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AVERROES' EPISTEMOLOGY AND ITS CRITIQUE BY AQUINAS

Richard C. Taylor

The critique by Thomas Aquinas of the philosophical views of **Averroes** on the nature of human beings and on the nature of human rational powers is well-known and **frequently** confirmed as devastating to the doctrines of Aquinas's Andalusian adversary.¹ The doctrine attacked is found in Averroes' mature thought in the *Long Commentary on the De Anima* which was translated in Latin in the early thirteenth century and which provided the Latin West with its first line-by-line analytical study of the psychology of Aristotle. There **Averroes** holds for the existence of two separate intellectual substances which make human rational activity possible.* The Agent Intellect, **familiar** to

¹ This view is what we find in the interpretive essays accompanying a recent translation of the *De Unitate Intellectus* by Ralph **McInerney**. See *Aquinas Against the Averroists: On There Being Only One Intellect* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993) 188-211.

² **Alfred L. Ivry** holds that Active Intellect and Material Intellect are "two *states* of the same substance" in "La Logique de la science de l'âme. Etude sur la *méthode* dans le Commentaire d'Averroès," in *Penser avec Aristote* (Paris: Editions **Erès**, 1991) 687-700. See 693. Davidson maintains that they are two distinct substances in the account in the *Long Commentary on the De Anima*. See Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 292-3; 332-333. The key text is *Averrois Cordubensis Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis De Anima Libros*, ed. F. Stuart Crawford (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America,

pp. 147-177.

Arabic and Latin readers who had studied the psychology of Avicenna and his doctrine of the *Dator formarum*, “Giver of Forms,” plays the role of active agent in the realization of intellectual thinking. The possible or Material Intellect, equally separate in existence, is for Averroes that in which actual understanding of intellectual forms comes to be realized. Understanding on the part of particular individuals is achieved only through an intimate albeit operational presence of this Material Intellect in the soul of an individual human being. Since this doctrine appears to entail the denial that individual human beings have intellectual understanding (*hic homo intelligit*), it was the key target of the extraordinary textual and philosophical attack upon the teachings of Averroes found in the *De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averroistas* of Aquinas.³ Nevertheless, even after examination of the full range of Aquinas’s critique of

1953) 450-1. I am in accord with Davidson that the *Long Commentary on the De Anima* teaches that there are two intellects existing as separate substantial entities.

³ “Aucune genre littéraire médiévale n’offre le type de lecture pratiqué ici par Thomas. S’il y a quelque chose comme un ‘sujet double’ c’est bien le double sujet du geste interprétatif qu’il accomplit ici: à la fois *reconstruction* de la pensée d’Aristote et *déconstruction* de l’exégèse averroïste...L’exégèse polémique pratiquée par Thomas dans le *De unitate* met cet opuscule à part dans son œuvre d’interprète. Cette machine de guerre contre l’averroïsme est une machine textuelle: c’est le texte même d’Aristote qui, re-lu, c’est-à-dire re-lié, dénonce la proposition de lecture averroïste, c’est lui qui, dans son enchaînement, some déroulé, fonctionne, avec un coup d’écart, comme la meilleure réponse possible aux errements du Commentateur.” Alain de Libera in his introduction to his translation of Aquinas in *Thomas d’Aquin. L’Unité de l’Intellect Contre les Averroïstes* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1994) 72.

Averroes,⁴ it is more than a little difficult to believe that *many* of his rather obvious criticisms could properly represent sound refutations of the teachings of Averroes, a philosopher acclaimed in Medieval Jewish and Christian intellectual circles for his intellectual brilliance and **insight**⁵ and widely recognized by Arabic reading intellectuals of the Islamic world today as a role model of intellectual and scientific **excellence.**⁶ Something is amiss in this picture.

⁴ See Edward P. Mahoney, "Aquinas's Critique of Averroes' Doctrine of the Unity of the Intellect," in *Thomas Aquinas and his Legacy*, ed. David M. Gallagher (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994) 83-106, for a descriptive account of Aquinas' critiques of **Averroes** throughout his *Opera*.

⁵ In his own Islamic cultural context **Averroes** was recognized as brilliant and also by some as a significant threat to religious orthodoxy. Although he was a **Qādi**, a religious judge, he was at one point banished and his books were ordered burned. Rehabilitated, he apparently died separated from his work and writings. For an account of the life of **Averroes** and the historical, political and cultural context of his work, see Dominique Urvoý, *Ibn Rushd, Averroes*, tr. Olivia Stewart. (London and New York: Routledge, 1991). Also see Dominique Urvoý, *Averroès. Les ambitions d'un intellectuel musulman* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998) and Roger Amaldez, *Averroès. Un rationaliste en Islam* (Paris: Editions **Balland**, 1998).

⁶ For a study of the ways in which the thought of **Averroes** has been interpreted and used in modern times to further the cause of intellectual advancement, see Anke von Ktigelgen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne. Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus im Islam* (Leiden, New York, Cologne: 1994). Also see many of the essays in *Averroès and the Enlightenment*, Mourad Wahba and Mona Abousenna, eds. (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996).

I. Scholars on Aquinas's Critique of Averroes

In 1981, **Bernardo** Carlos Bazan, working only from the Latin tradition, gave what is one of the most thoughtful and carefully argued accounts of the doctrines of **Averroes** and their critique by Aquinas. He explained that many of the criticisms leveled by Aquinas are not in fact based on a correct understanding of positions held by Averroes. "The real problem begins when we perceive that Saint Thomas identifies the Averroistic notion of the *intellectum speculativum* with his own notion of the *species intelligibilis*. This identification is already present in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, and it is reaffirmed in all the later works." Since Averroes' notion of the *intellectum speculativum* is not the equivalent of the *species intelligibilis* in the thought of Aquinas, many arguments against Averroes and founded on Aquinas' notion of the *species intelligibilis* may indeed be cogent, although they are not devastating against the thought of Averroes himself.⁸ Nevertheless, Bazan concluded that **Averroes**

⁷ **Bernardo** Carlos Bazan, "Intellectum Speculativum: Averroes, Thomas Aquinas, and Siger of Brabant on the Intelligible Object," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981) 432 Cf. *ST* 1.76.1c.

