

## Avicenna and his Sources: Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius (Part 1)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article is part of a broader investigation on Avicenna and his Greek Aristotelian sources. It aims to discuss the relation between Avicenna, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Themistius from their theory about the intellect. Nowadays, there is a long debate among scholars concerning Avicenna's noetic theory. One of its issues is the nature of the agent intellect and its relationship with the human intellect. However, since it is a difficult subject, the following lines are the first part of the mentioned investigation. They will be restricted to a general introduction to those three interpretations of the nature of the productive (or agent) intellect. One finds an analysis of the relation between Avicenna and his Greek sources based on the strict association (sometimes a strong dependence) of Avicenna's theory with Alexander's and Themistius' ones. Thus, I will discuss their interpretation of Aristotle's *De anima* 430a10-25 concerning the description and distinction of the intellects. Then, I will indicate some difficulties related to this strict association.

**Keywords:** Avicenna, Sources, Arabic Philosophy, Greek Philosophy, Intellect, Reception.

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## Introduction

As some of the historiographical studies point out (GUTAS, 2002, p. 10-2), one of the interpretative lines from which the Arabic philosophy was approached throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century had its base on the presupposition that the Arabic philosophers were mere intermediaries between Greek and Latin philosophies.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the philosophy produced in Arabic language was considered “philosophically insignificant in itself” (ibidem, p. 10). One of the representatives of this interpretative line is De Boer, who denies the philosophical relevance of the investigations in Arabic language. According to him,

[...] Muslim philosophy has always continued to be an Eclecticism which depended on the stock of works translated from the Greek. The course of its history has been a process of assimilation rather than of generation. It has not distinguished itself, either by propounding new problems or by any peculiarity in its endeavors to solve the old ones. It has therefore no important advances in thought to register. Now the history of philosophy in Islam is valuable just because it sets forth the first attempt to appropriate the results of Greek thinking with greater comprehensiveness and freedom than in the early Christian dogmatics [...] (DE BOER, 1901 *apud* GUTAS, 2002, p. 11)

The first aspect of De Boer’s analysis is the denial of the novelty of the Arabic philosophy and, consequently, of philosophers of that tradition, such as Avicenna. According to his criticism, the Arabic philosophical thought boils down to a process of assimilation of the content established by the translations to Arabic of the Greek treatises. Therefore, philosophers who belonged to this tradition would have been stuck to the principles and problems already established by the ancient philosophers without trying to solve them and without suggesting new debates: “It has therefore no important advances in thought to register” (idem).

De Boer does not deny the value in studying the history of the Arabic philosophy. The conclusion of the passage mentioned above acknowledges the relevance of this tradition in the transmission, to the Christian West, of the content extracted from the Greek texts. Consequently, the “the history of philosophy in Islam is valuable just because it sets forth the first attempt to appropriate the results of Greek thinking with greater comprehensiveness and freedom than in the early Christian dogmatics” (idem). This interpretation of the Arabic thought is founded on the perspective that the Semites, especially the Arabic speakers, were incapable of producing a critical and rational philosophy, but only mystic speculations.<sup>3</sup>

Bearing in mind Gutas’ argumentation (2002, p. 5-25) and some recent studies on reception<sup>4</sup>, the statement “the course of the history [of the Arabic thought] has been a process of assimilation rather than of generation.” (DE BOER, 1901 *apud* GUTAS, 2002, p. 11) is a mistake: a) insofar as it neglects the

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<sup>2</sup> Although there is some indication in the literature of the implicit problems in this interpretative line, many aspects of Avicenna’s philosophy, such as the theory of emanation and the noetic theory, are reduced to the study of the Greek tradition. Therefore, study cases which reconstruct the foundations of the Avicennian philosophy from its *corpus* are still relevant, without reducing them to the theories in the works of some authors such as Aristotle, Plotinus, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Themistius.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. GUTAS, 2002, p. 11. Such historiographical position was adopted not only by scholars of Latin Medieval philosophy, but it can also be identified among Arabists. The translator of Averroes’ *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, Simon van den Bergh, adopted as epigraph of his translation an excerpt according to which “only Greeks philosophized” (AVERROES, 1954 *apud* GUTAS, 2002, p. 11). Thus, Gutas concludes (2002, p. 12) that “if Arabists present Arabic philosophy as derivative and philosophically insignificant, it is easy to see how other historians of philosophy, and especially medievalists, would be justified in adopting the same view.”

