Remarks on the Importance of Albert the Great’s Analyses and Use of the Thought of Avicenna and Averroes in the *De homine* for the Development of the Early Natural Epistemology of Thomas Aquinas

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Remarks on the Importance of Albert the Great’s Analyses and Use of the Thought of Avicenna and Averroes in the *De homine* for the Development of the Early Natural Epistemology of Thomas Aquinas

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While it is obvious that Thomas Aquinas must have learned a great deal in the time he spent with Albert the Great as student in Paris and later as student assistant in Cologne, much detailed analytical work remains to be done to unlock all the keys to understanding just what the young Italian learned and gleaned of his teacher during his time with the German master. In this article I share what I consider to be one of the keys to determining the major source of the account of natural human intellectual knowledge in the early thought of Aquinas. My focus is on the *De homine* of Albert, a work generally agreed to have been completed ca. 1242, and Book 2 distinction 17, question 2, article 1 of the *Commentary on the Sentences* by

1 The present article is a preliminary study of the importance of the thought of Albert the Great in his *De homine* for that of the young Thomas Aquinas on the human intellect. I will provide a more detailed study of these issues discussed elsewhere. Katja Krause alludes several times to the likelihood of the importance of the *De homine* to the early thought of Aquinas in her article, Transforming Aristotelian Philosophy: Alexander of Aphrodisias in Aquinas’s Early Anthropology and Eschatology, in: Przeglad Tomistyczny 21 (2015), 175-217.


3 On the dating of this work, see H. Möhle / H. Anzulewicz et al. (ed.), Albertus Magnus und sein System der Wissenschaften: Schlüsseltexte in Übersetzung, lateinisch-deutsch, Münster 2011, 28. The issue discussed here is treated in part by R. Miller, An Aspect of Averroes’ Influence on St. Albert, in: Mediaeval Studies 16 (1954), 57-71. However, Miller’s account which draws on various works by Albert aims to show the differences of the teachings of Albert and Aquinas on the soul. My focus here is more narrowly on the accounts of (i) the possible and agent intellect as powers of the soul and (ii) the intelligibles in act or *species intelligibles* as developed in the *De homine* of Albert in his study of Averroes and Avicenna which is important for the development of the early conception of intellect and natural epistemology by the Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas. In what follows here (1) I provide a brief account of the earliest teachings of Thomas on the epistemology of human knowledge in this article. (2) I then examine in detail texts of Albert on the nature of the agent and possible intellects in which he develops his own teaching through careful study of the writings of Averroes and Avicenna. Here I explain how, through systematic misunderstanding of Averroes, Albert develops a teaching on these intellects that was foundational for the thought of Aquinas. (3) Finally, I conclude with some brief remarks on the importance of philosophy in the Arabic tradition to the thinking of these two Latin masters.

1. Aquinas on Natural Epistemology in his *Commentary on the Sentences*:

In 2 Sent d.17, Q.2, A.1

Thomas Aquinas first sets out details of his own understanding of natural epistemology in the second book of his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* at Distinction 17, Question 2, Article 1, “Whether there is one soul or intellect for all human beings,” written ca. 1252–1254. He does so in dialogue with the two great thinkers of the Arabic tradition who profoundly influenced the development of epistemology in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Avicenna and Averroes. In that article, Aquinas both uses Avicenna to refute Averroes on the need for a material intellect shared by all human knowers and Averroes to refute Avicenna on the need for a shared agent intellect. He also draws upon both for key aspects of his own epistemology. Much of his teaching on natural epistemology set forth there remained foundational in his later thought.

The *solutio* of the article is composed of two major sections. In the first section Aquinas provides a detailed account of the reasoning of his philosophical predecessors for their positions together with his critical rejection of their views. Here he makes clear his own impressive depth of understanding of his sources as well as his sophisticated critical insights into arguments relevant to the formation of his own quite distinct doctrine. After noting that “nearly all the philosophers after Aristotle” taught a doctrine of the unity of the Agent Intellect for all human beings, he goes on to explain the terminology used for the four sorts of intellect: possible or material intellect, agent intellect, intellect in act, and intellect in possibility. After noting the incompatibility with Catholic religious teachings of the


For an English translation of this entire article see Taylor, Aquinas and the Arabs, cited in the previous note.
accounts and asserting that for them the agent intellect and possible intellect differ in substance, Aquinas then largely follows the analysis of Averroes in the Long Commentary on the De Anima, at times also drawing on the De Anima and Metaphysics of Avicenna. In accord with the arguments provided by Averroes, Aquinas goes on to reject the teachings of Alexander of Aphrodisias and Ibn Bājja (Avempace), Avicenna, Themistius and Theophrastus, finally turning against Averroes himself with a refutation of the Cordoban’s own teachings. He then presents his own view in the second section.

I will not detail all the reasoning of Aquinas here but rather consider just four teachings he establishes in this article. In the solutio he writes,

(1) “I say with Avicenna that the possible intellect comes into existence, but does not go out of existence with the body, that it is diverse in diverse [human beings], and that it is multiplied according to the division of matter in diverse individuals, just as other substantial forms.”

and

(2) “And I also add that the agent intellect is diverse in diverse [human beings], for it does seem unlikely that there does not exist in the rational soul some principle which can fulfill a natural operation.”

