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Intellect and the Structuring of Reality in Plotinus and Averroes

John Hendrix

Though Averroes is not generally considered to be sympathetic to Neoplatonic thinking, there are definite parallels between the philosophies of intellect of Averroes and Plotinus. Both can be considered to be “Idealists” in that intelligible form precedes sensible form in perception, and that the material intellect of Averroes or Reason Principle of Plotinus, *nous hylikos* or *pathetikos*, depends in its functioning on the agent intellect of Averroes or Intellectual Principle of Plotinus, *nous poietikos*. The formation of the image in the *oculus mentis* is coincident with the formation of a thought, and the sensible form is a transient residue of the permanent intelligible form, as if it is reflected in a mirror and projected on a surface. For both philosophers, material intellect and intellect not connected to sense perception are mediated by a kind of *intellectus in habitu*, a practicing intellect which leads the individual to higher forms of understanding. The development of *phantasmata* or imprints of forms in the *oculus mentis* in the imagination or *phantasia* is the product of a dialectical relation between the mechanisms of sense perception in material intellect and an a priori understanding of forms in the intelligible, prior to the sensible. In order to be perceived, forms must be constructed, in a structuring of reality.

Plotinus was born in Lycopolis circa 205 and died in Campania in 270. Averroes, or Ibn Rushd, was born in Córdoba in 1126 and died in Marrakech in 1198. In the *Enneads* of Plotinus, I.6.3, shape is not something which is inherent to objects in sensual reality, but is rather something which is imposed upon objects by human thought, in the nature of geometry and ordering principles. The sensible form given by the material intellect connected to sense perception is already a product of intellection. The shape of the impression of the form of the object in Plotinus is something conceived, and joined to the material

object before it is received as an impression; the shape of the object is part of the a priori vocabulary by which intellect orders the sensual world, and reaffirms the existence of the perceiving subject in the world. For Plotinus, “So with the perceptive faculty: discerning in certain objects the Ideal-Form which has bound and controlled shapeless matter, opposed in nature to Idea, seeing further stamped upon the common shapes some shape excellent above the common, it gathers into unity what still remains fragmentary, catches it up and carries it within...”¹

The form and shape which intellect imposes on bodies are mechanisms of intellect in sense perception. As Averroes explains in the *Long Commentary on the De anima*, 3.1.5,² “It is necessary to assign two subjects to these actually existing intelligibles,” the intelligible as it exists in the form of the sensory object, “one of which is the subject due to which the intelligibles are true, i.e., forms, which are truthful images, the other, the subject due to which the intelligibles are only a single one of the entities in the world, and this is the material intellect itself.” The intellect of the perceiving subject in sensory perception is as responsible for how the sensible world is perceived as the forms which are assigned to the sensible world.

Sense perception transfers the form of the body or material entity, as conceptualized, according to Plotinus, “no longer a thing of parts, and presents it to the Ideal-Principle as something concordant and congenial...” (*Enneads* I.6.3); the perceived form must correspond to the preconception of it, the intelligible form. *Dianoia* or discursive reason, actualized material intellect, described as “the reasoning-principle in the Soul” in *Enneads* V.3.2, makes judgments about the sensible form given to it, which is already the product of judgments of the higher intellect, the Intellectual Principle, *nous poietikos*, the presence of active intellect in actualized intellect, and organizes them in combinations and divisions, corresponding to geometry and mathematics. As the *phantasmata* or imprints of forms come to reasoning power from intellect, “reasoning will develop to wisdom where it recognizes the new and late-coming impressions (those of sense) and adapts them, so to speak, to those it holds from long before...” according to Plotinus, as in an actualized intellect or *intellectus in habitu*. Perception is the product of experience in the interaction of thought and the sensible world, the dialectic of the incorporeal and

corporeal, the universal and particular.

In *Enneads* V.3.3, if sense perception is to “develop the impression received, it distinguishes various elements in what the representative faculty has set before it,” and if it makes a judgment on the form, “while it has spoken on information from the senses, its total pronouncement is its own...” Discursive reason in material intellect does nothing other than process images of forms which it has already defined itself, through the relation between active intellect and material intellect, Intellectual Principle and Reason Principle. Without the capacity to understand the intelligible, the intelligible form in relation to the sensible form, material intellect can only be unaware of the reality of the sensible world which is perceived, and unaware of the role that it plays in the formation and definition of the sensible world which it perceives as external to itself.

For Plotinus there can be no immediate sense perception of an object, without the mediation of the mirror reflection of the intelligible form of the object in intellect. In *Enneads* I.1.8, the intelligible form in intellect becomes the sensible form in sense perception, “not by merging into body but by giving forth, without any change in itself, images or likenesses of itself like one face caught by many mirrors,” in the same way that active intellect presents the intelligible to acquired intellect. Acquired intellect is only capable of receiving the intelligible to the extent of its limitations, as differentiated or sequentially arranged, in the same way that the mirror is only capable of receiving an image according to its corporeal state, adjusted in size and position.