⁸ This is discussed below at 178ff. The speculative intelligibles in the thought of **Averroes** differ from the intelligible species in the thought of Aquinas. The former are the unique intelligibles in act existing in the separate Material Intellect where they are the eternally existing referents of our scientific, that is, universal terms. They are there as consequences of abstraction of intelligibles from denuded intentions presented before the Agent Intellect and impressed upon the receptive Material Intellect. In the Material Intellect they are not separate things but rather actualizations of that Intellect's noetic potency. For **Averroes** both

had in fact been successfully refuted by Aquinas on the matter of whether *hic homo intelligit*, that is, whether thinking is something done by each individual human being: "The Arab Master is defeated on the ground that he himself had chosen: since thought in act takes place only to the extent that the intelligible form is rendered intelligible in act, and since we have this same form only in potency, it cannot be said that we take part in the act of thinking."⁹ But Bazán's analysis was shown to be unsound by Deborah Black in a carefully reasoned account of the thought of Averroes and the thought of Aquinas in 1993.¹⁰ She directly showed the inadequacy of the argument of Aquinas and also significant difficulties in the epistemological teachings of Aquinas himself," and indirectly also gave some indication of the considerable extent of Aquinas' dependence on Averroes' psychological teachings. Yet the importance of Black's article has not been sufficiently appreciated, perhaps in part because of the difficulty of Averroes' complex and , somewhat unfamiliar philosophical psychology.

the separate Agent Intellect and the separate Material Intellect are eternal such that the Material Intellect is eternally actualized by the light of the Agent Intellect. In Aquinas the intelligible species are also described as **intelligibles** in act but these exist in each human intellect as a consequence of intellectual abstraction from phantasms. In contrast to the speculative intelligibles, the intelligible species exist in a plurality of distinct created human intellects for Aquinas.

⁹ Bazan 435.

¹⁰ Deborah Black, "Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Aquinas's Critique of Averroes' Psychology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31(1993) 349-385.

¹¹ See Black "Consciousness" 366-379, where she provides "A Response on Behalf of Aver-roes."

My purpose here is to provide a short account of some of Averroes' fundamental epistemological doctrines on the human rational soul, with a view to explaining important misunderstandings of his doctrine. I will consider two of the critical responses to the philosophical positions of Averroes made by Thomas Aquinas, as expounded in a 1996 article by Lawrence Dewan, O.P.¹² What becomes evident as a consequence of his account is a commonplace in the study of the history of philosophy: Great minds seldom make great mistakes in argumentation and seldom are deserving of the disdain their critics heap upon them. Rather, differing understandings of key notions, foundational principles, and starting points are more frequently the reasons for what develop into doctrinal differences of substantial and even monumental import. In the case of Averroes and Aquinas, their differences about the rational soul are great, but these are not the consequences of faulty logic or poor argumentation. They result from their chosen principles in a logical and coherent way, even in the case of Averroes' much criticized teachings of the separate and unique Material Intellect which is shared by all human beings. What is needed first, then, is an examination of fundamental notions, principles and starting points for the thought of Averroes on this topic.

¹² Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "St. Albert, St. Thomas, and Knowledge," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 70 (1996) 121-135. Fr. Dewan's article is used here since it presents in a concise and valuable way some of the central issues at stake in the adversarial confrontation of the texts of Averroes by Aquinas.

II. Averroes' Mature Epistemology

For Averroes, like Aristotle, all knowledge begins with sense perception via the five external senses. Causally affected by the sensible object in accord with potentiality existing in the sense organ, the sense is actualized as a subject for the existence of the sensible form (or intention) in act. The object which causally affects the sense has its sensible form in actuality in the world, where it is sensible not in act but in potency. This external sensible form existing in the world is the basis for the truth and reality of the sensible intention existing in actuality in the **senses**.¹³ The results of sensation are reported to the common sense, which organizes sensations of both special and common sensibles into a sensible image of the externally existing object. The four internal sense powers--common sense, imagination, the cogitative power, and memory--taken together are the imaginative power as concerned with images or the rational power as constituting the terrestrial psychological elements for rationality in humanbeings. Nevertheless, this use of the term 'rational power' is not precise and is not to be taken literally, as we shall see. The most important of these four powers for our present purposes is the cogitative power.

In his *Long Commentary* Averroes holds that the cogitative power is a bodily power which is

¹³ That the model for understanding Averroes' doctrine of the double-subject of intellection was sense perception is insightfully recognized by Michael Blaustein, *Averroes on Imagination and the Intellect* (Am Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1984) 60ff. Also see Black's remarks in "Consciousness" 363-364.

concerned with individual intentions. Working with images consequent upon sense perception, this individual power of soul yields individual intentions by a process of distinction and **discernment**.¹⁴ This activity of distinction, discernment, and discrimination on the part of cogitation is only possible thanks to the prior role of the power of imagination. “* The cogitative power, as a particular power existing in a particular body, that is, insofar as it is itself a ‘this,’ cannot form universal intentions infinite in their possible extension in the world. That is something which can only be done by a power which is not in a body, as **Averroes** sees it. The cogitative power nevertheless seems to be able to

