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# AVERROES ON INTELLECT

*From Aristotelian Origins to Aquinas's Critique*

STEPHEN R. OGDEN

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Regarding translations in the book, for primary texts I cite the page number of the relevant edition of the original (or oldest extant) language, in some cases followed by the page number of a standard English translation in brackets. When using translations in multiple languages or a language other than English, the languages are distinguished. Full information for editions and translations can be found by checking the primary text’s abbreviation or author/title in the

Bibliography. When I quote others' translations, I have often slightly modified them. Emphasis within translations from primary texts is mine, unless noted otherwise. Finally, if no bracketed translation page number is given and unless noted otherwise, translations are my own.

When citing the Arabic Fragments of the *LCDA*, I often cite the comparison passage in Crawford's Latin edition and then Taylor's English translation in brackets after. But all translations of the Arabic Fragments are my own. Note that Taylor in his footnotes to his translation has usefully reprinted most of the Arabic Fragments found in Ben Chehida and Sirat and Geoffroy.

Parts of the following chapters have appeared elsewhere.

Chapter 2: "On a Possible Argument for Averroes's Single Separate Intellect." *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 4 (2017): 27–63.

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# List of Abbreviations of Works

For full bibliographical information for each work in the various languages used, please consult the bibliography under the author's name. The author is Averroes unless stated otherwise.

<i>An. Post.</i>	Aristotle. <i>Posterior Analytics</i>
<i>BDT</i>	Aquinas. <i>Super Boetium de Trinitate</i>
<i>Cat.</i>	Aristotle. <i>Categoriae</i>
<i>CDI</i>	<i>Commentary on De Intellectu</i>
<i>CPN</i>	<i>Commentary on Parva Naturalia</i>
<i>CT</i>	Aquinas. <i>Compendium Theologiae</i>
<i>DA</i>	Aristotle. <i>De Anima</i>
<i>DA Paraph.</i>	Themistius. <i>De Anima Paraphrasis</i>
<i>DC</i>	Aristotle. <i>De Caelo</i>
<i>De An.</i>	Alexander. <i>De Anima</i>
<i>DEE</i>	Aquinas. <i>De Ente et Essentia</i>
<i>De Intell.</i>	Alexander (?). <i>De Intellectu</i>
<i>DPN</i>	Aquinas. <i>De Principiis Naturae</i>
<i>DSO</i>	<i>De Substantia Orbis</i>
<i>DT</i>	<i>Faṣl al-Maqāl (The Decisive Treatise)</i>
<i>DUI</i>	Aquinas. <i>De Unitate Intellectus</i>
<i>DV</i>	Aquinas. <i>Quaestiones de Veritate</i>
<i>EC 1 &amp; 2</i>	<i>Epistle 1 &amp; 2 on Conjunction</i>
<i>EN</i>	Aristotle. <i>Ethica Nicomachea</i>
<i>EPC</i>	<i>Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction</i>
<i>GA</i>	Aristotle. <i>De Generatione Animalium</i>
<i>In DA</i>	Aquinas. <i>Sententia Libri de Anima</i>
<i>In Met.</i>	Aquinas. <i>Sententia Libri Metaphysicae</i>
<i>KM</i>	<i>Al-Kashf ‘an Manāhij (Exposition)</i>
<i>LCDA</i>	<i>Long Commentary on De Anima</i>
<i>LCDC</i>	<i>Long Commentary on De Caelo</i>
<i>LCM</i>	<i>Long Commentary on Metaphysics</i>
<i>LCP</i>	<i>Long Commentary on Physics</i>
<i>LCPA</i>	<i>Long Commentary on Posterior Analytics</i>
<i>MCDA</i>	<i>Middle Commentary on De Anima</i>
<i>MC de Interp.</i>	<i>Middle Commentary on De Interpretatione</i>
<i>MCGC</i>	<i>Middle Commentary on Generation and Corruption</i>
<i>Met.</i>	Aristotle. <i>Metaphysica</i>
<i>Najāt</i>	Avicenna. <i>Kitāb al-Najāt (The Salvation)</i>
<i>Phys.</i>	Aristotle. <i>Physica</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	Aristotle. <i>Politica</i>

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QDA	Aquinas. <i>Quaestiones Disputatae de Anima</i>
QDSC	Aquinas. <i>Quaestiones de Spiritualibus Creaturis</i>
QDV Com.	Aquinas. <i>Quaestio Disputata de Virtutibus in Communi</i>
QQ	Aquinas. <i>Quaestiones de Quolibet</i>
SCDA	<i>Short Commentary on De Anima</i>
SCG	Aquinas. <i>Summa Contra Gentiles</i>
SCGC	<i>Short Commentary on Generation and Corruption</i>
SCM	<i>Short Commentary on Metaphysics</i>
Sent.	Aquinas. <i>Scriptum Super Sententiis</i>
<i>Shifā' Met.</i>	Avicenna. <i>Al-Shifā'</i> ( <i>The Healing</i> ), <i>al-Ilāhiyyāt</i> ( <i>Metaphysics</i> )
<i>Shifā' Psych.</i>	Avicenna. <i>Al-Shifā'</i> ( <i>The Healing</i> ), <i>al-Nafs</i> ( <i>Psychology</i> )
ST	Aquinas. <i>Summa Theologiae</i>
TT	<i>Tahāfut al-Tahāfut</i> ( <i>The Incoherence of the Incoherence</i> )

# Introduction

“Why would anyone want to think that?!” This was the question I once received after briefly summarizing the (in)famous view of intellect from the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd or Averroes (d. 1198), namely that there is only *one* intellect that all human beings share.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, we can define Averroes’ surprising view as follows:

Unicity Thesis: The intellect that understands intelligible concepts is a single, separate, eternal substance shared by all humanity.

At least *prima facie*, it also follows that individual human beings do not have their own, individual and numerically distinct intellects. Now this seems like the sort of proposal that gives philosophy a bad name. The idea immediately shocks and repulses. While some people might find eminently plausible the notion that *certain* individuals wholly lack intellect (whether annoying co-workers or despised politicians), few would countenance it as a universal claim, equally applicable to themselves. “Of course, *I* have intellect. I think and understand things. Is it even possible to *think* that I *don’t* have intellect?”