The discerning of impressions printed upon the intellect by sensation for Plotinus is the function of discursive reason, not immediate sense perception. Since the sensual impressions in perception are copies and derivatives of intelligible forms, perception itself is a copy and derivative of reason. Reason in Plotinus is composed of mnemonic residues of perceived objects, what Plotinus calls “imprints” in “recollections” in *Enneads* V.3.2. Thoughts are propelled by the desire created by the multiple and fragmented images of perception as reconstructed in reason. In *Enneads* IV.7.6, sense perceptions merge together in reason like lines coming together from the circumference of the circle, from multiplicity to unity, subject to the ruling principles. In reality, sense objects are variable and differentiated in terms of size and location; they are multiple and fragmented, and it is only the reason of the

perceiver which allows them to be apprehended as whole and congruent. Sense objects themselves cannot be immediately perceived as a congruent whole. Once the diverse and multiple sense objects have been transformed into a whole by apprehension in sense perception, they cannot return to their original state. Apprehension permanently transforms sensual reality in conformance with the principles of reason.

Perception, according to Plotinus, divides, multiplies, and otherwise organizes sensual reality; in other words, perception is an intellectual process, the most basic exercises of which are mathematics and geometry. Perceived objects are divided and organized into parts which correspond directly to the organizational capacities of reason. The relation of parts and subdivisions to the whole and to infinity is the same in the sense object as it is in reasoning capacity. Geometry and mathematics are the mechanisms by which sensual reality is represented by perception to reason, though sense objects do not inherently contain geometrical and mathematical properties.

For Plotinus, discursive reason approaches *nous* when reason recognizes its recent sense impressions and “gathers into unity what still remains fragmentary, catches it up and carries it within,” the mnemonic residues or memory traces of previous sense impressions, in a process of reminiscence. In the *Enneads*, while perception grasps the “impressions printed upon the Animate by sensation” (I.1.7), through the mnemonic residue, a perception is a mental image for that which is going to remember it, and the memory and the retention of the object belongs to the image-making power (IV.3.29), or the imagination or *phantasia*. In the representation in the mnemonic residue, the intelligible form is present after the sensible form or perception is gone. Through memory, “every mental act is accompanied by an image,” as described in *Enneads* IV.3.30. Through the intelligible form the intellectual act is without parts and has not come out into the open, but remains unobserved within, unknown to Reason Principle.

The function of language, or the extent to which language can function, is as the mirror reflection of the intellectual in discursive reason, in the facilitation of memory, in that, as Plotinus says, the verbal expression unfolds its content and brings it out of the intellectual act into the image-making power, and so shows the intellectual act as if in a mirror, and this is how there is apprehension and persistence

and memory of it. The mechanism of perception mediates between the sensible world of objects in nature and the inaccessible intellectual, or *nous*, in a dialectical process between the subject and the world. There must be an affection which lies between the sensible and the intelligible, as Plotinus puts it, a proportional mean somehow linking the two extremes to each other (IV.6.1), the sensible form and the intelligible form. In the perception of an object, the object is already apprehended by the perceiving subject in relation to the perceiving mechanism, the construction of intellect involving the mnemonic residue and the intelligible form, through the use of geometry, as vision is understood in relation to geometry and mathematics, the intelligible mechanisms as the underlying structure.

In the *Long Commentary on the De anima* 3.1.5, Averroes posits three intelligences in the *anima rationalis* or the rational soul: agent intellect, material or passible intellect, and speculative or actualized intellect, also called acquired intellect. While material intellect is “partly generable and corruptible, partly eternal,” corporeal and incorporeal, the speculative and agent intellects are purely eternal and incorporeal. Actualized intellect is the final entelechy, or final actualization of potentiality. It is a form of *intellectus in habitu*, which can be both passive and active, corporeal and incorporeal. Material intellect is a possible intellect, a possibility, because it is both corporeal and incorporeal, thus neither corporeal nor incorporeal. Material intellect becomes actualized intellect through the affect of the agent intellect, which illuminates, as a First Cause, the intelligible form or *forma imaginativa*, the residue of the sensible form, the sensation, in the *anima rationalis*. The illuminated intelligible acts on material intellect until material intellect becomes actualized intellect, at which point intellect is able to act on the intelligible.

The *formae imaginativae*, as the basis of actualized intellect, are both corporeal and incorporeal; they bridge the gap or merge the two in the process of intellection. The *formae imaginativae*, like the sensations of which they are residues, are partially connected to the material or corporeal, and cannot be archetypes from without, but intelligibles within human intellect. The affect of active intellect on material intellect toward actualized intellect is a combination of the illumination and the resulting mechanisms of *intellectus in habitu*. The effect is in the combination of the receptivity of material intellect as a passive

substratum of cognitive and intellectual activity, like a blank tablet, and the will or desire on the part of the thinking subject to develop cognitive and intellectual *virtus*.

In the *De anima* 3.1.5, the existence of intelligibles or first principles in intellect, as they are understood in actualized intellect, “does not simply result from the reception of the object,” the sensible form in sense perception in material intellect, “but consists in attention to, or perception of, the represented forms...,” the cognition of the forms in actualized intellect wherein they can be understood as intelligibles, which requires both the participation of active intellect and the motivation of the individual for intellectual development. The goal of intellectual development is to achieve union with active intellect, the final entelechy, and through this union the highest bliss in life can be achieved. Such bliss can only be achieved “in the eve of life.”