(1) is in contradiction to Averroes and is established after the rejection of his two subject theory which has the understood intelligible somehow both in the separate shared Material Intellect as an eternal intelligible and in the particular human theoretical intellect as a perishable intelligible. Aquinas rejects this because the known intelligible would not be the same thing in its different human and transcendent subjects. Aquinas’s account is established consequent to his refutation of the teaching of Averroes that the intelligibles may exist only in one single shared subject since existence in a plurality of subjects would require the particularization of the intelligible in each of the multiple knowers. Aquinas rejects this notion that particularity precludes intelligibility and instead follows Avicenna in holding that it is matter that precludes intelligibility. Instead, Aquinas insists that each human being has his or her own receptive personal material or possible intellect as a power of the human soul. This power receives not the very intelligible which is unique and existing in the separate Material Intellect according to Averroes, but rather an intelligible species which is a representation and content bearing ratio of the nature of things of the world, not of separate intelligibles.

4 In what follows I cite the Latin of Averrois Cordubensis Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis De Anima Libros, F. Stuart Crawford (ed.), Cambridge, MA 1953 and the English of Averroes of Cordoba’s Long Commentary on the De anima of Aristotle, Richard C. Taylor (tr. and intro.), Thérèse-Anne Druart (subeditor), New Haven 2009. Citations of both are abbreviated LCDA.
Richard C. Taylor

(2) involves the rejection of the doctrine of the shared agent intellect which Aquinas earlier characterized as a common doctrine of nearly all the philosophers, a doctrine shared by Avicenna and Averroes though with different understandings. This cannot be so, Aquinas reasons, because the power of intellectual abstraction - which is essential to the definition of a human being and also essential to the teleology of what it is to be a human knower - cannot be something outside the essence of the human as knower. Otherwise human beings would not be intelligent per se but rather only per accidens. That is, knowing would not be an operation natural to human beings but rather in some sense a super- or extra-natural operation made possible by something external to the soul.

For Aquinas, then

(3) "[T]he soul has a power by which it makes sensible species to be intelligible [species] in act, and this power is the agent intellect. And [the soul] has a power by which it is in potency for being made in the act of determinate knowing brought about by a sensible thing’s species made intelligible in act, and this power or potency is called possible intellect."

Aquinas sets aside the difficulties and presents out his own doctrine in (3). Averroes had accounted for the unity of human intellectual knowledge needed for shared discourse and scientific understanding by having a single Material Intellect receiving and containing true intelligibles in act abstracted by the Agent Intellect. 7 According to Aquinas, Avicenna had asserted a common Agent Intellect to which human knowers had to connect or from which they had to receive an emanation 8 which enables human


8 Aquinas does not detail his understanding of the doctrine of Avicenna here but he does spell it out in his later Summa Contra Gentiles. There he clearly asserts that for Avicenna „the intelligibles in act (species intelligibiles) flow into our possible intellect from the Agent Intellect which itself [Avicenna] asserted to be a certain separate substance.” (SCG 2.74) Though common to the Latin tradition, this is not a correct understanding of the view of Avicenna. For Avicenna, the intelligible in act is generated in the individual rational soul thanks to the light of the Agent Intellect. Since he holds that there is no intellectual memory in individual rational souls, later apprehension and use of abstracted intelligibles in act are obtained through a connection to the separate Agent Intellect which contains all intelligibles in act of the sublunar world. One of the most valuable recent accounts of Avicenna on this is that of Tommaso Alpina in Intellectual Knowledge, Active Intellect and Intellectual Memory in Avicenna’s Kitâb al-Nafs and Its Aristotelian Background, in: Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale 25 (2014), 131-183. Alpina, however, insists that for Avicenna the intelligibles in act abstracted by the individual human knower must subsequently be stored in the Agent Intellect. Yet that is not possible since the Agent Intellect does not have receptive potency for those abstracted intelligibles. It seems more likely that the abstracting light of the
intellectual understanding only so long as this connection remained active. While Avicenna held that human beings do have a bodily power of memory, they do not have individual intellectual memories. The shared discourse and intellectual understanding of science as necessary and true which Averroes founded in a very different way in the shared separate and eternal Material Intellect, Avicenna grounded in the separate Agent Intellect and its connection to the human rational soul. Aquinas, however, grounds knowledge in the individual human knower through intrinsic powers belonging to the particular human soul, the abstracting power called agent intellect and the power receptive of the abstracted intelligible called possible (scil., material) intellect. Through these powers the individual human being apprehends the natures of things of the world. He writes: „For the sensible thing is intelligible in potency and has a nature distinct in act. Yet there is in the soul an intellectual light in act. But the determination of knowing with respect to this or that nature is there in potency, as the pupil is in potency with respect to this or that color. For this reason the soul has a power by which it makes sensible species to be intelligible [species] in act, and this power is the agent intellect. And [the soul] has a power by which it is in potency for being made in the act of determinate knowing brought about by a sensible thing’s species made intelligible in act, and this power or potency is called possible intellect.”

In the response to the third objection Aquinas writes,

(4) „According to Avicenna, the understood species can be considered in two ways, either with respect to the being that it has in the intellect, and in this way it has singular being, or with respect to the fact that it is a likeness of such an understood thing, to the extent that it leads to the knowledge of it, and on the basis of this part it has universality.” [This is] because it is not a

Agent Intellect that causes the abstraction of intelligibles from images in the human mind both abstracts (scil. separates from matter) the intelligible for the individual human and at the same time establishes a connection between the abstracted intelligible in the rational soul and the Agent Intellect. For this teaching by Avicenna, it may well be that an influence of the Paraphrase of the De Anima by Themistius is present for this teaching. This is something I explore further in my forthcoming article, Avicenna and the Issue of Intellectual Intelligibles, for the Routledge History of Philosophy of Mind series, M. Cameron (ed.). It should be noted that in the same section Aquinas himself recounts Avicenna’s view that individual rational souls do not have intellectual memory but must link with the separate Agent Intellect to access previously abstracted intelligibles in act.

Aristotle, Posterior Analytics 1.4.