Yes, it is possible to think this. And, yes, it is possible even to *argue* for it. Some of the best philosophers are precisely the ones who thus give philosophy a bad name. Recall the judgment of the Athenians and Aristophanes (not to mention the average student in an “Introduction to Philosophy” course) about Socrates. However ridiculous Averroes’ unicity thesis may appear at first, it is the most debated and enduring of his philosophical legacies. It was (and is, I suggest) not actually that easy to dismiss. Entire treatises have been devoted to arguing against it, even as it gained adherents at least in the Jewish and Christian traditions throughout the medieval period and well into the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> It undoubtedly

<sup>1</sup> In this book, I have made the practical decision to refer to our philosopher by his Latinized name, “Averroes,” rather than his patronymic Arabic name, “Ibn Rushd” (full title: Abū l-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Rushd al-Ḥafīd). “Averroes” is the most common and recognizable title in the Anglophone and European scholarly literature. Furthermore, the Arabic patronymic alone does not differentiate him from his famous jurist grandfather *al-qāḍī* (judge)/*al-jadd* (grandfather), nor from his son; by contrast, there is only one “Averroes,” and the name is a testament to his massive historical impact. I certainly mean the man no disrespect nor do I intend in any way to divorce him from his Islamic/Arabic context!

<sup>2</sup> Medieval Averroists regarding intellect include Siger of Brabant and Jean of Jandun—see Brenet (2003; 2008; 2018b). Renaissance proponents include Agostino Nifo and, the Jewish thinker, Elijah Del Medigo (Hasse 2007, esp. 117–121). From our current position, based on numbers of known extant

paved the way for views like Spinoza's monism and Berkeley's idealism. As I aim to show, the unicity thesis's impact and longevity stem largely from Averroes' compelling interpretations of Aristotle and, more importantly, his own powerful independent philosophical arguments. Averroes forces us to think deeply and soberly about what intellect is, especially by contemplating the nature of its objects—i.e., universal intelligible forms or concepts, like *greenness*, *what it is to be a protein*, *humanity*, or *being* in general.

Contemporary philosophy has seen a resurgence of interest in Aristotle's notion of hylomorphism, the view that substances, including chiefly human beings, should be explained as composites of matter (Greek, *hylē*) and form (*morphē*), the latter of which in living things becomes identified as soul (*psuchē*). This hylomorphic analysis is extended by Aristotle to various cognitive capacities of soul, including sensation, imagination, and intellect (Greek, *nous*; Arabic, *'aql*; Latin, *intellectus*). In the midst of the landscape of varying types of materialism and dualism in contemporary philosophy of mind,<sup>3</sup> many scholars have pointed to Aristotelian hylomorphism as a viable third way.<sup>4</sup> But we can only flee from the ills of the contemporary mind-body problem to the refuge of hylomorphism for so long before encountering (as ancient and medieval philosophers did) a distinct *nous*-body problem.<sup>5</sup> Not only does Aristotle continually signal throughout his *De Anima* that *nous* may constitute some sort of exception to his typical hylomorphic analysis, but he also confusingly identifies at least *two* different intellects in *DA* III, Chapters 4 and 5. Consequently, any attempt at developing a *noetic* hylomorphism must grapple with what these two intellects are and how they

manuscripts and the headwinds Averroes and his philosophy seemed to face in Andalusia toward the end of his life (Montada 1992, 243 and 251ff.), it currently seems that Averroes' unicity thesis probably had less impact on the wider Islamic world. Yet we should not be as confident as Renan was (in the mid-nineteenth century) about the death of Averroes' thought within the Islamic tradition. In fact, the rumors of his philosophy's demise are greatly exaggerated! See, e.g., Ben Ahmed (2016) on Averroes' disciple, Ibn Ṭumlūs. On Averroes' likely impact on 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghḍādī—see Martini Bonadeo (2013, 194, esp. fn. 328, and 228–229); Ben Ahmed (2019a); and Gutas (2011, 23–24). Even Ibn Taymiyya (and other Ḥanbalī scholars) clearly engaged with Averroes, even if using him for their own dialectical purposes (Hoover 2018; Ben Ahmed 2019b). On intellect specifically, at least Averroes' son wrote a treatise (Burnett and Zonta 2000), and we may well find more evidence that bears on this issue. Averroes' *SCDA* and other works were circulating in the Islamic East, including in Iran centuries after his death (Endress 2001, esp. 24 and 55). Furthermore, we know that Averroes' *LCDA* specifically (in some form or another, and in both Arabic and Latin) had an influence among the medieval Jewish philosophical community—see Sirat and Geoffroy (2005); (Wirmer 2007); and S. Harvey (2011, 492). Averroes likely had a broad effect on Maimonides (W.Z. Harvey 1989; Stroumsa 2009, 73; and Pessin 2016, §2.c), who, in virtue of recommending his commentaries, made Averroes “almost overnight the primary philosophic authority among the Jews” (S. Harvey 2000, 108); cf. S. Harvey (1992, esp. 53–56).

<sup>3</sup> For a hint of the landscape, see Kim (2005), Gillet and Loewer (2007), Koons and Bealer (2010), and Lavazza and Robinson (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Many of the chapters in Nussbaum and Rorty (1992), including Nussbaum and Putnam (1992); Haldane (1999); Klīma (2002b; 2009); Stump (2003); Oderberg (2005); Charles (2009); Leftow (2010); Shields (2010); Toner (2011); Putnam (2012, esp. Chapter 34); Jaworski (2016); Koons (2017); De Haan (2018); and Charles (2021).

<sup>5</sup> We can thank Modrak (1991) for the title. Cf. Burnyeat (2008, 10–15).

explain the action of human intellection or understanding (*noein*). We certainly will not comprehend Averroes' own arguments on intellect or the controversy they inspired without grasping these Aristotelian origins.