¹⁴ “But it was already explained in Sense *and Sensibilia* that such is the order of those powers in the brain through a demonstration giving the being and the cause. But that does not contradict what was said here. For the cogitative power according to Aristotle is an individual distinguishing power because it discerns things only in an individual way, not in a universal way. For it was explained there that the cogitative power is only a power which distinguishes the intention of a sensible thing from its imagined image. That power is one which is such that its relation to those two intentions, to the image of the thing and to the intention of its image, is just as the relation of the common sense to the intentions of the five senses. The cogitative power, therefore, is of the genus of the powers existing in bodies. Aristotle explicitly said this in that book, when he placed the individual distinguishing powers in four orders. In the first he placed the common sense, next the imaginative power, next the cogitative power, and afterwards the power of memory. He made the power of memory the more spiritual, then the cogitative, then the imaginative, and last the sensible.” *Commentarium Magnum* 415-16. Only fragments of the Arabic original of this work are extant. See A. Ben Chahida in “Iktishāf al-naṣṣ al-‘arabi li-ahamm ajzā’ al-sharḥ al-kabir li-*kitāb al-nafs* ta’lif Abi al-Walid ibn Rushd,” *Al-Ḥayāt al-Thaqāfiyya* 35 (1985) 14-48.

¹⁵ *Commentarium Magnum* 178.

disengage within itself the particular intelligible form which is responsible for the existence of the individual in the world. It does so when it considers the form of the particular being by **prescinding** from the individual sensible characteristics revealed by the internal and external senses by way of the proper and common sensibles. While it is unable to **prescind** fully from the object and its nature and characteristics as an individual, the cogitative power sets its focus upon the individual intention, the individual form of the particular thing in the **world**.¹⁶ The result of its activity, the grasp of the form of the individual and of the particular form and intelligibility constituting the existing essence of this individual, is what the cogitative power then deposits in **memory**.¹⁷ What we find, then, in the faculty of memory is not a universal notion or a grasp of the essence as universal, but rather an individual intention, one of the particular human being, e.g., Zayd or Socrates, as an intention of his

¹⁶ "the intention of this individual man and the intention of this individual horse." *Commentarium Magnum* 225.47-48.

¹⁷ "That individual intention is what the cogitative power distinguishes from the imagined form. The cogitative power extracts it from the things which were adjoined to it from among those common and proper sensibles and deposits it [*ea/eam* var.] in the faculty of memory. This same [intention] is what the imaginative power grasps, but the imaginative power grasps it as conjoined to sensibles, although the grasp [of memory] is more spiritual, as has been determined elsewhere." *Commentarium Magnum* 225-226. I read "reponit earn" with Crawford's manuscripts BG. Cogitation here is deemed less spiritual than memory because it does not retain in itself the denuded individual intention but rather conveys to memory what it worked to produce, the most spiritual and least sensible individual intention. See Deborah Black, "Memory, Individuals, and the Past in Averroes' Psychology," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 5 (1996) 161-187.

individual form by which this particular person exists in the world. This intelligible, however, is still an intelligible in potency, since it remains the intention of an individual and does not exist in an intellect where it could be an intelligible in act.

Other animals have imagination but “none has cogitation because none has reason.”“* While only rational animals have the cogitative power, this power is not in its own right a rational one.¹⁹ It is a power involving a sort of reasoning insofar as it is involved in discerning and distinguishing singular intentions from sensibles and yet it is still a power of a generable and corruptible corporeal subject. While the cogitative power can be called the passible intellect, it is only through its intimate and natural affiliation and collaboration with separate intellect that it can be described as ‘rational’ and labeled ‘intellect.’²⁰ Of the four senses of the term intellect which he finds in Aristotle—the Material Intellect, the intellect *in habitu*,

¹⁸ *Commentarium Magnum* 530.

¹⁹ The celestial bodies are animated by immaterial intellectual souls and so are equivocally rational animals. See *Commentarium Magnum* 172-173, 179; *Averroes Tafsir mā ba’d al-Ṭabī’ah*, ed. M. Bouyges (Beirut: 1948) 1600; Arthur Hyman, *Averroes’ De Substantia Orbis. Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text with English Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge, MA and Jerusalem: The Medieval Academy of America and the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1986); Gerhard Endress, “Averroes’ *De Caelo*, Ibn Rushd’s Cosmology in his Commentaries on Aristotle’s *On the Heavens*,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 6 (1995) 9-49. Also, David B. Twetten, “Averroes on the Prime Mover Proved in the Physics,” *Viator. Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 26 (1995) 107-134; Barry Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985).

²⁰ See *Commentarium Magnum* 90, 449.

Agent Intellect, and imagination-the cogitative power is identified with imagination and thereby classified as intellect in a derivative way and as **rational**.²¹

The cogitative power which exists as a particular power in each human being does not have in itself the ability to grasp intelligibles as such, that is, as universals distinct from individuals whose intelligible form is the cause of their being and formal structure or essence. The cogitative and memorative powers are able to attain only bare individual intentions, not **intelligibles *qua* intelligibles**. While external things in their real natures as particulars, as existing members of species and thereby as potential intelligibles, affect the senses and give rise to images in imagination, more is required for the transformation of what is merely potentially intelligible into what is actually intelligible. Intelligibles in act require a mind in order to exist as intelligibles in act, for it is only in the separate Material Intellect that they can exist without particularization. While actively involved as an integral part in the process of **transforming** potential intelligibles into actual intelligibles, the rational soul also has a passive role as somehow receptive or aware of immaterial **intelligibles**.²² Now the assertion that we human beings do in fact have knowledge in the sense of a grasp of intelligibles and an understanding of universals, results in the need for an Active or Agent Intellect which plays a causal role in the bringing about knowledge of intelligibles, by illuminating the individual intentions provided by the cogitative power. This activity of forming and grasping the intelligibles from imagined

²¹ *Commentarium Magnum* 452.