Here Aquinas follows Avicenna, Al-Shifa‘, Al-Ilahiyyat, v. 2, M.Y. Mūsā/S. Dūnıyā/S. Zayid (eds.), Cairo 1960, 5.1, 205-6. „This form, although a universal in relation to individuals, is an individual in relation to the particular soul in which it is imprinted, being one of the forms of the mind. And, because individual souls are numerically many, it is possible for this universal form to be numerically many from the aspect that it is individual.” The Metaphysics of The Healing, M.E. Marmura (tr.), Provo, Utah
likeness of this thing insofar as it is this thing but rather according to the nature in which it agrees with others of its species."12

Here Aquinas further displays his famous doctrine of intelligible species or forms as what he will later call representations and rationes of the natures of things,13 wherein the object of human intellectual understanding of things of the natural world is the nature as specific difference in the things.14 In this the views of Aquinas and Averroes are alike15 regarding the source of intelligible content, namely, the things of the world, but they differ substantially regarding the locus of the intelligibles in act after abstraction. Although Averroes holds the intelligibles in act to be derived by way

2005, 157. „Haec autem forma, quamvis respectu individuorum sit universalis, tamen, respectu animae singularis in qua imprimitur, est individua; ipsa enim est una ex formis quae sunt in intellectu, et quia singularae animae sunt multae numero, tunc eo modo quo sunt particulares habebunt ipsae aliiud intellectum universale.” Avicenna Latinus. Liber de Philosophia Prima sive Scientia Divine, V-X, S. Van Riet (ed.), Louvain/Leiden 1980, 238. As Van Riet notes, the Latin suffers from an omission here. Still, Aquinas is able to take from this passage the view of Avicenna that the universal is received in a plurality of individual human souls or intellects without losing its nature as an intelligible.

12 This is Aquinas’s teaching on intelligible species or forms according to which the intellect apprehends the natures of things in the world. The likely source of this language is Avicenna. The Latin Avicenna has: „Cum ergo dicimus quod natura universalis habet esse in his sensilibus, non intelligimus quod ex hoc quod est universalis, scilicet secundum hunc modum universalitatis, sed intelligimus quod natura cui accidit universalitas habet esse in ipsis signatis.” Avicenna Latinus. Liber de Philosophia Prima sive Scientia Divine, 5, 2, 244. Al-Shifa’, Al-Ilahiyyat, v. 2, Lc., 211. „If we then say that the universal nature exists in external things, we do not mean in as much as it is universal in this mode of universality; rather, we mean that the nature to which universality occurs exists in things external [to the mind].” The Metaphysics of The Healing, M.E. Marmura (tr.), 161.

13 See, for example, Aquinas, Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate, Opera omnia, t. 22, v. 1, fasc. 2, Rome 1970, q. 2, a 5 ad 6 & ad 7.

14 In the later Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima he writes, „Although the intelligible species by which the intellect formally understands is in the possible intellect of this or that human being, on the basis of which there are many possible intellects, nevertheless that which is understood through a species of this sort is one, if we consider it with respect to the thing understood, because the universal which is understood by each is the same in all [human beings]. And that what is one in all can be understood through species multiplied in diverse [human beings] occurs on account of immateriality of the species which represent the thing without the individuating material conditions on the basis of which one nature in species is multiplied in number in diverse [human beings].”

15 And Aquinas himself as well. See note 8.
of abstraction and transference from imagined intentions or phantasms in the human imagination, he regards the separated intelligibles in act ontologically present in the Material Intellect to be the proper intelligible object of human scientific understanding. In his late treatise On the unity of the intellect against the Averroists, Aquinas called attention to this and remarked that Averroes had somehow inadvertently fallen into a form of Platonism in his doctrine of the intellect.\(^\text{16}\) For Avicenna, as we have seen, intelligibles are described as coming to be in a plurality of human receptive intellects in a procedure involving an emanation (\textit{fayḍ}) from the separate Agent Intellect and by a conjoining (\textit{ittisāl}) with the separate Agent Intellect.\(^\text{17}\) Aquinas rejected this role for a transcendent Agent Intellect because he understood that to mean that the intelligibles in act themselves are emanated to the human rational soul by the Agent Intellect and because he also rejected Avicenna’s view that the rational soul does not have its own intellectual memory.\(^\text{18}\) Instead, Aquinas embraced the abstractionist account he saw in Averroes which derives the content of intelligibles solely from the world, while holding firmly that agent intellect and material or possible intellect are powers of the human soul, not separate substances.

In sum, in the Commentary on the Sentences Aquinas himself chose to follow Avicenna in the view that the possible intellect comes into being in each individual with the body, is multiplied in different human beings as individual for each, and does not perish with the death of the body. And he followed Avicenna’s famous understanding of the threefold consideration of essences, in things, in the mind and in itself distinct from the other two ways.\(^\text{19}\) For Aquinas the form or species in the external thing comes to be in the mind of the human knower through abstraction carried out by the individual soul’s power of agent intellect. However, Aquinas declined to follow Avicenna’s conception of the separate Agent Intellect and instead added that it is not improbable that the agent intellect must also be intrinsically present individually in each human being since that is required for the natural operation of intellectual understanding belonging to the human soul. In the last section of his solution in this article Aquinas also argues that the agent intellect and the possible intellect, though powers of the soul constituting what together makes up the general human intellectual power, must be understood as two diverse powers of the soul. For this distinction

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\(^{16}\) See Sancti Thomae de Aquino, De unitate intellectus contra averroistas, Opera omnis 43, Rome 1976, 312, lines 164-70.

\(^{17}\) See note 8 regarding the correct understanding of Avicenna.