<sup>4</sup> Budelmann and Haubold (2008, p. 24-5) analyze the concepts of reception and tradition by pointing out the existence of a direct dependency between them insofar as, when bringing the two concepts together, tradition stops having the sense of something complete, done. It is rather an artificial conception, a cut-off *a posteriori*, something built, invented. Understanding the concept of tradition directly linked to the reception enables us to establish connections between different contexts. As Martindale (1993, pp. 4-5) suggests, a tradition is built and analyzed from the point of view of the reception of a determined text or set of texts. Therefore, it is a framework or a cut-off of the receptions of a given author produced in a specific period. According to Martindale (1993, p. 5), “any notion of a naked encounter between a text and a reader who is a sort of tabula rasa is absurd. We all approach the reading of texts with the baggage of our values and our experience, with certain categories, assumptions, prejudices and ‘fore-understandings’. To have such baggage is what it is to be a human being in history; without it we could not read at all.”



very nature of the establishment of the Greek texts and their arrival in the Islamic milieu<sup>5</sup> and b) insofar as it denies the autonomy of the Arabic philosophical thought. Due to the complexity of the discussion, I will dwell only on point b) (the autonomy of the Arabic philosophical thinking). The study case I propose, that is, the relation between Avicenna, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Themistius<sup>6</sup> from the distinction between the productive and passive intellects, has the aims to illustrate, although in a brief way and from a specific thematic framework, the transformation<sup>7</sup> accomplished by Avicenna of his Greek sources. Following Lizzini's interpretation (2016), Avicenna's position regarding the nature of the agent intellect does not need any external element to his own theory to be justified<sup>8</sup>. It is directly linked, as Lizzini (2016, p. 285) suggests, to the Avicennian metaphysical model: "[...] thus in al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, for example [...] the transcendence ascribed to the separate intellect can be explained by the theory of emanation that is the foundation of their metaphysics."

## I

Philosophers of Late Antiquity already disputed on the distinction between the intellects presented in *De anima* 430a10-25<sup>9</sup> and on the kind of dependency kept among the intellects. In this passage, Aristotle distinguishes two intellects, one which produces all things and the other which becomes all things. Such distinction is presented from a reasoning founded on the relation cause-caused. Like all other natural entities in potentiality the intellect which becomes all things needs a cause in actuality which enables it to transit from the potential state to the act. Because this cause is an intellect in actuality, it is responsible for the actualization of the other intellect. However, the passage is not clear with respect to the kind of distinction, that is, whether they are two different substances or whether they are two principles that compose the same substance, neither with respect to how the intellect that produces all things is the cause of the actualization of the other intellect.

According to some scholars,<sup>10</sup> although Alexander, Themistius, and Avicenna diverge on the ontological status of the material intellect, they all agree with the "transcendental interpretation" (DAVIDSON, 1992, p. 13) of the agent intellect. Thus, Alexander of Aphrodisias' position would consider the agent intellect

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<sup>5</sup> According to Sgarbi (2012, p. x), "Looking at intellectual history from the point of view of the *translatio studiorum* means emphasizing the breakpoints, the refusals, and the transformation of language, concepts, and problems within specific traditions [...] Writing the history of a tradition, including its language, concepts, and problems, involves not only recognizing common intellectual elements, but also identifying new and original elements within the tradition itself."

<sup>6</sup> Although other authors in the same period disputed about the agent intellect from the Aristotelian passage mentioned, such as Theophrastus of Eresos, Stephanus of Alexandria, Philoponus, Simplicius, among others, I mentioned only Themistius and Alexander of Aphrodisias because both considered the agent intellect a separate substance. Cf. BOBBA, 1896; GRABMANN, 2006; JOLIVET, 1997, p. 569-82; SHROEDER, 1990; BLUMENTHAL, 1996; ENDRESS, 2002, p. 19-74; FINAMORE, 2011; MORAUX, 1978, p. 281-324; MAGRIN, 2011, p. 49-74.

<sup>7</sup> As Perler (2009, p. 2) suggests, the term "transformation" expresses adequately the relation between medieval authors and Aristotle's texts insofar as it is not a mere continuity of an already existent model or a rupture which proposes something radically different, but a process characterized by the emergence of something new from what has already existed.

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars (Cf. BOBBA, 1896, p. 265; DAVIDSON, 1992, p. 13; MAGRIN, 2011, p. 49) explain the intellect agent's nature in the Arabic philosophy by using Alexander and Themistius theories. This interpretation will be discussed further.

<sup>9</sup> It is the only passage in the entire *De anima* in which Aristotle reflects in detail on the distinction between the intellect that becomes all things and the intellect that produces all things. Cf. ARISTOTLE, 1961; BLUMENTHAL, 1996, p. 312-24; BOBBA, 1896; DE CORTE (1934); IVRY, 2001, p. 59-77; JOLIVET, 1997, p. 569-582; RIST, 1966, p. 8-20; PERLER, 2009; MONTADA, 2007, p. 129-35; LLOYD, OWEN, 1978; NUSSBAUM, RORTY, 1992. The Greek text of the *De anima* was consulted from Ross' edition (1961, pp. 133-4) and the Arabic text from the anonymous translation edited by Badawi (1945, p. 74).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. BOBBA, 1896, p. 265; DAVIDSON, 1992, p. 13; MAGRIN, 2011, p. 49; TAYLOR, 2013, p. 3. Averroes is also mentioned by scholars as having inherited from Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius the status of the agent intellect. Cf. TAYLOR, 2013, p. 3.

as a “separate substance, first cause” (SELLES, 2006, p. 1393) or a power “from outside” (MAGRIN, 2011, p. 66) always in actuality and, therefore, divine and immortal. The material intellect is presented as “pure disposition or the aptitude to receive the forms in such a way that it does not identify with any of them” (DAVIDSON, 1992, p. 9). However, Themistius’ position states not only that the agent intellect is a substance separate from the human soul, but also the potential intellect, which is “not blended with the body, impassive and separate” (idem).