²² *Commentarium Magnum* 384-385.

intentions Averroes calls “conceptualization by the intellect,” *formatio* or *ymaginatio per intellectum*, that is, *taṣawwur bi-l-‘aql*. Through this activity intelligibles come to exist in act in **intellect**.²³ As a power which is physically located in the brain, the generable and corruptible cogitative **power**²⁴ is ontologically other than the Agent Intellect and other than the Material Intellect. Nevertheless, “the Material Intellect understands nothing without the passible **intellect**,”²⁵ that is, without the cogitative power resident in individual human beings. For only with the aid of the cogitative power, and its use of the other powers of the soul, does the Material Intellect grasp intelligibles which exist in the world as intelligibles in potency and in the Material Intellect as intelhgibles in act.²⁶

In spite of a doctrine of intelligibles existing in act as intelhgibles only in the separate Material Intellect, **Averroes** considers himself to be fully in accord with the Aristotelian notion that knowledge is founded in sense perception and derives its content **from** that sense perception. This is in contrast to Avicenna who holds intelligible forms are emanated from the separate Agent Intellect to individual rational souls which are themselves intellectual and able to exist

²³ See, e.g., *Commentarium Magnum* 380ff. and 384-385. *ymaginatio per intellectum* occurs just once (6) and appears to be an early style of rendering the Arabic later abandoned in favor of *formatio per intellectum*.

²⁴ *Commentarium Magnum* 476-477.

²⁵ “intellectus materialis nichil intelligit sine intellectu passibili.” *Commentarium Magnum* 451.

²⁶ Cf. Helmut Gätje, “Die ‘inneren Sinne’ bei Averroes,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 115 (1965) 255-293, esp. 273-274.

independent of the body.²⁷ Averroes does indeed hold for a significant role on the part of the Agent Intellect, but we are able to have knowledge only when the Material Intellect has come to have the intelligible forms of worldly things realized in it because “[t]he Material Intellect is what is in potency all the intentions of universal material forms.”²⁸ The role of the Material Intellect is to receive universal forms in its activity of discerning and knowing intentions, which in that way become intelligible in act—the universal forms. But as we have seen, what is received into a particular existing entity is itself particularized when it is received into the particular individual. What is a body or a power of a body is a ‘this’ and cannot receive universal forms without transforming them into particular cognitions which are intelligibles in potency, not intelligibles in act.²⁹ From this it follows that the Material Intellect in which the intelligibles in act exist cannot itself be a particular, a ‘this,’ since it must contain intelligibles in act.

The sense of non-particularity (or non-‘this’-ness) belonging to the Material Intellect is based on two factors: its nature as an intellect and its nature as the sole intellect which has the forms of material objects as its content. The intelligibles of worldly entities in it are not objects of understanding for the other intellects, only for the Material Intellect which has access to worldly intelligibles in potency via the

²⁷ Davidson 94-95.

²⁸ “[I]ntellectus materialis est illud quod est in potentia omnes intentiones formarum materialium universalium.” *Commentarium Magnum* 187.

²⁹ *Commentarium Magnum* 387-388.

cogitative powers of individual human beings. The Material Intellect, like all the other separate intellects existing without matter, is the unique member of its species. The intelligibles in act in it are not identical with those in other separate intellects, because the content of a separate intellect is identical with its activity. What each intellect knows is the actuality of intelligibles in act in itself insofar as each is an intellect which is self-thinking thought in accord with the Aristotelian account in *Metaphysics* Λ.³⁰ Since there is an identity of knower and known in the separate intellects, the intelligible content of one separate intellect -what it knows-cannot be identical with the **intelligible** content of another separate intellect, for in that case there would not be two intellects but rather only **one**.³¹ The sense of non-particularity relevant here is that of the Material Intellect's uniqueness in its species, which is responsible for its nature as what we might call an individual, not some other characteristic which might distinguish it such as matter. It is not 'a this' in the sense that it is a particular individual distinguished from other members of its species. Consequently, both as a separate intellect and as the unique intellect in which worldly intelligibles come to exist in act, the Material Intellect is distinct **from** other intellects and from things of the material world.

Since intentions in the human cogitative and memorative powers are only intelligibles in potency because they are based on perceptions of particulars and

³⁰ *Metaphysics* 12.9 (1074b33-35).

³¹ Cf. Kogan 237; Taylor, "Averroes on Psychology and the Principles of Metaphysics," forthcoming in *The Journal of the History of Philosophy*.

are in particular human beings, intelligibles in potency become intelligibles in act which are universals only when they exist in a separate intellect. That separate intellect, the Material Intellect, is one for all human beings as a **thesaurus**³² of the actual intelligibles used in the universal propositions of science with which particular human beings are **concerned**.³³ This metaphysical account of intellect and intelligible requires that the thoughts in individual human beings be different from the intelligibles themselves: these 'thoughts' or 'cogitations' in individuals are not the intelligibles but refer to the **intelligibles**.³⁴ The intelligibles exist only in an operational way in the individual human rational power, that is, in the particular cogitative or imaginative power existing in each individual; they cannot be ontologically present **there**.³⁵ The intelligibles in individual human beings

³² Themistius, In *Libros Aristotelis De Anima Paraphrasis*, ed. R. Heinze, in *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (Berlin: 1899) 5: 99.20. Tr: *Themistius, On Aristotle's On the Soul*, Robert B. Todd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) 123. Cf. *An Arabic Translation of Themistius' Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, ed. M. C. Lyons (Columbia, South Carolina, and Oxford, England: 1973) 180.2.

