is above until, when one has reached the acquired intellect, one will have reached that which is like the stars and one will have reached the limit to which those things which are related to hyle and matter ascend. When one ascends from this, then one will have ascended to the first stage of existing things which are immaterial, and the first stage is the stage of the agent intellect.³⁴

For al-Fârâbî at this stage ultimate human perfection is reached with a transformation into an intellectual substance which is understood as the meaning of the afterlife, although the agent intellect does not affect human beings only by enabling the formation of intelligibles in act but also by being an emanative cause for natural forms of the world.³⁵

And the agent intellect thinks first the most perfect of existing things. The forms which here are forms in matters are in the agent intellect abstract forms, but not such that they at first existed in matter and then were abstracted, but those forms never cease in it in actuality. And it [the agent intellect] is imitated in the realm of first matter and of other matters, because they [the matters] were given in actuality the forms which are in the agent intellect. And the existing things whose coming into being was first intended are, according to our view, those forms, except that, inasmuch as their coming into being here [below] was not possible except in matters, there came into existence these matters.³⁶

In the *Long Commentary on the De Anima*, however, Averroes reads the work of al-Fârâbî as fatally flawed because al-Fârâbî conceived of the agent intellect only as an agent cause extrinsic to the human soul and not as form for us. Averroes writes that in

³⁴ *Risâlah fî al-‘aql*, Arabic pp. 23-24; English p.218.

³⁵ The views of al-Fârâbî in various works are succinctly summarized by Herbert A. Davidson as follows: “The *Risâlah fî al-‘aql* portrays the emanation of the translunar universe as *al-Madîna al-Fâdila* and *al-Siyâsa al-Madaniyya* did. It differs from those two works in ascribing to the active intellect the emanation of a range of natural forms above the level of the four elements. Alfarabi’s *Philosophy of Aristotle*, which maintained that a supernal incorporeal source must be assumed for species as a whole although not for individuals, occupies an intermediate position on the issue, standing between *al-Madîna al-Fâdila* and *al-Siyâsa al-Madaniyya*, which know nothing about a source of natural forms in the incorporeal realm, and the *Risâla*, which has the active intellect emanate the natural forms of individual sublunary objects.

“In the *Risâla*, the active intellect is still the cause of actual human thought. Alfarabi now explains, however, that the analogue of light emitted by the active intellect renders potential concepts actual and hence enables the human intellect to grasp concepts. In *al-Madîna, al-Fâdila, al-Siyâsa al-Madaniyya*, and the *Philosophy of Aristotle*, the analogue of light emitted by the active intellect enables the human intellect to grasp not concepts but the propositions embodying the first principles of thought and science.” Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.70.

³⁶ *Risâlah fî al-‘aql*, Arabic pp. 28-29; English p.219.

the *Letter on the Intellect* al-Fârâbî “said that it is possible for the material intellect to understand separate things” and identifies this also as “the opinion of Ibn Bâjjah.”³⁷ That is, as indicated above, the perishable human material intellect in select human beings able to attain the stage of actual intellect and then the stage of acquired intellect can become immaterial and eternal thereby achieving ultimate human happiness. According to Averroes, al-Fârâbî derived this notion from his reading of Alexander³⁸ who held contradictory views on the perfection of the material intellect. In his *De Anima* Alexander holds that the material intellect is subject to corruption with the natural corruption of the soul at death. Averroes quotes the text of Alexander on this:

[T]he material intellect is corrupted in virtue of the corruption of the soul, because it is one power belonging to the soul; and when that intellect is corrupted, its power and its actuality will be corrupted. Next, after he had explained that it is necessary for the intellect which is in us and which understands the separate forms to be neither generable nor corruptible, he recounted that this intellect is the acquired intellect according to the account of Aristotle, and [Alexander] said: *The intellect, therefore, which is not corrupted is that intellect which is in us as separate {483} which Aristotle calls acquired because it is in us from outside, not a power which is in the soul nor a disposition in virtue of which we understand different things and also understand that intellect.*³⁹

In this case what makes thought and abstraction possible is the temporary presence of the extrinsic power of the agent intellect operating in the perishable human material intellect. At the death of the subject, the material intellect and the human soul in which it exists, human thought simply ceases while the eternal agent intellect continues in its separate existence. This is altogether different from what is found in Alexander’s *De intellectu*, indicates Averroes:

But what he said in a treatise which he composed, entitled *On the intellect according to the account of Aristotle*, seems to contradict what he said in his book on the soul. These are his words: *When the intellect which is in potency is complete and fulfilled, then it will understand the agent intellect. For, just as the potency for walking which a human being has at birth becomes actual in time when that in virtue of which walking comes about is actualized, so too when the intellect is actualized, it will understand these things which are intrinsically intelligible and it will make sensibles into intelligibles, because it is the agent.*⁴⁰

In his *Letter on the Intellect*, al-Fârâbî develops this second view into the doctrine that certain human beings are able to develop their perishable material intellects so as to move through the stage of the intellectually realized actual intellect to the stage of acquired intellect which no longer has association with the body, maintains Averroes.⁴¹

³⁷ LCDA {486}.

³⁸ See the article by Geoffroy cited in note 29 above for the view that al-Fârâbî’s thought is dependent on a particular reading of Alexander and not on direct study of the *De Anima* of Aristotle.

³⁹ LCDA {482-483}. The quoted text is from Alexander *De Anima* (1887) pp. 90.23-91.4.

⁴⁰ LCDA {483}. The quoted text is from Alexander, *De Anima Liber Cum Mantissa* (1887) pp.110.30-111.2.

⁴¹ LCDA {483}.

Yet this entails, first, the impossible doctrine that a generated substance, the material intellect in the perishable human being, be transformed into an immaterial and eternal substance: “it will happen that something generated receives something eternal and is made like it, and in this way what is generated will become eternal, which is impossible.”⁴² Second, since the intelligibles in this new immaterial acquired intellect are not ontologically identical in existence to the intelligibles in the agent intellect in every way, the Aristotelian Third Man argument (originally proposed by Plato in his *Parmenides*) would require that there be another set of intelligibles over and above these two sets and so forth into infinity.⁴³ Third, even if al-Fârâbî maintains that this acquired intellect is perishable and its perfection only involves its receiving intelligibles without a conjoining with the agent intellect, a view Averroes reports al-Fârâbî held in his lost *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*,⁴⁴ then the “relation [of the agent intellect] to a human being will be only the relation of the agent to the human being, not a relation of form.”⁴⁵ That is, in this case the agent intellect will be the agent impressing abstracted forms on the distinct human material intellect and will not be ‘form for us’ in the sense of intrinsically operating within us. While this is certainly problematic for putting in jeopardy the understanding of human beings as essentially rational, Averroes is particularly concerned since, as agent cause only, the agent intellect cannot, properly speaking, be understood to conjoin or unite with human intellect.⁴⁶ Without that

⁴² LCDA {485}.

⁴³ LCDA {493}.

⁴⁴ For the source of this in Ibn Bâjjah, see Steven Harvey, “The Place of the Philosopher in the City According to Ibn Bâjjah,” in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy. Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi*, Charles E. Butterworth (ed.), (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) pp.199-233, precisely p.225 note 56. Also see Davidson (1992) 70-73. At LCDA {433} Averroes writes, “[I]n his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* he seems to deny that there is conjoining with the separate intelligences. He says that this is the opinion of Alexander and that it should not be held that the human end is anything but theoretical perfection.”

⁴⁵ LCDA {502}.

⁴⁶ “It is also evident that, when we assert that the material intellect is generable and corruptible, we will then find no way in which the agent intellect will be properly conjoined with the intellect which is in a positive disposition, namely, with a coupling similar to the uniting of forms with matters... In this way its relation to a human being will be only the relation of the agent to the human being, not a relation of form, and the question of al-Fârâbî which he voiced in his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* arises. For assurance of the possibility of the conjoining of the intellect with us lies in explaining that its relation to a human being is a relation of form and agent, not a relation of agent alone.” {LCDA {502} In a work probably written just before the *Long Commentary, Epistle #1 On Conjunction* extant only Hebrew, Averroes writes, “It is clear...that the agent intellect is not cause of the material intellect in as much as it is agent cause alone but in a way such that it is also its final perfection according to the mode of formal and final [cause], as is the case for sense in relation to what is sensed. This is one of the things which deceived al-Fârâbî, when he thought that [the agent intellect] was only the agent cause, as are material movers.” *Averroès. La Béatitude de l'Âme. Éditions, traductions et études*, Marc Geoffroy and Carlos Steel (eds. and trans.) (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2001), p. 216. My translation of their French.

conjoining or uniting, the issue mentioned second in the present paragraph again arises as also would the issue of the unity of intelligible thought.