Alexander of Aphrodisias’ *De intellectu*<sup>11</sup>, considered to be an epitome, was translated to Arabic (9<sup>th</sup> century) in *Hunayn Ibn Ishāq*’s school in Bagdad, which was also attended by his son *Ishāq Ibn Hunayn* (that is why it creates a certain confusion regarding the authorship of the translation<sup>12</sup>). Alexander of Aphrodisias<sup>13</sup> presents the productive or agent intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa‘‘āl*)<sup>14</sup> as the intellect through which the material intellect (*al-‘aql al-hayūlānī*)<sup>15</sup> becomes intellect in actuality (*al-‘aql bi-l-fi‘l*)<sup>16</sup>.

And the present intellect is the material intellect (*al-‘aql al-hayūlānī*) when once it has added a state (*malaka*) of actively thinking. Such an intellect is present only in those beings who are more complete, i.e., who are thinking. This then is the second intellect. The third intellect, on the other hand, in addition to the two already described, is the productive intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa‘‘āl*) through which the material intellect enters a state (*malaka*) of possession, and this productive intellect is analogous, as Aristotle says, to light (*daw‘*) [...] (*De intellectu* 107.25-107.32; Finnegan, 1956, p. 184 [28]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 48).

From the theoretical point of view, the first intellect described as hylic or material is characterized by the capacity to think any form. Since it is not a corporal faculty, whose activity would depend on an organ located in the body, the material intellect identifies with the intelligible forms. In this regard, the term *material* is used in an analogy with the passivity of matter<sup>17</sup>. From the moment in which this intellect thinks in actuality, it stops being an absolute potency. Although in the passage quoted above there is the expression “second intellect”, it is not another faculty, but a different phase or moment of the same intellect. The agent intellect consists in the cause of the intellection accomplished by the material intellect. Its productive activity is compared to the actualization of colors in the *De anima* 430a10-25. According to Alexander’s interpretation<sup>18</sup>, just as the light is the cause the colors potentially visible become actually visible, the productive (or agent) intellect turns the potential intellect (or material intellect) into intellect in actuality<sup>19</sup> by transforming the intelligible forms in potentiality into intelligible forms in actuality.

Among the properties<sup>20</sup> assigned to the productive intellect is to be exterior to the human soul and, therefore, not identical to any of its faculties, although “it happens to exist in us” (*De intellectu* 108.24;

<sup>11</sup> The *De intellectu* is part of a collection of writings called *Mantissa*. I will make use of Finnegan’s Arabic edition (1956, p. 181 [24]-199 [43]) and of Schroeder’s English translation (1990, pp. 45-57). Cf. ACCATINO, 2014, p. 275; SHARPLES, 2004, pp. 51-69.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. SCHROEDER; TODD, 1990, p. 2, n.5. On the versions of Alexander’s texts in al-Kindi’s circle, see FAZZO, WIESNER, 1993, pp. 119-53.

<sup>13</sup> *De intellectu* 106.19-110.3; Finnegan, 1956, p. 181 [24]-189 [33]; Schroeder, 1990, pp. 46-51.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 107.29-30; Finnegan, 1956, p. 184 [28]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 106.19; Finnegan, 1956, p. 181 [24]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 46. Finnegan (1956b, p. 198) considers that the use of the term *material*, referring to the intellect, would have been firstly used by Alexander.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 108.6-7; Finnegan, 1956, p. 185 [29]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> One of the aspects of Avicenna’s criticism concerns the association between the intellect in potency and matter. As Gutas (2004, p. 82) shows, Avicenna understands that Alexander of Aphrodisias’ material intellect is effectively material.

<sup>18</sup> *De intellectu* 107.29-34; Finnegan, 1956, p. 184 [28]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> According to Alexander of Aphrodisias (*De intellectu* 111.15-6; Finnegan, 1956, p. 185 [34] *apud* TAYLOR, 2016, p. 274): “For intellect, apprehending the form of the thing that is thought and separating it from the matter, both makes it intelligible in actuality and itself comes to be intellect in actuality.”

<sup>20</sup> *De intellectu* 108.19-108.26; Finnegan, 1956, p. 186 [30]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 49.

Finnegan, 1956, p. 186 [30]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 49) when the human intellect thinks. Thus, it exists separated from men and matter<sup>21</sup> for being imperishable (*tābit*)<sup>22</sup>. In the *De intellectu*<sup>23</sup>, it is described as a form (*ṣūra*) that unlike all the other forms thought by the human intellect<sup>24</sup> does not identify with the human intellect in the course of intellection. According to Schroeder (1997, p. 105), the productive intellect “contributes directly to the formation of the human intellect by serving as a form, object of thought prior to the engagement of the human mind with sense data”. However, because it is eternally in actuality, it only understands itself, remaining simple and immaterial (i.e., not blended with the body). Here<sup>25</sup>, the reasoning is based on the Aristotelian principle that a simple intellect cannot understand anything different from itself; otherwise, it would have its nature multiplied.