³³ "[I]ndividual men tap into the Material Intellect's thought of the active intellect by developing their own intellects *in habitu*, by acquiring a complete corpus of intelligible thoughts." Davidson 332. Cf. R. Taylor, "Herbert A. Davidson's *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*. A Critical Review," *The Journal of Neoplatonic Studies* 5 (1996) 89-105.

³⁴ "Through images in the imaginative faculty, the soul becomes conscious of intelligible thoughts. Consequently, although men share a common Material Intellect, each still owns his personal individual thoughts, and thoughts are not shared." Davidson 290.

³⁵ On operational presence, see Arthur Hyman, "Aristotle's Theory of Intellect and Its Interpretation by Averroes," in *Studies in*

constitute the speculative intellect (*intellectus speculativus*) and are the speculative intelligibles (*intellecta speculativa*). These intelligibles have a dual existence based on the nature of their subject. They exist in the separate Material Intellect as intelligibles in act existing eternally, and in the generable and corruptible human rational power they exist **corruptibly**.³⁶ On analogy with sense perception, where sensibles exist both in the sense power of the **perceiver** and in the objects sensed, the denuded individual intention, e.g. the form of Socrates, and all the other denuded individual intentions we study as we try to come to conceptualize “human being,” have a causal role in constituting the intelligible in act. As causes, they are the subjects or bases for the truth expressed in the intelligible in act. But where does the intelligible in act exist? The Material Intellect is the subject in which “conceptualization by intellect” takes place and where the abstracted or separated intention, now no longer referring to Socrates, Zayd or other individuals, exists as a universal, that is, as an intelligible in act. For the intelligibles in act *to* exist in a plurality of individuals is precluded by the nature of the intelligible in act, since reception into a ‘this’ would destroy its universality and reception into a plurality of subjects would destroy the unity required for science, intersubjectivity, and rational discourse in general.

Once present in individual human beings as their ‘thoughts’ or cogitations, that is, as images which refer to intelligibles in act in the Material Intellect,

Aristotle, ed. Dominic J. O’Meara (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981) 161-191, esp. 190.

³⁶ *Commentarium Magnum* 399-401; 404-7.

intelligibles are available to the cogitative power which wills and together with desire is responsible for human action. Knowledge, which is the operational grasp of the intelligibles in act, is the central factor in deliberating about future actions. Now in a different role, the cogitative power produces images in the absence of a sensation so that deliberation can take place in a concrete way, that is, as if a sensed object were present.³⁷ Since deliberation concerns particular actions which are up to us, knowledge and its representation by the cogitative power play essential roles in the formation of moral character.³⁸ To a considerable extent, then, our natural collaboration with the Material Intellect in knowing plays a role in the development of moral life.

Before proceeding to the criticisms of Averroes by Aquinas, it is worth noting that the account Fr. Dewan gives in his recent article is in fact a reasonably accurate rendition of the key teachings of Averroes

³⁷ *Commentarium Magnum* 476.

³⁸ This role is also attributed to cogitation in his *Middle Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Averroes, *Aristotelis Opera Cum Averrois Commentariis* (Venetiis, Apud Iunctas: 1552; rpr. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1962) 3: 82G; 86 H-I. On Averroes' *Middle Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, see Jerzy B. Korolec, "Mittlerer Kommentar von Averroes zur Nikomachischen Ethik des Aristoteles," *Mediaevalia Philosophica Polonorum* 31 (1992) 61-188; L. V. Berman, "Excerpts from the Lost Arabic Original of Ibn Rushd's *Middle Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*," *Oriens* 20 (1967) 31-59; and "Ibn Rushd's *Middle Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* in Medieval Hebrew Literature," in *Multiple Averroes*, ed. J. Jolivet et alii (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1978) 287-321. On cogitation and its role in the formation of opinion (*estimatio* or *existimatio*), see *Commentarium Magnum* 530.

Aquinas attacks. The criticisms concern two central propositions of Aver-roes' thought highlighted by Fr. Dewan.

The first of these propositions is recounted in Fr. Dewan's paraphrase of the *De unitate intellectus* of Albert the Great. He writes:

The particular problem I wish to consider is this. The nature of the intellect can be judged from the sort of reception it gives to things. Now, in the intellect things are universal, that is, always and everywhere the same. Hence, this is the sort of *thing the* intellect is. It is in its own nature one and the same always and **everywhere**.³⁹

The intellect and what it contains are to be considered in accord with their metaphysical natures. What is received into the intellect must be received in accord with the nature and capacity of the intellect, as immaterial and as unindividuated, not made into a particular by the recipient into which it is received, for it is an intelligible in act which is present in intellect when we have knowledge, not an intelligible in potency,

The second proposition Fr. Dewan states in paraphrasing portions of the *De unitate intellectus* of Albert and the *De unitate intellectus* of Aquinas:

To put the matter somewhat differently, suppose one multiplies the intellect (that is, putting one in you and another in me). Then, one multiplies the intelligible species or form which is in the intellect. These forms will then be only potentially intelligible, and one will be obliged to consider what they have in common, that is, to

³⁹Dewan, "St. Albert" 122-123, paraphrasing Albert's *De unitate intellectus*, ed. Paul Simon (Cologne ed.) 17: 6.69-7.19.

come to the universal. If this too is viewed as having particular being in the intellects, one **finds** oneself in an infinite regress. Hence, one cannot multiply the intellect.⁴⁰

Moreover, a multiplicity of intellects entails a multiplicity of intelligibles in act in those intellects, so that each distinct intelligible kind known in each intellect will have its like in another intellect. But each cannot in fact be the unique intelligible in act which is the universal to which science refers; hence, each must be an intelligible in potency and the intelligible in act must be a third over and above those. In order to forestall an infinite regress in this reflection of the "Third Man Argument," it must be admitted that the intelligible in act exists in only one intellect.