The first (kind of) intellect historically took on the name of the "material," "possible," or "potential" intellect (hereafter "MPI"), which Aristotle discusses in *DA* III.4 and at least the beginning of *DA* III.5, where it is compared to matter in its capacity for *receiving* every kind of intelligible universal form (just as prime matter is open to receiving every kind of material form in Aristotle's system).<sup>6</sup> The second (kind of) intellect is known as the "active," "agent," or "maker" intellect (hereafter "AI") from *DA* III.5.<sup>7</sup> The AI, like light illuminating colors, somehow makes or actualizes the intelligible forms received (i.e., understood) by the MPI. While Aristotle describes both of these intellects as "separable" or "separate" (*chōristos*) (possibly from the body),<sup>8</sup> the AI intriguingly also appears to be "immortal and eternal."<sup>9</sup> At first glance, both kinds of intellect seem to be lofty sorts of things. But *what* exactly are they? *Whose* exactly are they? Aristotle does not say, at least not as explicitly as readers throughout history would have liked. *DA* III.5 in particular is a short and cryptic paragraph, only sixteen lines long, yet perhaps the most hotly contested passage in all of ancient philosophy.

A majority opinion in the Greco-Arabic tradition and among modern exegetes holds that the MPI is the human intellect and thus multiple (each human has her own), while the AI is a single, eternal intellect somehow separate from human beings. The leading figure in this split-level strand of interpretation is Alexander of Aphrodisias (late second, early third century CE), who interpreted the single AI as the divine intellect, i.e., the first unmoved mover or God (proven in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* XII).<sup>10</sup> Others, especially in Averroes' own Arabic tradition, hold the AI to be some other sort of eternal separate intellect, but not God; it is the lowest within an Aristotelian hierarchy of separate, "celestial" intellects and unmoved movers.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Averroes' most consequential critic,

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle describes the MPI with the term *dunatos* (429a22) and also as *dunamei* (429b8; cf. 429a16 and 430a11). These terms were rendered into Arabic as *al-inkān* or *bi-l-quwwa* (*DA* [Arabic, 72]) and into Latin as *possibilis*. Because of the comparison of this same intellect with matter (*hylē*) in *DA* 430a10 and 13, Alexander of Aphrodisias refers to it as the "material intellect" (*hulikos nous*), subsequently translated into the Arabic tradition as *al-'aql al-hayūlānī* and into Latin as *intellectus materialis*. Though Averroes adopts this Alexandrian title, he clearly thinks it is wholly immaterial and a separate substance. Avoiding confusion on this point (and others) is one reason why I use the abbreviation MPI. See also n. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle describes the AI, in turn, as *poiētikos* (*DA* 430a12), which became in Arabic *al-fa'āl*, and in Latin *agens*. The layers of translation and range of terminology used by different figures provide other reasons why I have chosen to simply assign standard abbreviations MPI and AI in order to refer to the relevant concepts and roles picked out by the various terms.

<sup>8</sup> *DA* III.4, 429b5; cf. 430a17.

<sup>9</sup> *DA* III.5, 430a23—*athanaton kai aidion*.

<sup>10</sup> This interpretation is defended today, e.g., by M. Frede (1996b), Caston (1999), Charles (2000, esp. 134), and Burnyeat (2008). See also Menn (1992, esp. 562, fn. 26).

<sup>11</sup> See also, e.g., Ross (1995) and others in n. 32. Most of these intellects are, of course, "celestial" only in the sense that they are the associated movers of heavenly bodies, but the intellects (unlike the bodies) are wholly immaterial, even lacking the "topical matter" of a particular position or path of circulation in space.

the Christian thinker Thomas Aquinas, famously argues that both the MPI and AI are intellectual *powers* unified in intellects multiplied and immanent within each human person. Both the majority (split-level) view and Aquinas's position pleasantly preserve the ordinary thought that each human being has an intellect of her own and can thus truly understand (with some effort) universal intelligible ideas. In Aquinas's version, the separable nature of the human MPI-AI also ensures the immortality of the human soul on an individual basis. Sounds good!

Averroes' wholly unique interpretation is that both the material/possible intellect (MPI) and the agent intellect (AI) are single, separate, and eternal substances with which human beings must come into contact—"log on to," as it were—in order for universal intelligibles to be understood. So Averroes' unicity thesis concerns not just the AI as a single eternal intellect (as implied by the rather common, split-level interpretation of Alexander and others), but it additionally picks out, far more controversially, the MPI (almost always taken to be the human intellect) as also singular, separate, and eternal. Again, neither of these separate intellects is God, on Averroes' view, but they are the lowest in the hierarchy of separate substances, and they are associated with the human thinking that takes place here on earth, the sublunar sphere. And again, neither of these separate intellects is *ours* (at least not in any exclusive way), so exactly what human "thinking" even amounts to is also a very real question. In any case, this view of intellect provides no room for individual immortality of the human soul.

On everyone's view, the MPI is the intellect that receives or understands the intelligible forms, but the role of the AI is far less clear. Although it functions slightly differently in Alexander, both Averroes and Aquinas take from him the idea that the intelligibles, which are potentially contained in the sense images or phantasms in the faculty of imagination (*phantasia*), must be *abstracted* from their material and particular content and conditions in order to be made actual universal intelligibles for the intellect. From a single image (or host of images) of, say, particular green things I have encountered, the universal form of *greenness* can be abstracted; from the images<sup>12</sup> of Bach's Well-Tempered *Klavier* and Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues," I can abstract the form of *music* or *notes*, etc. Averroes and Aquinas both think it is the AI that thus abstracts the intelligibles from the images, so that the intelligibles can then be received and understood by the MPI.