For Averroes the agent intellect must be both agent cause of our intellection and also our formal cause as “form for us” and as the ultimately perfecting final cause of human intellection, a view found in all three of his commentaries on the *De Anima*. This is also the proper understanding of the nature of conjoining and uniting or coupling with the agent intellect:

when the theoretical intelligibles are joined with us through forms of the imagination and the agent intellect is joined with the theoretical intelligibles (for that which apprehends [theoretical intelligibles] is the same, namely, the material intellect), it is necessary that the agent intellect be coupled with us through the conjoining of the theoretical intelligibles.⁴⁷

For Averroes this conjoining in the activity of abstraction of intelligibles in potency and of impressing those intelligibles on the single receptive eternal and shared material intellect explains the teleology of sense and imagination in providing intentions from experience of the world. Sense and imagination valuably provide particular intentions as intelligibles in potency but cannot effect the intentional transference required for the existence of intelligibles in act. For that the agent intellect must be present to move the intentions to a new level of existence in the material intellect. It also explains how we are able to come to have intellectual knowledge by our will and voluntary effort.⁴⁸ Averroes makes this clear when he writes,

For, because that in virtue of which something carries out its proper activity is the form, while we carry out our proper activity in virtue of the agent intellect, it is necessary that the agent intellect be form in us....[I]t is necessary that a human being understand all the intelligibles through the intellect proper to him and that he carry out the activity proper to him in regard to all beings, just as he understands by his proper intellection all the beings through the dispositional intellect (*intellectus in habitu*), when it has been conjoined with forms of the imagination.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ LCDA {500}.

⁴⁸ “It was necessary to ascribe these two activities to the soul in us, namely, to receive the intelligible and to make it, although the agent and the recipient are eternal substances, on account of the fact that these two activities are reduced to our will, namely, to abstract intelligibles and to understand them.” LCDA {439}. Cf. LCDA {390}, {490}, and {495}.

⁴⁹ LCDA {499-500}. Interestingly, the same principle is used by Thomas Aquinas in his arguments against the notion of the material and agent intellects existing as unique separate entities shared by human beings: “[I]n any given thing acting, there must be some formal principle by which it formally acts. For something cannot formally act in virtue of what is separate in being from it. Even if what is separate is a moving principle for acting, still there must be something intrinsic by which it formally acts, whether that [principle] be a form or some sort of impression. Therefore there must be in us some formal principle by which we receive intelligibles and another by which we abstract them.” *Oportet autem in unoquoque operante esse aliquod formale principium quo formaliter operetur. Non enim potest aliquid formaliter operari per id quod est secundum esse separatum ab ipso, set etsi id quod est separatum sit principium motuum ad operandum, nichilominus oportet esse aliquod intrinsecum quo formaliter operetur, siue illud sit forma siue qualiscumque impressio. Oportet igitur esse in nobis aliquod principium formale quo recipiamus intelligibilia et aliud quo abstrahamus ea.* Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima* q. 5,

For Averroes this conjoining and uniting with the agent intellect and the subsequent human link with the material intellect where intelligibles in act are received is simply the action of knowing the intelligibles of theoretical science. And that is nothing but the very end of human beings, as he indicates in his late *Commentary on the Republic of Plato*: “The purpose of man, inasmuch as he is a natural being, is that he ascend to...the intelligibles of the theoretical sciences,”⁵⁰ which is “man’s ultimate perfection and ultimate happiness.”⁵¹ Still, this is the end attainable by the human species and not necessarily the end attained by each member of the species, simply because our attainment of intellectual knowledge in the intelligibles in act resulting from abstraction is a product of individual will and effort. We must use our powers of sense, imagination, cogitation and memory to form particular refined intentions, intelligibles in potency, for presentation to the agent intellect for abstraction, that is, for transference to the higher level of being of intelligibles in act, and for the attendant impression upon the receptive material intellect.⁵²