These propositions are accurate in their portrayal of the thought of Averroes. The first Averroistic principle identified by **Fr. Dewan**, when put in Averroes' own terms, is that the intelligible in act is itself such that it cannot be received into a particular individual, material human being. If that were to happen, it would be received into a *this* and hence it would become an intelligible in potency, thereby forfeiting its nature as an intelligible in act.⁴¹ Averroes'

⁴⁰ **Dewan**, "St. Albert" 123, paraphrasing Albert, *De unitate intellectus* 17: 12.4-26; and Aquinas, *De unitate intellectus* (ed. Leonine) 42: 5.19-3 1. **Fr. Dewan** identifies the intelligibles in act ("form which is in the intellect") of **Averroes** with the "intelligible species" in spite of Mahoney's warning to the **contrary**. See **Dewan**, "St. Albert" 128 n.12, citing Mahoney, "Aquinas' Critique" 85. Mahoney's suggestion is correct. This is particularly evident in *ST* 1.76. lc.

⁴¹ "The Material Intellect is defined as that which is in potency all the intentions of universal material forms and is not any of the

second principle is that consideration of the intelligible in act as such shows that it must be one and cannot be many. The reason for this is that its existence in many different and ontologically separate intellects would mean that there exist many intelligibles in act, not one. But if that were the case, the unity of science and the very possibility of science itself would be compromised since there would not be the single and common

beings in act before it thinks [any of them]. Since that is the definition of the Material Intellect, it is evident that in its own case it differs from prime matter in this respect: it is in potency all the intentions of the universal material forms, while prime matter is in potency all those sensible forms, not something which knows or discerns. And the reason why that nature is something which discerns and knows [distinguens et cognoscens] while prime matter neither thinks nor discerns, is because prime matter receives different forms, namely individual and particular forms, while this [nature] receives universal forms. From this it is apparent that this nature is not 'a this', nor a body nor a power in a body. For, if this were so, then it would receive forms inasmuch as they are different and particular; and if this were so, then the forms existing in it would be intelligible in potency, and thus it would not discern the nature of the forms inasmuch as they are forms, as it is a disposition in individual forms, be they spiritual or corporeal. For this reason, if that nature which is called the intellect receives forms, it must receive forms by another mode of reception than that by which those matters receive the forms whose determination by matter is the determination of prime matter in them. And for this reason it is not necessary that it be of the genus of those matters in which the form is enclosed, nor that it be prime matter itself. Since, if this were so, then the reception in these would be of the same genus; for the diversity of the received nature causes the diversity of the nature of the recipient. This, therefore, moves Aristotle to set forth this nature which is other than the nature of matter, other than the nature of form, and other than the nature of the composite." *Commentarium Magnum* 387-388.

referent for each **intelligible**.⁴² For these reasons **Averroes** sees it to be necessary to hold that the Material Intellect's existence in a particular material individual 'is impossible and that as a consequence its existence in a single, separate immaterial entity must be affirmed. Any doctrine asserting a plurality of Material Intellects must be rejected. For **Averroes**, the required

⁴² "That way we posited the essence of the Material Intellect solves all the questions resulting from our holding that the intellect is one and many. For, if the thing understood in me and in you were one in every way, it would happen that, when I would know some intelligible, you would also know it, and many other impossible things. If we assert it to be many, then it would happen that the thing thought in me and in you would be one in species and two in individual [number]. In this way the thing understood will have a thing understood and so it proceeds into infinity. Thus, it will be impossible for a student to learn from a teacher unless the knowledge which is in the teacher is a power generating and creating the knowledge which is in the student, in the way in which one **fire** generates another fire similar to it in species, which is impossible. That what is known is the same in the teacher and the student in this way caused Plato to believe that learning is recollection. Since, then, we asserted that the intelligible thing which is in me and in you is many in subject insofar as it is true, namely the forms of the imagination, and one in the subject through which it is a being of the intellect (namely the Material Intellect), those questions are completely resolved." *Commentarium Magnum 411-412*. This text of **Averroes** is ultimately derived from Themistius, Heinze, 104.1-14; Lyons, 189.2-15; and Todd tr. 129. A more proximate source is Ibn **Bâjjah's** *Risâlat Ittiṣâl al-ʿaql bi-l-insân*, "Treatise on the Conjoining of the Intellect with Man." See Miguel **Asín Palacios**, "Tratado de Avempace sobre la Union del intelecto con el **Hombre**," *Al-Andalus* 7 (1942) 1-47, section 8, Arabic Text 14-15, Spanish translation, 32-33. Also see Vincent **Laguardère**. "L'Épître d'Ibn **Bâjja** sur la conjonction de l'intellect avec l'esprit **humain**," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 49 (1981) 175-196. See 187.

conclusion is that all human beings must share in one Material Intellect.

III. The Critique of Averroes by Aquinas

The responses of Aquinas to these two key principles of Averroes' thought are quite different from those of Albert because Aquinas rejects both principles, unlike Albert, who sees some cogency in **them**.⁴³ Of course, to reject an understanding of something is hardly the same as proving the incoherence of that understanding. In the case of the second of Averroes' principles, namely that the intelligible in act must be one and so there must be one Possible or Material Intellect for all human beings, Aquinas's attack fails to take the metaphysical toll of his adversary, contrary to what Aquinas believes. In the case of the first of Averroes' principles, namely that the intelligible in act can exist in only one intellect and, if it were to exist in a plurality of intellects, it would be particularized and no longer an intelligible in act, this entire understanding of the intelligible in act is rejected by Aquinas in a way which shows a radical difference in epistemology between the two philosophers.