There is a sizeable and important collection of scholarship on varying interpretations through history given to the intellect(s) from Aristotle's *DA*.<sup>13</sup> A vast amount of literature (including books) has been devoted to Aristotle's theory of

<sup>12</sup> "Image" is one of various imperfect translations for Aristotle's *phantasia*. I use it or the borrowed "phantasm" to refer to these preserved deliverances of the various sense modalities, which are not limited to the visual, but include also sounds, smells, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Caston (1999, 199–200, fn. 1) lists some of this vast group.

intellect and philosophical psychology; the same is also somewhat true in the case of Alexander and certainly true for Aquinas.<sup>14</sup> Yet scholarly treatment of Averroes' novel view of intellect remains notably incomplete for various reasons. First, there have been issues discerning what Averroes' decided view really was. Over the course of his career, he wrote three different commentaries on the *DA* (as he did for several other Aristotelian works)—a “short commentary” or “epitome” (*jawāmiʿ*), a “middle commentary” or “paraphrase” (*talkhīṣ*), and a “long commentary” (*sharḥ* or *tafsīr*).<sup>15</sup> In his *Short Commentary on DA* (*SCDA*) (c. 1160), Averroes follows Ibn Bājja's position that the MPI is a disposition of the faculty of imagination.<sup>16</sup> He came to reject this view as an inappropriately materialist conception of intellect and intellection which illogically forced imagination to be both the mover (since the images are potentially intelligible) and the thing moved (receiving the actual intelligibles). In the *Middle Commentary* (*MCDA*) (1172 or 1181), he adopts a hybrid position taken from Alexander and Themistius, namely that the MPI is the human intellect and an immaterial disposition, though one that must be completed through interaction and conjunction with a separate substantial intellect, the eternal AI.<sup>17</sup> The unicity thesis is found only in his last and most substantial *Long Commentary on DA* (*LCDA*), completed around the mid-1180s. Further complicating matters, the latter has survived in full only in Latin translation, with some fragments in Arabic, while the other two commentaries survived in Arabic. Yet even if Arabic manuscripts of the *LCDA* had been extant, the texts of the *SCDA* and *MCDA* were only edited in the last century, and not all scholars were equipped to read Arabic. Furthermore, some scholars drew inferences only on the basis of the earlier commentaries (or simply relied upon others who did) and suggested that Averroes himself did not hold the unicity thesis.<sup>18</sup> While recent research has identified complexities regarding the dating and interrelationship between the *MCDA* and the *LCDA*, it is now nearly universally acknowledged

<sup>14</sup> Brentano (1867) and (1977), Wedin (1988), Burnyeat (2008), Moraux (1942), Fotinis (1979), Schroeder and Todd (1990), Kenny (1994), McInerney (1993), Wood (2019), etc. Many other books could be cited on these figures' psychological theories more broadly.

<sup>15</sup> There are complications with these names for the different types of commentaries; see esp. Gutas (1993). For sake of ease, I use the common “short,” “middle,” “long” titles and abbreviations (*SC*, *MC*, *LC*); this can also quickly remind readers of rough dating (*generally* “short” = early; “long” = late), though we cannot be sure of this “natural ordering” in all cases, especially the commentaries on the *DA* (Glasner 2009, 19–21). Short commentaries tend to be brief summaries, the middle versions are more detailed comments paraphrasing or often quoting the text, and the long commentaries give the full text of Aristotle in lemmata with detailed commentary on each lemma. For more on Averroes' writing in these commentary styles (though with a focus on the *Physics*), see Glasner (2009, part A). On the three commentaries on *DA* and their evolution, see, e.g., al-'Alawī (1992), Davidson (1992, Chapters 7–8), Druart (1994), Ivry (1999), and Taylor (2009a, Introduction).

<sup>16</sup> *SCDA*, 86. For issues of dating Averroes' works in general, see al-'Alawī (1986), Cruz Hernández (1997), and Endress (1999). For the commentaries on the *DA* specifically, see also Ivry (2002), Glasner (2004), Sirat and Geoffroy (2005), Wirmer (2007), and Taylor (2009a, Introduction).

<sup>17</sup> *MCDA*, 111–112.

<sup>18</sup> Gómez Nogales (1976); Gauthier (1984, 221–222); Torrell (2005, 192–193). Cf. Mohammed (1984).

that the *LCDA* represents Averroes' most developed and latest view on intellect, including the unicity thesis.<sup>19</sup>

Another complication, related to the first point, is that Averroes' view of intellect has long labored under the shadow of Aquinas's (and other Latin philosophers') arguments against it because it was associated with certain contemporaneous philosophers in the faculty of arts at the University of Paris in the mid-thirteenth century. Scholars have had to question the relation between Averroes and these latter "Latin Averroists," investigating whether Averroes himself ever really was an "Averroist" (in the same sense), and, indeed, whether any such Latin Averroists themselves ever really existed (i.e., whether any of Aquinas's coevals ever unequivocally held the doctrines in question, whether there was a development in their views, etc.).<sup>20</sup>

Again, it is by now quite clear that at least regarding the unicity thesis, Averroes is an Averroist—indeed, the arch-Averroist, as proven by his final position in the *LCDA*.<sup>21</sup> Still, even the Latin Averroists who hold the unicity thesis often have very different ways of defending the view and combining it with other parts of their systems.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Aquinas often argues against a mostly genuine Averroes. He obviously carefully read Averroes' *LCDA* in Latin translation and was greatly formed by it (as we shall see).<sup>23</sup> But Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle became more dominant in the Christian West,<sup>24</sup> and sometimes attendant cultural and religious factors unhelpfully crept into assessments of this

<sup>19</sup> We can roughly date the *SCDA* to around 1160(?) and the *MCDA* to around the mid-1170s to 1181. Most importantly, at least some of the basic tenets of the unicity thesis are confirmed in Averroes' likely latest commentary, the *LC Metaphysics* (c. 1190)—see *LCM* Λ.17. While Ivry, e.g., (2002, xxiv ff.), has argued for the priority of the *LCDA* to the *MCDA*, most other scholars (Davidson, Geoffroy, Elamrani-Jamal, and Taylor) do not agree. In any case, even Ivry (2002, xxvii) admits that the doctrine of the *LCDA* on the material intellect may well represent his final view, a point argued for convincingly by Taylor (2009a, Introduction, esp. xxxi); de Libera (1998, 17); Geoffroy and Steel (2001); and Sirat and Geoffroy (2005).