Conclusion

In all three of his commentaries on *De Anima* Averroes held the notion that the agent intellect must be conceived as “form for us” and as an intrinsically acting formal cause in human beings in the process of the apprehension of intelligibles in act. In all three works the formation of intelligibles in act is explicated as a genuine abstraction from worldly experience coming about as a result of a conjoining and uniting with the unique and separate agent intellect. Common to all these accounts is also the notion that this attainment of knowledge is the end and perfection for human beings in which ultimate happiness can be found. Although couched in language of uniting and conjoining which perhaps brings to mind religious or mystical notions, there is nothing of that sort at work in these commentaries. What is more, even though all three have substantially differing conceptions of the material intellect, there is no argument in these to the effect that the individual human soul or intellect lives on in any sense after the death of the body.

resp. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones de anima* in *Opera Omnia*, v. 24.1. B.-C. Bazán (ed.). Roma: Commissio Leonina; Les Éditions du Cerf, 1996. Elsewhere Aquinas asserts that “nothing carries out an activity except through some power which is formally in itself. . . . Therefore, it is necessary that the principles in virtue of which these actions are attributed [to human beings], namely the possible intellect and the agent intellect, be certain powers existing formally in us.” Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book II, ch. 76 n. 17-18. I will examine the use of this principle to very different ends by Averroes and Aquinas in another article.

⁵⁰ *Averroes on Plato’s “Republic,”* Ralph Lerner, Ralph (trans.) (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974) p.88.

⁵¹ *Averroes on Plato’s “Republic”* (1974) p.86.

⁵² On the cogitative power, see the article cited in note 22 and Richard C. Taylor, “Cogitatio, Cogitativus and Cogitare: Remarks on the Cogitative Power in Averroes,” in *L’elaboration du vocabulaire philosophique au Moyen Age*, ed. J. Hamesse et C. Steel (Turnhout, Brepols, 2000) pp. 111-146. (Rencontres de philosophie Medievale Vol. 8.)

The notion of the agent intellect as “form for us” acting in us in the activity of abstraction contributed importantly to the coherence of Averroes’s understanding of human knowing. Still, this notion strains the limits of his Aristotelian philosophical project, limits already strained powerfully by his novel doctrine of the unique and separate material intellect shared by all human beings.⁵³ It is central to the thought of Aristotle that form is the nature of a thing (*Physics* 2.1, 193b7-8), that form is the intrinsic cause of being in a substance (*Metaphysics* 7.3, 1029a29-32), and that form is substance (*Metaphysics* 7.6 ff.). Hence, to employ the notion of form so that the ontologically separate agent intellect is also an intrinsic form acting in the ontologically distinct human knower so as to be called “form for us” and “the final form belonging to us” is to extend the meaning of form far beyond that of the nature of a thing or the cause of existence in a thing. Averroes uses the principle, “that in virtue of which something carries out its proper activity is the form,”⁵⁴ to argue that, since human beings carry out intellectual understanding of intelligibles in act as a proper activity, then it must follow that the agent intellect needed for abstraction of intelligibles must be “form for us.” Yet, at the same time he asserted that the agent intellect is ontologically separate from the individual human intellect for which it serves as form. This is both because individual human beings perish at death while the agent intellect is eternal and because the activity of intellectual abstraction can only be carried out by something which has the immaterial nature of intellectuality in itself. However, these uses of the term ‘form’ are compatible only by an equivocation in the meaning of the word ‘form’: ‘form’ in the phrase “form for us” when said of the agent intellect does not denote the full ontological presence of the agent intellect’s form in us. Rather, it denotes a formal activity present in the human soul for abstracting and understanding intelligibles in act which, nevertheless, cannot be either an accident or a power consequent upon the very substance of the human soul itself. Yet Averroes shows no indication of an awareness of the extent to which his conception of the agent intellect in its relation to the human soul is equally as novel and problematic as his conception of the material intellect as unique and shared by all human beings.

⁵³ Averroes was aware his account was not found in any of the Greek or Arabic thinkers who preceded him. The material intellect in the *Long Commentary* is not itself form, matter or a composite of these. Rather, he writes, “One should hold that it is a fourth kind of being. For just as sensible being is divided into form and matter, so too intelligible being must be divided into things similar to these two, namely, into something similar to form and into something similar to matter.” {409}

⁵⁴ LCDA {499}.