The identity between intellect, intellection, and intelligible safeguards the simplicity of the productive intellect. Although, in the *De intellectu*, Alexander does not mention what the productive intellect is, some scholars<sup>26</sup> understand the adjective “divine” (*‘ilāhī*)<sup>27</sup> and its characteristics (i.e., absolute simplicity<sup>28</sup>, immortality<sup>29</sup>, cause<sup>30</sup>, separated existence<sup>31</sup>) as indicative of God or of the First Principle.

In his *Paraphrase of Aristotle’s “De Anima”*<sup>32</sup>, translated to Arabic by *Ishāq Ibn Hunayn*<sup>33</sup>, Themistius affirms (without mentioning Alexander of Aphrodisias’ name<sup>34</sup>):

As for those who believe that the productive intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa‘āl*) is said by him to be the First God (*‘allāh al-‘awwal*), why on earth do they overlook the following in this very passage [430a10-25]? For after first saying that in the whole of nature there is one thing that is matter (*hayūlā*), and another that moves matter and completes it, he claims that “it is necessary that these differences exist also in the soul” (*Paraphrase of Aristotle’s “De Anima”* 102.36-103.2; Lyons, 1973, p. 186.16-187.1; Todd, 1990, p. 102).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 108.26-7; Finnegan, 1956, p. 186 [30]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 49. As Fazzo and Wiesner point out (1993, p. 121), Alexander points an interaction between those celestial, separated, and immortal substances and the sublunar substances. However, due to the fragmentary character of the approach of their interaction, Alexander does not have an integral theory of this “dynamic interaction”.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 108.31; Finnegan, 1956, p. 187 [31]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> *De intellectu* 108.29; Finnegan, 1956, p. 186 [30]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> According to Alexander of Aphrodisias (*De intellectu* 108.4-7; Finnegan, 1956, p. 185 [34] *apud* TAYLOR, 2016, p. 274): “[E]nmattered forms are made intelligible by the intellect, being intelligible potentially. The intellect separates them from the matter with which they have their being, and itself makes them intelligible in actuality, and each of them, when it is thought, then comes to be intelligible in actuality and intellect; [but] they are not like this previously or by their own nature.”

<sup>25</sup> *De intellectu* 109.27-109.31; Finnegan, 1956, p. 189 [33]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. CASTON, 1999, p. 201; SELLES, 2006, p. 1393; TAYLOR, 2016, p. 274; MAGRIN, 2011, p. 66; FREDE, 1996, p. 383-4; BOERI, 2009, pp. 80-1. For Blumenthal (1987, p. 94), the intellect in act mentioned by Aristotle in III.5, according to Alexander’s reading, is the supreme cause of all things, that is, it “identifies with the Aristotelian first mover”. By comparing Themistius’ interpretation of 430a10-25 with Alexanders’ interpretation, Todd (1990, p. 32) affirms that Themistius rejected the identification of the productive (or agent) intellect with God, as proposed by Aphrodisias in the *De intellectu*.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 112.16; Finnegan, 1956, p. 196 [40]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 109.27-109.31; Finnegan, 1956, p. 189 [33]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 51.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 108.31; Finnegan, 1956, p. 187 [31]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 111.34; Finnegan, 1956, p. 194 [38]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *De intellectu* 108.26-7; Finnegan, 1956, p. 186 [30]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Lyons (1955, p. 426) does not refer to the work as a paraphrase, but as a commentary. From now on, I will use Lyons’s Arabic edition (1973) and Todd’s English translation (1990, p. 77-133).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. LYONS, 1955, p. 426; 430; BADAWI, 1954, p. 14-5; ELAMRANI-JAMAL, 2003, p. 348; GUERRERO, 1992, p. 93.

<sup>34</sup> Some scholars (cf. Todd, 1990, p. 102, n.113) acknowledge that Themistius criticism is directed to Alexander because the latter would have identified the agent intellect with God.

His first point is to deny that the productive or agent intellect mentioned by Aristotle in 430a10-25 is “the First God”. Aristotle’s distinction between the parts that constitute natural entities, that is, matter “and another [thing] that moves matter and completes it” (idem) is placed in the soul, not outside it. Since there is in the soul an intellect that becomes all things and an intellect that produces all things, the latter cannot be God, a substance completely different from the human soul. Thus, Themistius<sup>35</sup> distinguishes three intellects, not only two: the productive or agent intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa‘‘āl*), the material or potential intellect (*al-‘aql al-allāḡi bi-l-quwa*), and the passive or common intellect (*al-‘aql al-muštarak*)<sup>36</sup>. The productive intellect, which exists in complete actuality given its natural perfection, completes the possible intellect by uniting with it insofar as it is a form or “the form of the forms” (*Paraphrase do De anima* 100.33; Lyons, 1973, p. 182.18; Todd, 1990, p. 95); in this aspect, Themistius’ position resembles Alexander’s. However, they are different since the first one, the productive intellect, is a faculty of the human soul.