\(^{18}\) See note 8.

of powers in the soul Aquinas draws directly on Averroes’s distinction of the separate intellects and their proper activities.²⁰ For Aquinas, the power of soul called agent intellect as „an intellectual light in act“ is „a power by which [the soul] makes sensible species to be intelligible [species] in act“ by separation or abstraction of the intelligible, while the power of soul called possible intellect is „a power by which it is in potency for being made in the act of determinate knowing brought about by a sensible thing’s species made intelligible in act.“²¹ The innovations of Aquinas in this discussion, then, are largely in his rejection of the roles of separate Agent or Material Intellects of Avicenna and Averroes and his insistence that these must be understood as two distinct powers intrinsic to the individual human soul. Regarding this conception so fundamental to all his later discussions of the human soul and its powers of intellectual understanding, Aquinas was preceded by perhaps ten years by his teacher, Albert the Great.

*Unde necesse est, cum hoc quod posuimus quod proportio intentionum i ymagnatarum ad intellectum materialem est sicut proportio sensibilium ad sensus (ut Aristoteles post dicit), imponere alium motorem esse, qui facit eas movere in actu intellectum materialem (et hoc nichil est aliud quam facere eas intellectas in actu, abstrabendo eas a materia). Et quia hac intension cogens ad ponendum intellectum agentem aliam a materiali et a forma rerum quas intellectus materialis comprehendit est similis intentioni propter quam visus in diget luce, cum hoc quod agens et recipiens alia sunt a luce [...].“. LCDA, Latin, 438-9; English, 438-439: Hence, in view of our having asserted that the relation of the imagined intentions (439) to the material intellect is just as the relation of the sensibles to the senses (as Aristotle will say later), it is necessary to suppose that there is another mover which makes [the intentions] move the material intellect in act, and this is nothing but to make [the intentions] intelligible in act by separating them from matter. Because this intention, which forces the assertion of an agent intellect different from the material intellect and different from the forms of things which the material intellect apprehends, is similar to the intention on account of which sight needs light, in view of the fact that the agent and the recipient are different from light [ ...].“.

²¹ Taylor, Aquinas and the Arabs, Lc. (note 4), 292 (appendix). Aquinas is likely drawing on both Averroes and Avicenna here for an explanation the image of light that Aristotle used at De Anima 3.5, 430a 15 („the intellect making all things as a disposition (hexis) such as light“) both of whom assert teachings of intellectual abstraction by the light of the separate Agent Intellect. This is further discussed below. It should be noted that the doctrine of intellectual abstraction of intelligibles in act by a transfer of content from images of things of the sensible world is not at all explicit in Aristotle. The teaching seems, rather, to be an interpretation of Alexander of Aphrodias read back into the texts of Aristotle by later thinkers. See R.C. Taylor, The Epistemology of Abstraction in: R.C. Taylor/L.X. López-Farjeat (eds.), Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy, London/New York 2015, 273-284.
While later in his career Albert rejected the view of Averroes that for intellectual understanding human beings share in the powers of the separately existing Agent Intellect and Material Intellect, in his *De homine* Albert had a very different understanding of the texts of Averroes. In this early work in which Albert engaged in detail the writings of Avicenna and Averroes on the soul and intellect and formed a new conception of the human powers of intellect on the basis of a (mis)understanding of the teachings of Averroes on intellect. Through a thoughtful and meticulous study of the texts of Averroes, Albert came to the (false) conclusion that for Averroes the intellects he discusses are powers intrinsic and individual for each human soul. Thinking himself to be following the correct reading of Averroes, Albert then went on, with critique of Avicenna’s doctrines of the separate Agent Intellect and the lack of human intellectual memory, to form a teaching that is largely the same that found later in Aquinas’s *Commentary on the Sentences* at Distinction 17, Question 2, Article 1.

Among the most important texts of the *De homine* for this account are those that follow below.

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22. Between the *Summa de Creaturis*, written in 1240-1, and the *De Anima*, written in 1256, St. Albert discovered that Averroes did teach (1) that the agent intellect is not a part of the soul, that is separate and not joined to the soul, (2) that everything which is separate and then is conjoined must have some cause to account for its being conjoined, (3) that one must discover what is the cause of the conjunction through which the agent intelligence is conjoined formally to the possible intellect. Miller, Averroes’ Influence on St. Albert, l.c. (note 3), 64, Also see A. de Libera, Métaphysique et météorique. Albert le Grand, Paris 2005, 281 sqq.

23. This issue is discussed in Miller, Averroes’ Influence on St. Albert, l.c. (note 3). This is a valuable contribution from a time when the work of Averroes was less well known than it is today. Note that Miller misunderstands Averroes and thought him to be disturbed by the lack of acceptance of his doctrine of the separate Material Intellect. “Even in Averroes’ own day the complications of his presentation were the source of resistances among his hearers and readers.” Ibid., 64. In fact, however, Averroes was not addressing contemporaries but rather predecessors in the Arabic and Greek traditions and questioning why they would not accept the unity of the Material Intellect since they accepted the unity of the Agent Intellect.

24. In his The Psychology of Saint Albert the Great Compared With That Of Saint Thomas, Washington, DC 1934, George C. Reilly gives valuable accounts of the thought of Albert throughout many of his works but does not highlight Albert’s (mis)understanding of Averroes in the *De homine*. See, for example, pp. 36-37. On the notions of *First Averroism* and *Second Averroism*, see n. 31 below. That the texts and arguments of Averroes on this issue were difficult to understand for Albert is noted by P. Hellmeier, *Anima et Intellectus*. Albertus Magnus und Thomas von Aquin über Seele und Intellekt des Menschen, Münster 2011, 69 sqq.
(1) On the nature of the intellect Albert holds in the De homine – as did Thomas later – that the agent intellect and the possible intellect are powers in the individual soul. Albert cites with precision the texts of Avicenna and his followers al-Ghazali and Gundissalinus who hold that the Agent Intellect is the last of the hierarchy of immaterial separate substances and does not exist in the individual human soul. This is a view Albert rejects with detailed argumentation, as the following texts demonstrate:

(1.1) 402.40: "We concede that the agent intellect is in the soul." – "Concedimus quod intellectus agens universaliter est in anima." My emphasis.