<sup>20</sup> First, for the literature on whether Averroes was an Averroist, see Gómez Nogales (1976), Gauthier (1982; 1984), Bazán (1972; 1985), and Taylor (2009a, c–cii). At least with regard to the unicity thesis on the *MPI*, there is really now no question that he was. Gómez Nogales and Gauthier were misled by considering only Averroes' earlier commentaries on the *DA*. Second, on whether Siger of Brabant, Boethius of Dacia, and other thirteenth-century philosophers actually held those views, see Gilson (1955), Van Steenberghen (1980), Bazán (1981; 2002). Third, on the different waves of Averroism, see Kuksweicz (1994), Bazán (2000; 2002), and Taylor (2009a, xcvi–civ). On all of the above, see Taylor's very helpful introduction (2009a) and Torrell (2005, 191ff.). According to Torrell (2005), the term "Latin Averroists" is from Renan (1852) and Mandonnet. It should be remembered that "Latin Averroism" is a blanket term, sometimes covering multiple doctrines, including the unicity thesis, but also the so-called "double-truth" theory and the eternity of the world. See Marenbon (2007) for a case for keeping the term.

<sup>21</sup> Note that I use the term "Averroist" as a neutral term designating Averroes' positions, similar views, or other thinkers holding them. I do the same with "Thomistic" (related to the views of Thomas Aquinas). I mean neither to affirm nor deny the baggage each term could carry; it is a practical decision, equivalent to using terms like "Aristotelian" or "Neoplatonic."

<sup>22</sup> See Brenet (2003; 2018b).

<sup>23</sup> Multiple other works by Averroes were translated into Latin by Aquinas's time, including the *LCs* on the *Metaphysics* and the *Physics*. See Wolfson (1961, 374).

<sup>24</sup> Caston (1999, 201) says that at least Alexander's position (and one might infer Averroes' as well) was "rarely...held after Thomas Aquinas's influential rejection of it." Of course, the Church's

debate.<sup>25</sup> Many studies have only offered accounts of Aquinas's arguments or dealt primarily with Aquinas and Latin Averroists.<sup>26</sup> Despite the monumental scale of the debate concerning the unicity thesis in medieval philosophy, there is not a single book on *Averroes'* arguments in relation to Aquinas. In the literature that does exist, even Herbert Davidson, one of the top Averroes experts of our time—albeit, sadly, recently deceased—, enumerates a list of Averroes' doctrines as discussed by Aquinas but seems to accept the latter's objections all too quickly: "All [these positions of Averroes] are duly refuted by Aquinas."<sup>27</sup> In contrast, scholars like Deborah Black, Jean-Baptiste Brenet, Richard Taylor, and others have emphasized the different presuppositions Averroes and Aquinas bring to the question of intellect and have adeptly defended Averroes against some of Aquinas's attacks. Their noteworthy and insightful contributions, however, have been limited to articles and have not received the serious responses they deserve.<sup>28</sup> I hope this book will, in part, serve as an introduction for newcomers to Averroes' self-standing position, highlighting and building upon some of this most significant recent scholarship on the topic.

The most important reason for writing this book, however, is that, while many scholars have substantially illuminated Averroes' overall view of intellect and his critical interaction with the Aristotelian commentary tradition, not enough attention has been paid to his own fundamental arguments for the pivotal and distinctive unicity thesis.<sup>29</sup> The aforementioned development in Averroes' views on

condemnations of the unicity thesis (among other doctrines) in 1270 and 1277 were also influential (or, if not themselves influential, they at least reflected a formidable tide against Averroism).

<sup>25</sup> Brentano (1867; 1977) offers an impressive interpretation of Aristotle's *DA*, which agrees on many points with Aquinas. Yet he does not disguise his disdain for Averroes:

This is the doctrine of the Arab, a doctrine which the level-headed philosopher from Stagira [Aristotle] had certainly never dreamt. But in spite of its eccentric mysticism and its sophistical turns of phrase it found great approbation among the Arabs, and also attracted many adherents in the *Christian* West, so that the great Scholastics, in particular Thomas Aquinas, thought it necessary to inveigh against it with all their might.

See also Gilson (1938, e.g., 321): "The point of view of the Averroists is self-consistent. Being ignorant of the immortality of the soul, they affirm the unity of the intellect, and individuation can be achieved through matter in their system, because the individual as such is valueless in their eyes... But the Christian philosopher knows that it is not so..." Also Renan (1852, 105).

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., McInerney (1993) and Black's (1995) review. For other accounts mainly treating Aquinas's arguments in isolation or the *Latin* Averroists (though certainly not all defending Aquinas), see Wéber (1970), Bazán (1974), Mahoney (1994), Dewan (1996), Conolly (2007), and Brenet (2012; 2018b). Brenet (2015b) covers the broader Western reception of and reaction to Averroes, though, again, he is quite critical of much of it.

<sup>27</sup> Davidson (1992, 301).

<sup>28</sup> For some very important articles on Averroes (proper) and Aquinas, see Bazán (1981); Black (1993; 2004); Taylor (1999a; 2009b; 2013a), and Brenet (2015c). Outside of articles, there is some discussion in Davidson (1992, 300–303); Wirmer (2008), esp. 376–384; and Brenet (2017, Chapter 7, esp. 47–48).

<sup>29</sup> Davidson's very important (1992) work, for example, nowhere discusses any philosophical arguments for Averroes' view. Wirmer (2008, 394–403) does discuss one of Averroes' arguments, though mainly focusing on its background sources. Taylor has done more than any other recent scholar to draw attention to Averroes' positive arguments (see below), though he has also emphasized Averroes' reliance on Themistius, e.g., in Taylor (2007b; 2013b).

intellect over the course of his career cries out for explanation. Remember: “Why would anyone want to think that?!” Averroes consciously develops a position neither he nor anyone else in the commentary tradition had ever previously articulated: “This came to me after extended speculation (*nazar ṭawīl*) and intense care, and I have not seen this account from any other [person] before.”<sup>30</sup> While his reading of prior commentators may roughly explain his position in the *MCDA* and it always remained a serious, studied concern for him, it cannot account for the leap in doctrine from the *MCDA* to the *LCDA*. Only new arguments and a new appraisal of what intellect demands could have persuaded Averroes. He does not merely pick and choose ingredients from his predecessors’ views, as if he were mixing a bizarre Aristotelian cocktail.<sup>31</sup> Rather, Averroes (1) offers strong textual arguments directly from Aristotle’s *DA* itself, and, more importantly, (2) he mounts powerful independent philosophical arguments.