According to Martin (1966, p. 2), Themistius faces some issues related to the properties of the potential intellect: “Themistius, accordingly, must decide whether the potential intellect shares the immortality of the agent intellect or the mortality of the passive intellect”. On the one hand, choosing the first option means that the potential intellect is impassible (*ḡayr munfa‘il*) such as the agent one<sup>37</sup>. On the other, the second option means that it is corruptible (*fāsid*) such as the passive one<sup>38</sup>.

Nevertheless, what does it mean when Themistius says that the productive intellect is immortal, eternal, and separate?<sup>39</sup> The answer seems to be the fact that the intellect is not blended with the body, which, by receiving a form, becomes determined by it. As Taylor (2013, p. 6) points out, the intellect is essentially eternal even though the intelligible in it is corruptible “due to their connection with the forms of imagination”. Therefore, the intellect does not undergo any alteration caused by being blended with the body such as the senses do. Thus, the intellect (be it productive or possible) is separated from the body, but not from the human soul.

Although both intellects share some properties, such as being impassive and separated, they do not share the same nature.<sup>40</sup> Themistius’ distinction between them is based on the productive intellect being essentially in actuality and the potential intellect being essentially in potentiality. The superiority of the productive intellect is established by the Aristotelian principle according to which the cause is prior to what is caused.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Paraphrase of Aristotle’s “De Anima”* 105.13-105.34; Lyons, 1973, p. 191.9-192.11; Todd, 1990, p. 108-9.

<sup>36</sup> Themistius (*Paraphrase of Aristotle’s “De Anima”* 105.13-105.34; Lyons, 1973, p. 191.9-192.11; Todd, 1990, p. 108-9) understands that there is a third intellect called common intellect, which is perishable, passive, and blended with the body. Due to the scope of this article, I will not consider this intellect in detail. On the passive intellect and its relation with the imagination and the body, see Martin (1966, pp. 17-8).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Paraphrase of Aristotle’s “De Anima”* 101.4; Lyons, 1973, p. 183.8; Todd, 1990, p. 95.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Paraphrase of Aristotle’s “De Anima”* 101.4; Lyons, 1973, p. 183.8; Todd, 1990, p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Paraphrase of Aristotle’s “De Anima”* 102.35; Lyons, 1973, p. 186.16; Todd, 1990, p. 101.

<sup>40</sup> Martin’s interpretation (1966, p. 4) goes in another direction. According to the scholar, the intellect in actuality and the intellect in potentiality are not two separate intellects, but are two phases of a single intellect.

<sup>41</sup> According to Themistius (*Paraphrase of Aristotle’s “De Anima”* 106.7-10; Lyons, 1973, p. 192.16-193.2; Todd, 1990, p. 108-9): “according to [Aristotle] the common and potential intellects must be distinct. And while the common intellect is perishable, passive and inseparable from and mixed with the body, the potential intellect is unaffected, unmixed with the body and separate (for he says this of it explicitly). It is like a forerunner of the productive intellect, as the [sun’s] ray is of the daylight, or as the flower is a forerunner of the fruit.”

### III

Before pointing out some problems related to the approach mentioned in the introduction, it is worth summarizing Avicenna's position regarding the distinction between the intellects.<sup>42</sup> Although his commentary<sup>43</sup> on the *De anima* III.5 430a10-25 is not available, his distinction between different types of intellects<sup>44</sup> can be found in *On the Soul* V.5. From the causal distinction between the active and the passive principle, Avicenna distinguishes four stages or phases in the rational soul: the material intellect, the habitual intellect (both in potentiality), the actual intellect and the acquired intellect (both in actuality).<sup>45</sup> Since the intellect is one of the soul's faculties which, like matter (*hayūlā*), is in potentiality to receive any form and, therefore, to know, it is clear that there must exist something which actualizes that potential state. The necessity of this element is justified as follows: everything which goes from potentiality to actuality depends on an agent principle; the human souls go from potentiality to actuality; thus, the human souls depend on an agent principle. However, going from potentiality to actuality means a) that the actual intellect has already known some intelligibles but it is not thinking them in the moment or b) that the acquired intellect thinks intelligible forms so that its actualization is directly related to the acquisition of some intelligible forms from the agent intellect in the moment. Thus, to achieve the last stage (the acquired intellect), it is necessary that this agent cause grants the human intellect a certain kind of intelligible form and "it is nothing more than an agent intellect in which all the intelligible forms exist" (*K. al-nafs* V.5, p. 234<sup>46</sup>).

Avicenna does not point that they (the actual intellect and the agent intellect) are two principles of the human soul because the agent intellect is a substance apart and different from the human soul.

It follows necessarily, then, that the separate intellects (*al-'aql al-mufāriqa*) – rather, the last of them, which is close to us<sup>47</sup>, is the one from which there emanates, in participation with the celestial movements something having the configuration of the forms of the lower world by way of passive receptivity to action, just as there is in that intellect or intellects the configuration of the forms by way of enactment. The forms then emanate from it [...]. (*Ilāhiyyāt* IX.5, 410.6-410.9; Marmura, 2005, p. 335; Bertolacci, 2008, p. 751).