(1.2) 408.68: "[Avicenna] expressly accepted that the Agent Intellect is the separate intelligence of the tenth order of the separate intelligences." – "[E]xpressè accipitur quod intellectus agens est intelligentia separata decimi ordinis intelligentiarum secondarum."

(1.3) But Albert himself in a sed contra remarks that these are in us and not separate. 411.51: "Since, therefore, one of these is the agent intellect and the other the possible [intellect], each of those intellects will be in us and not a separate substance." – "Cum igitur unum horum sit intellectus agens et alterum possibilis, uterque istorum intellectorum erit in nobis existens et non separata substantia." My emphasis. In the solution at 412.72-76 he affirms this. See (1.5) below.25

(1.4) 412.57-68: Albert clearly rejects the views of the philosophers who say that the Agent Intellect is separate and efficient cause of human knowing. He writes against "others" (scil. Avicenna) that he rejects the connection between the intellect as the tenth in the emanative hierarchy of the heavens and the function of the Agent Intellect. The notion that "the human possible intellect moves a human being to be connected to the agent intellect of the tenth order" ("intellectus humanus possibilis movet hominem ad hoc quod conformatur intelligentiae agenti decimi ordinis") and that "in this way the goodnesses flow from the agent intellect into the possible

25 The phrase in nobis is commonly found in Averroes for whom the separate Agent Intellect is forma nobis, svah la-ná, and in our soul, just as the separate Possible Intellect is in our soul. In this Averroes is following Aristotle who writes at De Anima 3.5, 429a13 that the two intellects are "in the soul", en tê psyhê. More of Albert's use of in nobis is found at 17.9-10 (possible intellect); 25.57 (Aristotle); 38.24 (agent intellect: Avicenna); 40.74-41.2 sqq. (Avicenna); 414.27-38 (Averroes); 438.64-439.4 (Averroes). On the notion of the Agent Intellect as "form for us" in Averroes, see my article, The Agent Intellect as 'form for us' and Averroes's Critique of al-Fârâbî, in: Topicos (Universidad Panamericana, Mexico City) 29 (2005), 29-51. Reprint with corrections in: Universal Representation and the Ontology of Individuation. Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics 5 (2011), 25-44. Also see my introduction to LDCA, xxiv sqq. Derived from Alexander of Aphrodisias and al-Fârâbî, this characterization of the Agent Intellect is found in all three of his commentaries on the De Anima of Aristotle.
intellect" ("et hoc modo fluunt bonitates ab intelligentia agente in intellectum possibilem") is something Albert will have none of ("nos nihil horum dicimus"). This is further confirmed in his direct discussion of the agent intellect (415-416) where he writes in his solution concerning the constituent parts of the human intellect 416.33-41: "We concede that the agent intellect is part of the soul [...]. And on account of this we say that the agent intellect is part of the potential soul flowing from it as 'that by which it is', or act; but the possible [intellect] is the part of the soul flowing from it as 'what is' or potency." — "Concedimus quod intellectus agens est pars animae [...]. Et propter hoc dicimus quod intellectus agens est pars potentialis animae fluens ab eo quod est 'quod est', sive actus; possibilis autem est pars animae fluens ab eo quod est 'quod est', sive potentia." In the response to the first objection he confirms his view as follows 416.51-53: "And on account of this the agent and possible intellects can be intrinsic parts of the rational soul." — "Et propter hoc intellectus agens et possibilis possunt esse intrinsicae partes animae rationalis." My emphasis.

(1.5) 412.69: In his solutio he follows the view of Averroes who says that the human agent intellect is conjoined with the human soul, is simple and does not itself have the intelligibles but instead brings them about in the human possible intellect by abstracting them from phantasms. "But we say none of these things. For following Aristotle and Averroes we say that the heavens do not have a soul beyond the intelligence, as was determined above on the question of the heavens. And likewise we say that the human agent intellect is conjoined to the human soul, is simple and does not possess the intelligibles but brings them about in the possible intellect from phantasms, as Averroes expressly says in [his] Commentary on De Anima." — "Sed nos nihil horum dicimus. Sequentes enim Aristotelem et Averroem dicimus caelum non habere animam praeter intelligentiam, ut supra in quaestione de caelo determinatum est. Et similiter dicimus intellectum agentem humanum esse conjunctum animae humanae, et esse simplicem et non habere intelligibilitia, sed agere ipsa in intellectu possibili ex phantasmatibus, sicut expresse dicit Averroes in commento libri de anima." My emphasis.

As we have seen, the doctrine of Averroes is that the Agent Intellect does not have all the intelligibles in it — as Albert correctly notes — but rather abstracts them from images in the individual human soul and impresses them onto the separate Material or Possible Intellect. Both these are separate substances for Averroes and yet they must come to be present in the soul (finas) through a form of sharing and presence. This is required to be the case because that in virtue of which something formally acts must be
intrinsic to it. Hence, for Averroes the separate substances, the Agent Intellect and the Material Intellect, must come to be in the soul, that is, intrinsic to it in the attainment of intelligibles in act while remaining separately existing eternal and imperishible substances. But Albert does not understand Averroes in this (correct) way but rather understands those two intellects to be powers existing intrinsic to the individual human intellect with each person having his or her own powers of agent and possible (scil., material) intellect.