Fr. Dewan rightly highlights the standpoint from which Aquinas formulates his response to the argument that there must be just one Material Intellect for all human beings. "One of the principles of the argument is that 'the understood' [*intellectum*] cannot be two in number and one in **notion**."⁴⁴ This should be taken as a principle concerning understanding in general, not just

⁴³ See Dewan "St. Albert" 123-127.

⁴⁴ Dewan, "St. Albert" 127.

human understanding. If there were something understood by human beings, angels and God, then it would follow that the intelligible understood by all three would be one and would exist in a single intellect as an intelligible in act. That single intellect would be the intellect for human beings, for angels, and for God. But in God His very nature and substance is not different from his intellect; therefore, as Fr. Dewan puts it, "Our intellect will be God."⁴⁵

The foregoing argument is simple and valid. To forestall a possible objection, Aquinas adds that one cannot say that the human species and also the different species of angels understand specifically different intelligibles, for what is at issue is not the way they understand but the object of their understanding. According to Fr. Dewan,

The object does not receive its species from the act and the power; rather, the converse is true. Accordingly, it simply must be admitted that 'the understood,' as regards some one thing, for example a stone, is one only, not merely for all men, but for all intelligences.⁴⁶

Two remarks in behalf of Averroes are in order here. First, Averroes does in fact hold what Aquinas says he cannot hold, and in this matter the argument against Averroes fails, because Averroes and Aquinas are not in agreement on the principle that the understood *qua* understood, or the intelligible *qua* intelligible, is an intelligible *for any intellect without distinction*. Averroes holds that the knowledge in each of the intellects is specific to that intellect. Knowledge

⁴⁵ Dewan, "St. Albert" 128.

⁴⁶ Dewan, "St. Albert" 128.

in the Material Intellect concerns its own understanding of other intellects, specifically the Agent Intellect, and of the intelligible content of material things in consequence of the Material Intellect's special relationship to human beings. Knowledge is attained when intelligibles in potency, in the form of denuded intentions, are presented before the light of the Agent Intellect and then realized as intelligibles in act in the Material Intellect. Just as sensation requires that there be **sensibles** in potency existing in the world for sensation to be realized in us, so too the Material Intellect requires that there be human beings in the world 'thinking' or **cogitating**.⁴⁷ There must always exist human beings in the world sensing, forming images, discerning intentions by their cogitative powers, and depositing into memory denuded intentions of individual instances of forms in the world. Successful study of these denuded intentions, as a result of repeated cogitative efforts in forming denuded intentions, is nothing more than the presentation of these intentions before the Material Intellect in the "light" of the Agent Intellect. The intelligible contents in the Material Intellect specifically concern the intellect itself and things of this world. For Averroes, in accord with the thought of Aristotle, the intelligible contents of each of the separate intellects are in fact *specific to that intellect* since each is self-thinking thought. They have no sense perception and they have no external illuminating force affecting them. The separate intellects do not think the natures of things

⁴⁷ *Commentarium Magnum* 408.

here such as **stones**.⁴⁸ Even in the case of God, he is properly speaking the First Form and the highest intellect and does not think the intelligibles of material things in any sort of direct way as does the Material Intellect. God too is self-thinking thought and thinks only his own intelligible essence. Hence, there are no intelligibles in act common to human beings, separate intellects and God in the thought of Averroes. Consequently, the argument of Aquinas against Averroes fails on this point because Aquinas and Averroes do not understand separate intellect and intelligibles in act in the same way.

Secondly, again in behalf of Averroes, in reference to the argument for the unity of the Material Intellect on the issue of grasping particulars such as a stone, and intelligibles such as the nature of the stone, Thomas and Averroes agree that in the thought of Aristotle what is understood is one and "is the very nature or quiddity of the **thing**."⁴⁹ Each thinker holds that the intellect's grasp of the intelligible begins seminally in sense perception of individuals in the world, that intelligibles come to exist in the intellect as a consequence of sense perception, and that the inner

⁴⁸ The separate intellects do have intellectual potency but that potency is only because they have it in their natures to desire to strive toward the perfect actuality of something outside their own essence, namely the perfection of being which is God. As such, they are not wholly self-contained, since their being as intellects contains reference to something outside themselves, to God who is the **final** cause of all. Only God is pure actuality: fa-inna-hu fi'lun maḥḍun, *Averroes Tafsīr mā ba'd al-Ṭabī'ah*, (ed. M. Bouyges) 1599.7. God is the First Form in the hierarchy of separate intelligences as well as "the intelligence moving the outermost sphere" of the universe. Davidson 256.

⁴⁹ Dewan, "St. Albert" 129

senses are intelligibles in potency. But, as is evident in Fr. **Dewan's** article, there is ambiguity lurking in this language. For Aquinas, according to Fr. **Dewan**, "'The understood,' when we understand the stone, is one, namely the very nature which is in the stone, and not the form in any intellect."⁵⁰ Of course, for something actually to be understood, it must exist in an intellect. Only in virtue of the activity of intellect does an intelligible in potency become an intelligible in act. Properly speaking, we do not have scientific knowledge or understanding of *this* stone *qua* particular. Rather, we are able to grasp this stone in two ways. In grasping the stone intelligibly we come to know its nature or essence in a way appropriate for scientific knowledge, not in the way we grasp the stone as an individual in the world. Scientific knowing properly speaking comes to pass when the intelligible in act is in the intellect as such, for to know the stone intelligibly is just to have its essence or nature present in the intellect as an intelligible in act. This doctrine is much the same for Aquinas and **Averroes** but two ambiguities impede our ability to recognize it as such.