<sup>42</sup> For a complete analysis see Sousa, 2018, p. 9-24.

<sup>43</sup> I will make use of Avicenna's *On the Soul* (*Kitāb al-nafs*) V.5, which is part of his natural works. It is not a commentary on the homonymous work of Aristotle. Cf. Gutas, 2004, p. 78. On the reception of Aristotle's *De anima* in Arabic language, see SOUSA, 2018, p. 9-15.

<sup>44</sup> As I will show further, Avicenna distinguishes the human intellect, which is a faculty of the human soul, from the celestial intellect, which is separated and independent from the human intellect.

<sup>45</sup> Regarding the phases or stages of the intellect according to *On the Soul* (*Kitāb al-nafs* I.5, pp. 47-50; McGinnis and Reisman, 2007, pp. 184-5; Attie, 2011, pp. 70-2), in the case of the potential intellect or material intellect, it is an illimited disposition to know without having received any form, like the baby and the writing. According to Davidson (1992, p. 84), the human soul at birth did not produce any thought and only carries a potentiality to think. Throughout the child's development, this potentiality unfolds in several steps, which begin with pure potentiality. Next, there is the habitual intellect. It is the potential intellect after having received the first intelligibles. Avicenna attributes to it the expression *possible potentiality*; in this case, the intellect already possesses the principles from which one is able to know, such as the young man who knows the cartridge, the pen, and the alphabet. The intellect in actuality is characterized by the acquirement in actuality of some knew intelligibles, although in that moment he is not dedicated to them: "It is called an actual intellect because it is an intellect that intellects whenever it wants, without the burden of acquiring [it], although it can be called a potential intellect in comparison to what comes after it." (*Kitāb al-nafs* I.5, pp. 49-50; McGinnis and Reisman, 2007, p. 185), like when the young man has already learned how to write, but in that specific moment he is not writing. The last relation is the absolute perfection of the intellect, called acquired intellect. The degree of the acquired intellect consists in the possession in actuality of the intelligible forms which in that moment are thought.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Bakosh, 1956, p. 166; McGinnis and Reisman, 2007, p. 199; Attie, 2011, p. 242.

<sup>47</sup> That is, the agent intellect.

The celestial intellects, including the agent intellect, participate in the emanation (*ḥayd*)<sup>48</sup> from which all beings are indirectly derived from the first principle. As an eternal and single activity, the creation from the first principle is opposed to a second way of giving being performed by the celestial intellects.<sup>49</sup> This second sense of giving being is a fundamental one insofar as the first principle does not create the sublunar multiplicity<sup>50</sup>, but all natural beings are originated through emanation from the agent intellect.<sup>51</sup> Thus, it is the *dator formarum*<sup>52</sup>, i.e. the efficient principle responsible for the existence of sublunar substances and the source of certain intelligible forms to the actual intellect. To some scholars<sup>53</sup>, since it is the agent intellect that emanates forms into the sublunar realm<sup>54</sup>, without its emanative activity the human intellects cannot produce abstracted knowledge<sup>55</sup> insofar as “the light of the agent intellect shines upon them” (*K. al-nafs* V.5, p. 234<sup>56</sup>)<sup>57</sup>. Bearing in mind that Avicenna brings forward a creationist theory<sup>58</sup> dependent

<sup>48</sup> On emanation, see LIZZINI, 2011, pp. 27-36.

<sup>49</sup> ‘*Ibdā*’ is a term that has two meanings: 1 – the completion of a thing, not from another thing, nor through the mediation of another thing; 2 – its second meaning is that a thing has absolute existence from a cause without mediation and belongs to the essence of this thing the fact that it is not an existing being, but what belongs to it essentially is removed in a perfect manner. Cf. *Risala al-ḥudūd* 105 [70]; Goichon, 1963, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> The Arabic cosmology assumes the system of celestial spheres in a descendent hierarchy of perfection. The most perfect sphere, called first sky, is nobler than the other spheres of the hierarchy. Below this one is the sphere of the fixed stars. Next are the spheres of planets, whose order is: first sphere, the closest to Earth, is occupied by the Moon; the second, by Mercury; the third, by Venus; the fourth, by the Sun; the fifth by Mars; the sixth, by Jupiter, and the seventh, by Saturn. This order was established by Ptolemy. Thus, the last sphere is the sphere which spins around the sphere of the four elements and of the Earth. Among the seven spheres, seven contain planets, one contains stars, and one does not contain planets or stars. The other beings which constitute the supralunar realm are the ten celestial intellects (eleven, according to Farabi). Cf. JANOS, 2009, pp. 117-8; 133.

<sup>51</sup> Multiplicity is gradually amplified through the activity of the intellects since each new intelligence understands itself, the previous ones and the necessary existent. An important aspect here is that the necessary existent creates directly only the first intelligence. It does not directly deal with the multiplicity of existents. According to Colish (1975, p. 299), by adopting the theory of emanation, Avicenna solves part of the difficulty when he removes from God the task of creating multiplicity, however, it is necessary to resort to the secondary causes, including the agent intellect, in order to continue the hierarchy chain of emanation.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Physics* I.10, 3.4; McGinnis, 2009, p. 65. See DAVIDSON, 1992, p. 78.