Albert later changes his view and holds the common (and correct) understanding of Averroes. But in the De homine he sees the Cordoban write that the intellects are “in the soul” and “in us” and interprets it as indicating the agent and possible intellects are powers of the individual human soul. Well aware of the importance of his way of understanding Averroes for its contribution to a sound account of the soul, Albert quotes Averroes on this point of the intellects being both “in the soul” and “in us”.

(1.6) 411.46-53: “Again, Averroes [writes]: ‘Every intellect existing in us has two actions. One is of the genus of affection and it is to understand; the other [is] of the genus of action. And this is for abstracting these from matter, which is nothing but to make them understood in act after they were understood in potency.’ Since, therefore, one of these is the agent intellect and the other the possible [intellect], each of those intellects will be existing in us and not a separate substance.” – *Item, Averroes: Omnis intellectus in nobis existens habet duas actiones. Quarum una est de genere passionis, et est intelligere; alia de genere actionis, et est abstrahere eas a materia, quod nihil aliud est quam facere eas intellectas in actu postquam erant intellectae in potentia.’ Cum igitur unum horum sit intellectus agens et alterum possibilis, uterque istorum intellectuum erit in nobis existens et non separata


27 Averroes was correctly held by Aquinas, Bonaventura, Kilwardby and many others to have taught that there are two separately existing intellectual substances, the Agent Intellect and the Material (or Possible) Intellect. Albert’s early misunderstanding of Averroes found in the De homine contributed to the (false) assertion by R.A. Gauthier that there were two Averroisms, a *First Averroism* such as Albert held in the De homine which viewed the intellects as powers intrinsic to the human soul and a *Second Averroism* which viewed the intellects as separately existing substances. This *Second Averroism*, Gauthier claimed, is an invention of the Christian theologians and not the genuine teaching of Averroes himself. As I have explained in the introduction to my English translation of Averroes, LDCA, xcix-civ, Gauthier was misled by reliance on incorrect assertions regarding teachings in the Arabic texts of Averroes by S. Gomez Nogales. See LCDA introduction, ci. See (1.6). I will address the tangled issue of First and Second Averroism at length elsewhere.
My emphasis. Note that here Albert is himself a witness to the existence in his own day of two interpretations of Averroes, one that those intellects are separate substantial entities and the other that they are powers of the human soul when he writes at 411.52-53, "both of those intellects will be existent in us and not a separate substance" — "uterque istorum intellectuum erit in nobis existens et non separata substantia."29

(1.7) 414.27-38: "And this is what Averroes says in his Commentary on Book Three of the De Anima: "It is evident that, when all the theoretical intelligibles are in us in potency, then the agent [intellect] is united with us in potency, because it is not united with us except through them. And when they are existing in us in act, then it too is united with us in act. For the act of the agent intellect is determined by reference to the phantasms, and in this way a determined [action] moves the possible intellect and brings it forth into act, as the action of light is determinate in reference to colors and in this way a determinate [action] brings forth vision into act. And in virtue of this it is evident that the agent intellect is not a substance full of forms." — "Et hoc est quod dicit Averroes in commento super tertium de anima: 'Manifestum est, quoniam quando omnia speculativae fuerint in nobis existentia in potentia, tunc et agens continuatur nobis in potentia, quia non continuator nobis nisi per illa; et cum fuerint existentia in nobis in actu, tunc et ipse continuatur nobis in actu."30 Actio enim intellectus agentis determinatur ad phantasma, et sic determinata movet intellectum possibilem et educit eum in actum, sicut actio luminis determinatur ad colores, et sic determinata visum educit in actu. Et per hoc patet quod intellectus agens non est substantia separate plena formis." My emphasis. Albert’s own view involves the rejection of the view he found in Avicenna regarding an emanation of intelligibles from the separate agent intellect. The human agent intellect is not full of forms as Albert understood the Agent Intellect of Avicenna, but rather is what provides the power for a genuine abstraction or separation of forms from

28 LCDA 495; English, 395: "Let us say, therefore: the intellect existing in us has two activities inssofar as it is ascribed to us, one of the genus of affection, namely, understanding, and the other of the genus of activity, namely, to extract forms and denude them of matters, which is nothing but making them intelligible in act after they were such in potency [...]." — "Dicamus igitur: quoniam autem intellectus existens in nobis habet duas actiones secundum quod attribuitur nobis, quorum una est de /465/ genere passionis (et est intelligere), et alia de genere actionis (et est extrahere formas et denudare eas a materia, quod nichil est aliud nisi facere eas intellectas in actu postquam erant in potentia) [...]."

29 See note 28.

30 LCDA 500.599-603; English, 399. "It is evident [then] that when all the theoretical intelligibles exist in us in potency, it will be united with us in potency. When all the theoretical intelligibles exist in us in act, it will then be united with us in act." — "Et manifestum est quod, cum omnia intellecta speculativa fuerint existentia in nobis in potentia, quod ipse erit copulatus nobis cum in potentia. Et cum omnia intellecta speculativa fuerint existentia in nobis in actu, erit ipse tunc copulatus nobis in actu."
the content of experience in phantasms or images.