Regarding (1), despite some influential and roughly Averroistic accounts of Aristotle’s AI,<sup>32</sup> and despite the fact that Averroes is the most important medieval commentator on Aristotle (known in the Latin West simply as “the Commentator”),<sup>33</sup> no one has yet provided a full analysis or defense of Averroes’ view as a viable interpretation of both the MPI and the AI in Aristotle’s *DA* III.4–5.<sup>34</sup> In fact, although some exegetes of Aristotle occasionally cite Aquinas in their commentary, Averroes is nowhere to be found, even though, as I will argue, Aquinas is largely dependent on Averroes for the fundamental tenets of his interpretation.

Regarding (2), in addition to his reading of the *DA*, Averroes advances at least two major independent philosophical arguments in his longest discussion of the unicity thesis in *LCDA* III, comment 5. I refer to them as the Determinate Particular Argument (DPA) and the Unity Argument (UA). Richard Taylor has done absolutely essential work drawing attention to these arguments, but more still needs to be done to differentiate them, reconstruct them, and assess them in detail.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *CDI*, 30.12–13.

<sup>31</sup> Davidson (1992, 282): “Averroes’ Long Commentary...refutes the positions of Alexander and Ibn Bājja...and arrives at what is in effect Themistius’ position.” Cf. Hyman (1981; 1999); Leaman (2004, 32): “entirely a creature of the commentators.” Geoffroy in Geoffroy and Steel (2001, 69) rightly critiques this temptation to oversimplify.

<sup>32</sup> To varying degrees, Kosman (1992), Ross (1995), and Kahn (1981; 1992).

<sup>33</sup> Averroes towers over the rest of the Arabic-Islamic tradition as the most prolific and textually attentive commentator on Aristotle’s works, and he was later regarded as the most important commentator within both the Latin-Christian and Hebrew-Jewish traditions. His impact on the Latin tradition and Aquinas specifically is well known. I will further demonstrate his influence on Aquinas’s commentary on the *DA*. See also n. 2.

<sup>34</sup> For an excellent article attempting to take this approach, albeit on a smaller scale, see S. Harvey (1999); also Taylor (2004, esp. 124–128). On the other hand, Davidson (1992, 298) and Leaman (2004) criticize Averroes’ reading of Aristotle’s *DA*.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor rightly identifies the arguments and notes their import in, e.g., (2009a, lviii and lx–lxii; 2011, 395–396; 2013a, 153–154), but they are not discussed in detail. For other brief mentions or quotations of at least one of the arguments, see, e.g., Blaustein (1984, 203–204); Black (1999b, 75–76); and Brenet (2005, 59). See also Wirmer (2008), cited above in n. 29.

Thus, my aim is to develop a new and comprehensive analysis of Averroes' unicity thesis on intellect and the central arguments for it, from their foundations in Aristotle's *De Anima* to Aquinas's most famous and potent objections. Though focused on Averroes, I will examine his positions in broader context, including his Greek and Arabic predecessors, as well as prior and later foils—especially Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) (an eleventh-century Muslim predecessor of Averroes) and Aquinas. Aquinas is crucial to engage since his arguments against the unicity thesis are the best known and the most penetrating, yet also because, ironically, his own Aristotelian commitments (unlike Avicenna's) are so close to and often drawn from those of Averroes. I will argue that this is also true for how the two read Aristotle's *DA* text. In this sense, it is wrong to think Aquinas and his objections should be ignored, or to conclude that he has nothing to offer to our reflections on Averroes. Aquinas read Averroes carefully and appropriated many of his insights. Nevertheless, I have already acknowledged how excessive or exclusive focus on Aquinas has somewhat obscured Averroes' thought in the past, and I definitely aim to avoid reading Averroes through Aquinas's eyes. If anything, to the extent I discuss Aquinas in this book, I will legitimately be reading *him* through *Averroes'* eyes. In turn, I seek to base my in-depth treatments of Averroes on extensive use of his corpus, including his earlier commentaries on the *DA* and his often complex, wider metaphysical commitments in the commentaries on the *Metaphysics*, theological treatises, and beyond. Finally, though I have already argued that a study of the commentary tradition is not sufficient for an understanding of Averroes, it is certainly necessary. So I will devote some attention to how his thought blossoms out of not only Aristotle but also a host of other Greco-Arabic thinkers, such as Alexander, Themistius, and Ibn Bājja (Avempace).

As mentioned above, this project is not only of historical interest for at least three reasons. First and most generally, Averroes' arguments can challenge our own conceptions of intellect and mind. If we contemplate universal intelligibles and, in particular, their unity, we should have some account of what thus unifies them. When we tap into something truly universal, say, *triangularity*, it is actually not personal or idiosyncratic at all. It is equally true for me and for you, and it is equally *triangularity*. It is the *same* thought. Averroes' view, for all its seeming oddity, easily explains this unity and, as we shall see, forces us to consider whether it could be explained on other views.

Second, though we are no longer committed to Averroes' specifically Aristotelian conception of the cosmos, his basic idea of a single intellect for all human beings still presents a live option. Paul Draper has recently sketched a contemporary form of "monopsychism"<sup>36</sup> quite similar to Averroes' unicity thesis, which he

<sup>36</sup> Averroes' view often became called "monopsychism" in later eras. But Averroes' position would be more accurately termed "mono-nous-ism," and some types of monopsychism also differ substantially (not just titularly) from the unicity thesis. So I will mostly avoid the term.

argues “is not obviously false” and which can help avoid problems in both philosophy of mind and traditional versions of theism.<sup>37</sup> Although I will mostly be unable to extend that intriguing project here, I will similarly try to argue that Averroes’ position is “not obviously false!”