<sup>53</sup> According to Davidson (1992, p. 93): “Avicenna employs the analogy because it had become common, but in his framework, it is no longer apt. His position is not in fact that the emanation from the active intellect enables the human intellect to abstract concepts from images presented by the imaginative faculty, just as the eye sees colors that are illumined by the rays of the sun. Intelligible thoughts, he has maintained, flow directly from the active intellect and are not abstracted at all.” On other scholars who presented similar interpretations, see Hasse (2013, p. 109).

<sup>54</sup> According to Lizzini (2016, p. 288), the intellection performed by the human intellect is the reception of forms emanated from the agent intellect. On the fact that the intelligible form emanated from the agent intellect is responsible for the association between the universal and the particular form, cf. MCGINNIS, 2007, p. 165-86.

<sup>55</sup> According to the *On the Soul* V.3 there are three modes of conceptualization through which the intellect helped by the inner senses acquires intelligible forms. The first mode is described as the ordering of intentions in a statement without the ordering being necessary. The results are empirical statements. Although Avicenna states that it is accomplished by the incorporeal substance, the senses help the ordering insofar as they provide the subjects the intellect deals with. The second mode of conceptualization happens when the intellect has already conducted the first conceptualization, but has abandoned the acquired intentions in order to conceptualize others. Next, the intellect verifies the truth or the falsity of the proposition; in other words, it investigates the cause of attributing a determined intention to a subject. This is only possible after the conceptualization of the particulars and the intuition of the medium terms of the syllogism. Because the cause is the medium term of the syllogism acquired by intuition or by instruction, the intellect is not capable of concluding the assent without it. Intuition is receiving what is emanated from the agent intellect. Cf. HASSE, 2001, pp. 39-82; GUTAS, 2012, p. 391-436; 2001, pp. 1-38.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Bakosh, 1956; p. 166; McGinnis and Reisman, 2007, p. 199; Attie, 2011, p. 242.

<sup>57</sup> According to Gutas (2012<sup>a</sup>, p. 420), the relation between the agent intellect and the human intellect is described in two manners: from the point of view of the agent intellect or from the point of view of the human intellect. In the first case, the reception of the medium terms is called “divine emanation” (idem), characterized by the emanation of the intelligibles to the intellect; from the perspective of the human intellect, it is described as intuition or learning the medium terms.

<sup>58</sup> *Stricto sensu*, the term *creation* refers only to the first principle’s act of giving being by emanation.

on intermediary substances such as the agent intellect, the Aristotelian productive cause of all things is a separate agent intellect, not a mixed one. The potential intellect is primarily the material (or human) intellect, which becomes the habitual, actual and acquired intellect. It is separated from the body<sup>59</sup>, since it does not depend on a bodily organ, although it needs the senses<sup>60</sup> to think.

### III

The access that the Arabic philosophers had, including Avicenna, to some ancient works, and the similarities between their interpretations of Aristotle's *De anima* III.5 were used by many scholars<sup>61</sup> to fuse both traditions. From the traces<sup>62</sup> of Alexander of Aphrodisias' and Themistius' influence on the Arabic philosophy, it has been a common approach to read Avicenna's writings regarding the agent intellect without considering the differences between their theories.<sup>63</sup> It is problematic to assume that the understanding of the productive intellect is the same in both (Greek and Arabic) traditions. This attempt of thinking the influence of the Greek philosophical tradition on the Arabic philosophy presents some limits. Avicenna operates a unique transformation of the Aristotelian works.<sup>64</sup> I do not deny that Alexander's and Themistius' works were read by Avicenna (which is pointed by the philosopher himself<sup>65</sup>). As Gutas (2004, p. 81-2) points out, Avicenna critically refers to Themistius and Alexander in his *Notes on the De anima*. Thus, Avicenna's references to the Aristotelian tradition cannot be used to prove that his understanding was determined by it. As Lizzini (2016, p. 290) explains, "Arabic epistemological theories cannot be explained only on the basis of their sources".

Understanding the agent intellect as a separate substance is not Alexander of Aphrodisias' and Themistius' novelty. On the contrary, it might be concluded from the very passage of Aristotle's *De anima*. Aristotle refers to it as a *separate* (χωριστὸς/*mufāraq*)<sup>66</sup>, *immortal* (ἀθάνατος/*gayr mayyit*)<sup>67</sup>, and *eternal/spiritual* (ἄιδιος/*rūhānī*)<sup>68</sup> intellect. In this regard, the similarities between the interpretations that I discussed here are justified by the fact that all of them presuppose the same Aristotelian passage.

In Alexander's case, the peculiarity of his position is in the description of the productive intellect. At several moments in his *De intellectu*<sup>69</sup>, the philosopher refers to it as form. Thus, there is a substantial

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<sup>59</sup> On the independence of the rational soul, cf. HASSE 2000, pp. 80-92.