Hence, for Albert the two intellects, agent and possible, are parts or powers of the human soul:

(1.8) 416.52: "And on account of this the agent intellect and the possible intellect are intrinsic parts of the rational soul." — "Et propter hoc intellectus agens et possibilis possunt esse intrinsicae partes animae rationalis." My emphasis. That is, in substance and definition the agent intellect is a power and principle of the soul for apprehending intelligibles. On this issue, Quid sit intellectus agens secundum substantiam et diffinitionem (418.4), Albert comes to the following conclusion:

(1.9) 419.5-8: "Solution: It should be said that the agent intellect in substance and definition is a power and an active principle of intelligibles, and on account of this the Philosopher says that the intellect is 'that by which all things are made'." — "Solutio: Dicendum quod intellectus agens secundum substantiam et diffinitionem est potentia et principium activum intelligibilium, et propter hoc dicit Philosophus quod est intellectus, quo est omnia facere.' While for Albert the human separate intellect is not to be identified with the human power of agent intellect, still the human intellect in which knowledge is realized (called the theoretical or speculative intellect) is separate from matter and its concomitants:

(1.10) 419.41-43: "The [human] separate intellect is not the same as the agent intellect but rather the speculative intellect is separate from matter and its concomitants." — "Separatus intellectus non est idem quod agens intellectus; sed intellectus speculativus est separatus a materia et appendiis materiae." Albert goes on to cite the same text of Averroes he had cited earlier, now indicating that the possible intellect is affected by the formal actualizing character of the power called agent intellect and also by the intelligible species received into it.

(1.11) 438.64-439.4: "For Averroes says in [his] Commentary on the Third Book of De Anima that, when all the theoretical intelligibles are in us in potency, then the agent [intellect] is united with us in potency, because it is not united with us except through them. And when they are existing in us in act, then it too is united with us in act. From this we take it that the intellect is in potency to the species of the agent [intellect] and to the intelligible species. In this way it is in potency to two species at once." — "Dicit enim Averroes super tertium de anima quod, quando omnia speculative fuerint in nobis existentia in potentia, tunc et agens continuatur nobis in potentia, quia non continuatur nobis nisi per illa; et cum fuerint existentia in

31 See (1.6) above.
32 LCDA Latin, 500; English, 399.
nobis in actu, tunc et ipse continuatur nobis in actu. Ex hoc accipitur quod intellectus est in potentia ad speciem agentis et ad speciem intelligibilis, et ita est in potentia ad duas species simul." My emphasis. To this Albert responds at 439.31-37: „Dicendum quod suscipit speciem agentis et speciem intelligibilis, sed illae duae species non sunt nisi actus unus. Species enim agentis est actus speciei intelligibilis, sicut lux actus coloris [...].“ — „It should be said that it receives the species of the agent and the intelligible species, but those two species are only one act. For the species of the agent is the act of the intelligible species, as light is the act of color [...].“ This theoretical or speculative intellect is the power of the possible intellect when we are in the state of knowing.

(2) What is essentially the foundation of the doctrine of Aquinas on the abstraction and apprehension of the species intelligibilis is also spelled out clearly by Albert.

(2.1) 435.47-69: „Solution: It should be said that all the intelligibles are denuded of matter and the concomitants of matter or stripped per se, and on account of this the theoretical intellect is the species of all the intelligibles and the same in act with them. But act has a twofold relation. One is to the thing of which it is the act, and in this way it is the ratio of the thing and a quiddity having no difference from it. For if it were to have a difference according to that in which it differs, the thing known would not be cognized in virtue of that. For this reason the species which is in the soul — which is the principle of understanding the whole thing and the whole being of the thing — is taken completely as the act of the whole thing. Since it is in the intellect in this way, because it is in this way the principle of understanding, knowledge is the thing known in act and the theoretical intellect [is] the theoretical [intelligible] in act. It has another comparison to that in which it is as in a subject and in this way it is not the principle of understanding but rather the principle of being. Because there is in the intellect an accidental likeness, it causes in it accidental being; because there is a natural form in the thing, it makes in it natural being. Noting this the Philosopher says that knowledge in some way is the thing known and in another passage he says that intellect is the same in act as that which is understood, but the being is different. And likewise sense is the same in act as the sensible but its being is different, as we explained above.“ — „Solutio: Dicendum quod omnia intelligibilia denudata sunt a materia et appendicitis materiae vel nuda per seipsa, et propter hoc intellectus speculative species omnium intelligibilium et idem actu cum omnibus. Sed actus duplicem habet comparationem. Unam ad rem cuinus est actus, et sic est ratio rei et quiditas nullam habens differentiam ab ipsa. Si enim haberet differentiam secundum illud in quo differt, non cognosceretur per ipsum res scita; et ideo species quae est in anima, quae est principium intelligendi totam rem et totum esse rei,
omnino accipitur ut actus rei totius, et cum sic sit in intellectu, eo quod principium sic sit intelligendi, est scientia res scita in actu, et intellectus specularius specularium in actu. Aliam habet comparationem ad id in quo est ut in subiecto, et sic non est princiium intelligendi, sed principium esse; et quia in intellectu est similitudo accidentalis, causae in ipso esse accidentalis; quia vero in re est forma naturalis, facit in ipsa esse naturale. Et hoc attendens Philosophus dicit quod scientia modo quodam est res scita, et in alio loco dicit quod intellectus est idem actu cum eo quod intelligentur, sed esse est aliud; et similibet sensus cum sensibili est idem actu, sed esse est aliud, sicut supra exposuimus."

This notion of the content but not the mode of being of the thing as what is grasped Albert further emphasizes later at 446.9-11 when he writes the following: "The definition which is through the principles of knowing is given in virtue of forms abstracted from the particular which are the genus and difference."

"Diffinitio autem quae est per principia cognoscendi, datur per formas abstractas a particulari, quae sunt genus et differentia."

(2.2) According to Averroes the abstracted intelligibles of human knowing (intelligibles in actu) or, in the phraseology of Albert and Thomas, the species intelligibles, are found in the separate Material Intellect and also in the disposition of the theoretical intellect belonging to the perishable human soul. In fact, for Avicenna — since he denies intellectual memory to the individual human rational soul — those intelligibles must be available in the separate Agent Intellect. This issue Albert addresses at 439 sqq. in the article, "Whether the disposition of the theoretical intellect remains in it after apprehension or in some memory which is part of the rational soul, or does not at all remain in the rational soul."