First, the English verb 'to know' allows for both knowledge by acquaintance with a particular in the world and knowledge by intellectual grasp of the essence of a **thing**.⁵¹ Here we are concerned with the latter. Secondly, the Latin translation *intellecta*, rendering the Arabic *ma'qūlāt*, can be misread depending upon one's philosophical approach to the

⁵⁰ **Dewan**, "St. Albert" 129.

⁵¹ Cf. Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, first published in 1912), Chapter 5, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description."

text. For **Averroes** it is clear that the term refers to *the intelligibles in the intellect*, that is, to the intelligibles in act; and it is when we have a grasp of intelligibles that we are said to understand. Like Aquinas, **Averroes** places these in the intellect but understands that their ultimate source and their causal foundation as intelligibles in act are their natures as intelligibles in potency in particular individual entities of the world made intelligible by the abstractive power of the Agent Intellect. These intelligibles in act in the separate Material Intellect are the means by which we come to apprehend the essences of things in the world. On the question of just what are the objects of knowledge and what is in the intellect, Aquinas and Averroes are in agreement that the objects of knowledge are not material particulars as such but rather the essences of things of the world, and that these are known by us with intellectual understanding by way of intellect in which the intelligibles come to exist in act when we are knowing. There is no refutation of **Averroes** on this issue, although it remains the case that Aquinas and Averroes differ on the questions of the number of human intellects and of the natures of the intelligibles in act which exist in human **intellects**.⁵² This difference,

⁵² "St. Thomas, professing to agree with Aristotle, says that 'the understood,' which is one, is the very nature or quiddity of the thing; natural science, and the other sciences, are about things — *de rebus* — not about understood forms. If 'the understood' were not 'the very nature of the stone, which is in things,' but 'the form which is in the intellect, it would follow that I would **understand** not 'the thing which is the stone' but only 'the *intentio* which is abstracted from the stone.'" **Dewan** 129.

however, is a consequence, not the cause, of what most importantly separates the epistemological thought of these two philosophers, the nature of the intelligible in act.

For Aquinas, the intelligible in act is held to exist in a plurality of intellects when it has been extracted from matter. It is materiality which impedes intelligibility for Aquinas. For Averroes, however, while materiality indeed impedes intelligibility in act, it is also the case that the intelligible in act is understood as existing only in a single subject insofar as it is an intelligible in act. Aquinas **finds** it scandalous that Averroes denies *hic homo intelligit*, because it must be denied that the individual human being has her own intellect containing the intelligibles in act. Yet Averroes would not be disturbed by Aquinas attributing to him the view that the phantasms in the soul (for Averroes more precisely, the *intentiones distinctae*, the discerned intentions) are understood as the sources of understanding, and that Socrates is not himself understanding in the primary sense of that term. For Averroes, while understanding is an activity of intellect itself, not an activity of a bodily power, the human being can be said to understand to the extent that he is *involved* in bringing knowledge about and in recognizing that knowledge has been attained. The 'understanding' which comes to pass in the individual person is manifested in the ability to **classify** future experienced things in terms of knowledge already attained. The universal is not literally in the person; this is metaphysically impossible. But the ability to discern by means of what has come to pass in intellect is in the person. To that extent, I understand this

particular tree in front of me to be a coniferous tree and I do so by intellect. I do that **classifying** but I do it *by means of intellect*. What is in me to make this possible is not the universal itself, but a flexible image consequent upon grasping the form or intention as intelligible in act. Things which fit this flexible image are classified under the relevant notion and recognized, e.g. a coniferous tree. For Averroes, the falsity of this proposition, *hic homo intelligit*, with *intelligere* taken literally in its most proper sense must be admitted because of the impossibility of intelligibles in act existing in a 'this.' This all takes place only thanks to the natural relationship which human beings have with the separate Material Intellect.

IV. Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to provide a brief account of the epistemology of **Averroes** against the background of just two of the many important critical arguments set forth by Aquinas in the *De unitate intellectus* in refutation of key doctrines of the philosophical psychology of Averroes. But what Aquinas provided was not sufficient for the refutation he considered himself to have accomplished. On the two points discussed here, that refutation could be accomplished only if **Averroes** were to concede two premises assumed in the argument by Aquinas: first, an intelligible *qua* intelligible is an intelligible for any intellect without distinction, be it the intellect of a human being, of an angel or of God; secondly, it is absurd to hold understanding and intellect to be ontologically separate from the individual human being

of whom understanding and rationality are predicated, i.e. it is absurd to deny *hic homo intelligit*. Yet Averroes does not accept these premises and, consequently, is not refuted by Aquinas on premises which each thinker accepts.

The differences which separate **Averroes** and Aquinas on human nature and intellectual understanding do not allow the simple comparisons and easy analyses which are frequently given. **Averroes** took seriously the need for a unity of science which allows for human discourse and discussion referring to universal notions. In his view, the intelligibles in act had to exist actually in an intellect for there to be the kind of knowledge of universals which characterizes human understanding. Because of the particularity of each worldly individual, intelligibles in act could not exist in them without forfeiting the universality needed for discourse by all human beings. Hence, for **Averroes** the intelligibles in act had to exist in a single non-particular separate Material Intellect intimately and naturally connected with individual human beings. Aquinas, in contrast, holds that each person has her own agent and material intellects as powers existing in the rational soul. Using these, each individual forms intelligibles in act in her own intellect by an epistemological account quite different from that of Averroes, one in which intelligibility is ultimately grounded in the essences of things in the world as well as in the powers of intellect to transform intelligibles in potency into intelligibles in act. Rather than being a result of poor argument and weak intellectual insight, the positions of **Averroes** and Aquinas diverge because of different philosophical roads taken along the way,

particularly with respect to the nature of the rational soul and the nature of the intelligible in act. Both thinkers have difficult questions to answer on these issues and need to be interrogated in their own philosophical contexts and in greater depth.

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