<sup>60</sup> The exterior senses compose the perceptive faculties of the animal soul along with the inner senses. They are: touch, vision, taste, hearing, and smell. The second kind of perception is conducted by the five inner senses that are different from the exterior senses because they accomplish perceptions from the inside. They are: common sense, retentive imagination, imaginative, called cogitative in men, estimative faculty, and memory. The material forms and the perceived intentions are still quantitatively and qualitatively determined. Cf. WOLFSON, 1935, pp. 69-133; DI MARTINO, 2008; PORMANN, 2013, pp. 91-108.

<sup>61</sup> BOBBA, 1896, p. 265; FINNEGAN, 1956b, p. 192; DAVIDSON, 1992, p. 13; MAGRIN, 2011, p. 49; TAYLOR, 2013, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> According to Gutas (2004, pp. 81-2), Avicenna mentions Alexander of Aphrodisias (four times) and Themistius (twice) in the *Notes on the De Anima*. Thus, the connection between Avicenna and the tradition of the Greek authors is established by the philosopher himself.

<sup>63</sup> On the possible or material intellect, cf. FINNEGAN, 1956b, pp. 198-9.

<sup>64</sup> For further details regarding the relation between the Avicennian philosophy and the Aristotelian tradition, see Gutas (2014 [1998]).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. GUTAS, 2004, p. 81.

<sup>66</sup> *De anima* III.5 430a17; Ross, 1961, p. 133; Badawi, 1954, p. 74.

<sup>67</sup> *De anima* III.5 430a23; Ross, 1961, p. 134; Badawi, 1954, p. 74.

<sup>68</sup> Idem.

<sup>69</sup> *De intellectu* 108.24; 108.29; 108.31; Finnegan, 1956, p. 186 [30]-187 [31]; Schroeder, 1990, p. 49.



union<sup>70</sup> between this intellect and the human one so that the union enables the actualization of the human disposition for knowing. These two aspects of the productive intellect, that is, being a form and uniting with the human intellect are directly related. Bearing in mind the link between form-matter and act-potency, there should be a necessary link between the productive and material intellects. Since an activity takes place in a potential substratum (matter or analogous to it) which achieves the actuality because of an agent principle (form), a union between them must be presupposed.

The specificity of Themistius' position regarding the productive intellect is to put it in the human soul: "we are the productive intellect" (*Paraphrase of Aristotle's "De Anima"* 101.1; Lyons, 1973, p. 183.5; Todd, 1990, p. 95). Even though we find in the *Paraphrase of Aristotle's "De Anima"* that the productive intellect is separate, it is not, however, a substantial separation. Themistius, differently from Alexander, understands being separated as being independent from any bodily organ. Thus, as mentioned previously, the productive intellect is separated from the body, although it is not separated from the man. It is a faculty of the rational soul.

Although the three philosophers assign the same ontological status to the agent intellect, they do not share the same understanding on the nature of the intellect that produces all things. Those properties pointed to the intellect, which go beyond the acknowledgement of it as separated (a term that does not have the same meaning in Alexander's and Themistius' texts), are not found in Avicenna's *On the Soul*. Avicenna's transcendent substance is not a form or a faculty of the human soul. The agent intellect is not only causally different from the human intellect, but also a substance ontologically different. However, it is not a form. Avicenna's creationist model, which invokes celestial intellects as intermediaries, supported his understanding of the productive intellect as a celestial intellect and, thus, ontologically separate from the material intellect. Since the agent intellect is the last celestial substance, it is the cause of the existence of forms and souls in the sublunar realm<sup>71</sup> and the efficient cause by providing some intelligible forms for the human intellect. According to Hasse (2013, p. 117) "Epistemologically, universal forms are either abstracted from particular forms if intellected for the first time, or grasped directly if intellected again. Ontologically, they always come from the active intellect".

In this regard, reducing Avicenna's interpretation to his sources does not contribute to understand<sup>72</sup>: a) how Avicenna does transform the *De anima* 430a10-25; b) the nature of the agent and the human intellect in *On the Soul* V and c) why Avicenna affirms the substantial separation between these intellects.

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. FINNEGAN, 1956b, p. 193. The Arabic term means *acquisition*, from which we have the *acquired intellect*.

<sup>71</sup> Therefore, as a product of the divine intellection from which the existents flow, Lizzini (2011, p. 320) points out the prominence of the noetic moment compared to the ontological one. Nothing happens without the First Principle's intellection of itself. However, it is an "aporetic" anteriority due to its simultaneity to the ontological causality. Because the self-intellection is continuous, the flow of existence is also continuous: "not only the intellection is creation, but the existence of the First consists in its own self-intellection" (idem). It is precisely this circularity that determines the intellectual unity.

<sup>72</sup> Although it is out of the scope of my discussion here, another problem in reducing the Arabic philosophy to its sources is the difficulty to explain, for instance, the theoretical divergences in the tradition itself. If the Arabic philosophies could be reduced to the Greek ones, there would not be any distinction between Avicenna's and Averroes' noetic theories.



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