Finally, with a narrower focus on human nature, Averroes represents one significant manifestation of Aristotelian noetic hylomorphism, which can be instructive for our consideration of hylomorphism broadly. If hylomorphism promises a better analysis of the psychology and metaphysics of human beings, we need to understand what it entails about intellect. As mentioned above, however, that has been no small task for philosophers in the millennia since Aristotle wrote. As with the second point above, I cannot hope in the present work to fully develop the implications from Averroes (or Aristotle) for contemporary philosophy of mind. However, by thoroughly treating Averroes’ own conception and arguments on intellect, we will begin to get a sense of the (dizzying) range of options among competing intellectual hylomorphisms, as well as a sense of what can be said for and against them. At the very least, Averroes casts into stark relief why intellect (and not all cognitive “mind,” including sensation) is something separate and distinct from the material body. Yet he does so in a way that fascinatingly anchors his conception of human beings as such in more naturalistic terms.

A brief plan for the book is as follows. In Chapter 1, I focus on Averroes’ interpretation of Aristotle’s *DA* III.4–5. It is impossible to grasp Averroes’ unicity thesis and his wider discussions of intellect without seeing how he treats his primary source text. Additionally, despite being overlooked or dismissed by many scholars of ancient philosophy, Averroes has a novel and quite credible reading of Aristotle, so I hope this chapter will also be of particular interest to those working on Aristotle’s *DA* today. Against various classical and contemporary versions of the majority view (exemplified by Alexander) that attribute the MPI to individual humans and the AI to a separate substance, I defend Averroes’ strategy, which I call “the all-or-nothing” reading. He assigns the MPI and the AI the same immaterial and ontological status on the grounds that most of the important attributes predicated of the AI in III.5 are also attached to the MPI in III.4: Aristotle views them both as separable, impassible, and unmixed. Despite their major disagreements, I also show that Averroes’ staunchest critic, Aquinas, follows and confirms Averroes in this all-or-nothing reading of *DA* III. The main distinction between Averroes and Aquinas in their interpretations regards the degree of separability/separation enjoyed by both types of intellect. For Averroes, the MPI and AI are separate and eternal substances, but, for Aquinas, they are two capacities or

<sup>37</sup> Draper (2019, esp. 160). See also Draper’s p. 163 for the comparison to Averroes. His “exactly one mind,” however, is identical to God (a merotheistic “panpsychotheism”), which would also eliminate supra-human intellect diversity (unlike Averroes). I thank Allison Krile Thornton for alerting me to Draper’s interesting chapter.

aspects of each human being's individual immaterial power of intellect. Each of these readings has a mix of purchase on and difficulty with Aristotle's text, but I attempt to demonstrate their overall plausibility.

In the core Chapters 2 and 3, I explore Averroes' two most prominent philosophical arguments from universals for his conception of the single separate MPI. My aim is certainly to reach a better understanding of what Averroes intends in each argument, but, in addition, to challenge each argument philosophically (while still from a roughly shared Aristotelian mindset) in order to see if they are successful. I try to make clear where my own assessments might diverge from whatever we can discern of Averroes' own thinking.

Chapter 2 is focused on the first major argument in *LCDA* III.5, the Determinate Particular Argument (DPA), which appears to be entirely Averroes' own. Averroes argues that the MPI must not be a determinate particular if it is to receive universal intelligible forms. By drawing on Averroes' metaphysics of substances and universals, I contend that his DPA only proves that the MPI is not a *material* determinate particular. Although it might provide reasons for the MPI's status as immaterial and eternal substance—what I term unicity (i), i.e., the *Nature* of the MPI—I call into doubt the DPA's sufficiency for proving the most important aspect of the unicity thesis—unicity (ii), i.e., the *Number* of the MPI, the claim that the MPI is only one. Though Averroes might have thought DPA strongly suggests unicity (ii), I argue that there are several ways to block that inference and to object to the DPA's additional premises. Avicenna and Aquinas in particular could resist it, even as they would accept the major conclusion that the MPI is not a material determinate particular.

The crucial unicity thesis (ii) ultimately depends on the second argument in *LCDA* III.5, the Unity Argument (UA), which I analyze in Chapter 3. In the UA, Averroes argues that there must be a single MPI in order to explain the unity of scientific knowledge and concepts. If we each had our own intellect and grasp of the "same" intelligible form, this would lead to an infinite regress, at least assuming some sort of realism about shared form and the mind-dependence of universals. The Unity Argument proves more efficacious for and central to Averroes' purposes. In response to the UA, I briefly consider alternative ancient and medieval explanations, again, especially from Avicenna and Aquinas, and in particular their view of common essences or natures.

After investigating these primary philosophical arguments for Averroes' view, in Chapter 4, I set out to thoroughly examine the most famous and piercing objections to it from Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas argues that Averroes cannot adequately make sense of the simple proposition *hic homo intelligit* ("This human being understands"). Therefore, I dub this contention and its deeper metaphysical underpinnings the HHI Argument. To assess this objection, we must divide the HHI into a phenomenological level (i.e., that we seem to experience understanding as something we do) and a more metaphysical level: What is intellect and its

activity? Could they possibly belong to separate substances, or must they belong properly to human beings in virtue of their substantial form? Averroes' counter-arguments to these HHI objections turn on his dual subject theory and doctrine of conjunction (*ittiṣāl, continuatio*) with the separate intellects. The dual subject theory holds that acts of understanding intelligibles have two subjects. One subject is the source or ground of the intelligible's truth and its connection to things of the world, i.e., "the subject of truth," situated in human images or phantasms. The second is the ground of the intelligible's existence in actuality, i.e., "the subject of existence," in the separate MPI. Because human beings and their images play the role of one of these subjects, we can conjoin or make contact somehow with the intelligible and the separate intellects.