"Utrum habitus intellectus speculativi post considerationem manet in ipso, vel in memoria aliqua quae sit pars animae rationalis, vel omnino non manet in anima rationali."

He explains that for Avicenna the apprehensive power of the soul is not the same as the retentive power. For him, says Albert, the intelligible species is not retained in the possible intellect because it is an apprehensive power. He then writes at 442.5-17, "We, however, say that it remains in the possible intellect, because Aristotle expressly says that memory and recollection have their own acts of apprehension. Hence, it is false that to apprehend is not characteristic of the retentive part. For in the case of bodily powers one power receives while another retains, for it is characteristic of dampness to receive well and of dryness to retain well. But in the intellectual power it belongs to the same power to receive and to retain. This is because the acts of opposites there are not opposed since they are separate things [themselves] opposite to matter and the potency of acting and being acted upon. Hence, the possible intellect receives the forms and intelligibles and retains...

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33 See note 8.
them." – "Nos autem dicimus quod manet in intellectu possibili, quod Aristoteles expresse dicat quod memoria et reminiscencia habit suos actus apprehensionis. Unde falsum est quod thesauri non sit apprehendere. In virtutibus enim corporalibus alterius quidem virtutis est recipere et alterius retinere; humidi enim est bene recipere, et sici bene retinere. Sed in intellectuali virtute eiusmodem virtutis est recipere et retinere, eo quod oppositorum actus ibi non sunt oppositi, cum sint separata opposita a materia et potentia agendi et patiendi. Unde intellectus possibilis recipit formas intelligibilium et retinet eas."

It is quite clear in this work that Albert was very familiar with the abstractionism of Avicenna. But Albert rejected the common view attributed to Avicenna that the Agent Intellect is a separate substance and that human efforts with bodily external and internal sense powers were only a preparation for the reception of emanated intelligibles from the Agent Intellect. Albert also rejects the actual teaching of Averroes who held the Agent Intellect to be a separate intellectual substance in its own right. Still, Albert – who understands this to be a power of the individual human soul – follows Averroes in finding for it only the role minimally required for the completion of Aristotle’s account: the agent intellect is what provides the power for the abstraction or separation of the content intelligible in potency in the images or phantasms derived from sensory experience of the world. But Albert misread Averroes likely because of the novelty of Averroes’s doctrine of the separate and shared Material Intellect and also because Albert did not understand the intent of Averroes’s repetition of the phraseology of ‚in the soul’ and ‚in us’ used to describe the role of the separate Agent Intellect and separate Material Intellect in relation to the human soul. The argument from intrinsic formal cause set forth by Averroes and later used by Aquinas against Averroes, required for Averroes that the separate intellects – so essential to the natures of human beings as animals that are rational – be formally ‚in the soul’ for human intellectual understanding. But in the De homine Albert holds that the agent intellect and the possible (material) intellect are not separate substances but rather immaterial powers of the soul separate from body, as the text at 411.51 quoted above indicates clearly with the phrase in nobis. 35

34 See Taylor, Intellect as Intrinsic Formal Cause, Lc. (note 27).
35 It is worth noting that elsewhere Albert works to bring together the human agent intellect and the Augustinian notion of the „inner teacher”. For discussion of this, see M. Führer, Albert the Great and Mystical Epistemology, in: I.M. Resnick (ed.), A Companion to Albert the Great, Theology, Philosophy, and the Sciences, Leiden/Boston 2013, 137-161. Note, however, that the author’s statement regarding the separate Agent Intellect that Averroes „identified it with God” at p. 146 is incorrect.
Albert, working closely with the texts of Avicenna and Averroes, constructs in the *De homine* what is remarkably similar to, if not the original source of, the doctrine of intelligible species later developed by Thomas in the latter’s *Commentary on the Sentences* at In 2 Sent d.17, Q.2, A.1. But Albert was able to do so only by his systematic misreading of the complicated and challenging texts and arguments of Averroes. Some 8–10 years later Thomas understood correctly the doctrines of the separate intellects set forth by Averroes and directly combatted the teachings of Averroes as well as those of Avicenna regarding their consequences for human knowing through his own reexamination of their texts. Though surely following the lead of Albert, Thomas went back to the Arabic translations and rethought them for himself in the development of his own teaching. Both made valuable use of the teachings of Averroes and substituted in place of what they read as an Avicennian emanation the account of Averroes which asserted that the content of intellectual understanding is garnered from the experience of the world without any reference to preexisting intelligibles in act in the Agent Intellect.

The preliminary account of the teachings of Albert and Thomas on human intellectual thought is another witness to the importance of the classical rationalist Arabic philosophical tradition to the development of philosophy and theology in the Medieval Latin Christian tradition.

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36 Miller examines several of the texts reconsidered in the present article and concludes that “[The basic position of Aquinas] is in no way compatible with the basic position of his master, St. Albert [...] . Starting from basic positions so diametrically opposed, the intrinsic logic of philosophical ideas will never permit St. Albert and St. Thomas to maintain the same position on many dependent problems such as the nature of the agent and possible intellects, the proper object of the intellect, abstraction, illumination, the soul’s knowledge of itself, of Angels and of God, immortality.” Miller, *Averroes’ Influence on St. Albert*, L.c. (note 3), 69-70. This is a bit strong though Miller is correct that the accounts of Aquinas and his teacher differ a great deal on the nature of the soul and its intellectual powers. Still, it remains the case that the account of the human soul and its powers which Albert crafted in his early *De homine* on the basis of his mistaken reading of Averroes proved to be foundational for that of the early Aquinas in ways that persisted through the works of Aquinas.