Aquinas knows this aspect of Averroes' view and attacks it in various ways. While I argue that several of these criticisms fail, Aquinas's most important Analogy Objection against the dual subject theory significantly sharpens his HHI Argument. He insists that human beings as the subject of truth, just like the subject of truth for acts of sensation (e.g., sensed things out in the world) cannot be the agent of the act in question (which is rather the subject of existence). After considering several recent responses to Aquinas's objections from Black, Brenet, and Taylor, I offer my own interpretation of Averroes' view and assess what he must say in reply to Aquinas. On my view, Averroes can explain why we seem to understand (answering HHI on the phenomenological level), and why we can attribute acts of understanding and even the separate intellects to humans in some way (partly responding to HHI on the metaphysical level). Yet, I give textual and theoretical arguments for why Averroes should and does deny that human beings properly understand or have intellect. He thus has an error theory of human intellection.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I consider one further, less direct metaphysical objection from Averroes to competing theories like those of Avicenna and Aquinas, which could bolster his two primary arguments and DPA in particular: The notion of individual human intellective souls as separating from their respective bodies violates the idea of matter as the principle of individuation for human forms (which all three figures accept) and violates a more basic tenet of the inseparability of matter and form in Aristotelian hylomorphism. I briefly examine how Avicenna and Aquinas attempt to maintain the first point about individuation while denying the second—Avicenna making a more determinate break with hylomorphism, and Aquinas preserving what may be a coherent, albeit highly complicated, version of hylomorphism. In comparison with these positions, Averroes' view boasts some advantages, at least within a basic hylomorphist framework.

Overall, we will gain through these chapters a new insight into Averroes' signature unicity thesis and his wider philosophy as it relates to Aristotle and the

Aristotelian tradition, both before and after him. In analyzing these detailed arguments, however, we can come to appreciate him not only as the medieval “Commentator,” but, more importantly, as an incisive philosopher in his own right. There is so much more to be said for his utterly unique (and—let’s face it—eccentric) view of intellect than has been shown by both his previous detractors and even defenders. Why would anyone want to think that? Let’s try to find out.

# 1

## The All-Or-Nothing Reading

### Averroes (and Aquinas) on Aristotle's *DA* III.4–5

In order to understand Averroes' views on the intellect, we must first understand his primary source text. Aristotle's arguments and texts in the *De Anima* motivated Averroes and his further distinct philosophical arguments, so my main task in this first chapter is to show and defend how he reads Aristotle, with some comparison to Thomas Aquinas. Aristotle's *DA* III.5 (along with its connection to the preceding chapter III.4) is notoriously one of the most debated texts in all of ancient philosophy. The strikingly rival interpretations of the intellects from Averroes and Aquinas constitute one of the more interesting chapters in that history.

Yet contemporary commentators often dismiss or overlook an important core and structural interpretation of *DA* III.4–5 advanced by Averroes and later, following Averroes' lead, by Aquinas. Indeed, this point has not been given much attention even by medievalists.<sup>1</sup> However much Averroes and Aquinas disagree on the separate substantiality of the intellects, the key to both their interpretations is an all-or-nothing reading of the shared immateriality and ontological status of *both* the material/possible intellect (hereafter, MPI) and the agent/active intellect (hereafter, AI).<sup>2</sup> Averroes argues that the MPI, described in *DA* III.4 as *δυνατός* (بالقوة/*possibilis*), is separable, impassible, and unmixed—exactly like the AI (*νοῦς ποιητικός*/الفعل العقل/*intellectus agens*) in *DA* III.5. The fact that Aristotle uses this same language for each intellect implies that each should have the same ontological status. Either both are separate, eternal substances (as Averroes argues) or they are both inherent human faculties (Aquinas)—this is why I call the reading all-or-nothing. Therefore, any of the popular split-level attempts (both ancient and modern) to attribute *only* the MPI to humans or to characterize it as

<sup>1</sup> Gauthier (1984, 222ff.) makes a good case that Averroes' *LCDA* had an influence on Aquinas. He specifically mentions the doctrine of the cogitative power (p. 225). See Taylor (2009a, 325–326, fn. 101) on the passive intellect. I will go a step further and show that Aquinas's adoption of Averroes' interpretation on these points is simply a consequence of following him on a more overarching, structural argument regarding *DA* III.4–5 as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle describes the MPI as potential and as receiving the intelligible forms. The AI is considered somehow as the maker or activator of those intelligible forms. For Averroes and Aquinas, the AI makes the intelligibles by abstracting them from their condition of potentiality in sense images, making them truly universal and intelligible in act. For more on the basic roles of the intellects and the terminology, see the Introduction.

essentially embodied are undermined. This also means that the description of passible intellect (*νοῦς παθητικός*/العقل الآم/*intellectus passivus*) at the end of *DA* III.5 cannot be identified with the MPI, so a third faculty must be introduced.

In the beginning of the chapter, I will outline this all-or-nothing reading. First, in §1, I briefly discuss three families of opposition to Averroes and Aquinas as interpreters of Aristotle (both generally and in specific reference to this all-or-nothing reading). Sections 2 and 3 then provide an overview of each thinker's case, as well as an argument that Aquinas is historically dependent on Averroes for this interpretation. In §4, I argue briefly on linguistic grounds that the all-or-nothing reading is a *prima facie* justified reading of Aristotle's Greek text, and then I defend the all-or-nothing interpretation against the strongest objections in §§5 and 6, namely that, according to Aristotle's text, one need not grant such a robust and shared degree of impassibility and separability for the two intellects. If successful, I will have shown at least that Averroes and Aquinas have an interesting and defensible interpretation of Aristotle on intellect, and perhaps even that their reading provides a crucial corrective to various other common interpretations.<sup>3</sup> Despite Aquinas's agreement with Averroes' interpretation in the first part of the chapter, I will in §7 also explain how their similar commitments in the all-or-nothing reading ultimately tend toward two quite different conclusions on intellect. Finally, in §8, I come to their specific assessments of the other major interpretative strand regarding Aristotle on intellect, namely Alexander of Aphrodisias's.

## 1. The Opposing Views

Averroes and Aquinas share a core reading of *DA* III.4–5 with a few basic moving parts. Of course, no contemporary scholar disagrees with every point of Averroes' interpretation, but many (if not most) deny at least one major component of it. There are three basic (often mutually supporting) ways of reading *DA* in opposition to Averroes (and Aquinas), which I shall call modernism, materialism, and minimalism.

### 1.1 Modernism

Modernism (unlike the other two) is a general methodology, rather than a specific interpretation of the *DA*'s content. It represents a broad turn in the study of

<sup>3</sup> Given the nature of the texts involved, I do not think either Averroes' or Aquinas's interpretation (or any other interpretation I have seen) can claim to be conclusive. The question is whether theirs are legitimate candidates.