Material intellect, in that it is only a possibility, contains neither actual intellectual cognition nor a faculty for intellectual cognition. Both of these are only possible in actualized intellect, through *intellectus in habitu*, acquired intellect, and the affect of agent intellect. Material intellect contains only the possibility of being united with active intellect; all material intellects are equally potential. *Intellectus in habitu* is developed as the *oculus mentis* of the *anima rationalis* develops a vocabulary of images or *phantasmata* stored in the *imaginatio* or *phantasia*. The phantasm, sensible form, is corporeal, and potentially intelligible, as the material intellect has the potential to understand the intelligible. The sensible form can only potentially be an intelligible form if it is predetermined by the intelligible form. In the *De anima*, 3.5.36, “this sort of action,” of the agent intellect, “which consists in generating intelligibles and actualizing them, exists in us prior to the action of the intellect,” prior to the formation of the sensible form in *imaginatio*. The corporeal condition of material intellect acts as a substrate for actualized and agent intellect, the partially and completely incorporeal, only as a blank tablet on which letters are written. The corporeal presence of the letters, the sensible form in *phantasia*, is predetermined by the writing of the letters, based on the idea of the letter, the intelligible form, which pre-exists the letter itself.

The passible intellect is able to distinguish and compare individual sensory representations, the sensible form, in the *virtus aestimativa* or

virtus cogitativa, which provides the material substrate for *intellectus in habitu*. The *virtus aestimativa* or *virtus cogitativa* might also be ascribed to the *sensus communis*, common sense. In distinguishing and comparing the *phantasmata* in *imaginatio*, intellect applies shape and form to otherwise nebulous, inchoate images. It also organizes them in totalities, in the most rudimentary processes of abstraction, and defines them in relation to organizational systems, such as geometry and mathematics. Averroes suggests that the sensory powers themselves entail an element of intellection, in that the imprint of the sensible form would depend on the formation of the intelligible form. In the *De anima* 3.1.7, “the cogitative faculty,” *virtus cogitativa*, “belongs to the genus of sensible faculties. But the imaginative and the cogitative and the recollective” faculties, *imaginatio*, *ratio* and *memoria*, “all cooperate in producing the image of the sensible thing, so that the separate rational faculty can perceive it,” as a reflected image in the *oculus mentis*, “and extract the universal intention,” the intelligible form, “and finally receive, i.e., comprehend it.”

The sensible form in the *oculus mentis* exists as a potential intelligible, and the material intellect, which is engaged in the formation of the sensible form, is capable of receiving the intelligible from the active intellect. The material intellect is the passible intellect described by Aristotle in *De anima* 3.5.430a24, which distinguishes and compares the individual representations of sense experience in the *oculus mentis*. Averroes compares *intellectus passibilis* to *phantasia* or *imaginatio*, or imagination, in *De anima* 3.1.20, the image-making *virtus* or power of intellect in the formation of the *phantasmata* of the sensible form. Following Aristotle, Averroes divides material intellect into the *sensus communis*, or sense perception, the *phantasia*, the *virtus cogitativa*, and *memoria*, in ascending order from corporeal to spiritual, as the active intellect is increasingly engaged. The material intellect cannot distinguish or apprehend intelligibles on its own. The material, passible intellect, is an acquired intellect, through the activities of *phantasia* and *memoria*, and it is based in the acquisition of habitual knowledge through exercise, the gymnastics of discursive reason, *dianoia*, as a material *intellectus in habitu*. The passible intellect operates according to its capacity for receptivity, not according to an ability to form concepts or abstractions.

Intellectual knowledge for Averroes must be distinguished from the habitual knowledge of passible intellect. Intellectual knowledge is the product of the merging of the *intellectus materialis*, which is considered to be incorporeal, despite its dependence on the sensible form, and the active intellect, which transforms the sensible form into the intelligible form, stripping it of its corporeal attachment and converting it from a particular to a universal, which makes the potentially intelligible *phantasmata* in the *oculus mentis* intelligible. The *intellectus agens* is the intellect which acts, which moves the material intellect, the intellect which only receives or is affected, in *De anima* 3.1.5. The active intellect allows the material intellect to be moved by imagination. The *intellectus passibilis*, as *virtus cogitativa* in combination with *phantasia* and *memoria*, forms the phantasm or sensible form in order that it can be perceived by the *intellectus agens*, and prepares it to receive the *intellectus agens*, by which the sensible form becomes the intelligible, which can be comprehended as a universal.

In the *De anima*, the transformation from potentiality to actuality takes place in the speculative intellect, which includes the *intellectus in habitu*, and is distinguished from the agent or productive intellect, *intellectus agens*, and the material or passible intellect, *intellectus passibilis*.³ The actualizing of the material intellect by the productive intellect is the result of the productive intellect illuminating the residues of sensations existing in the mind, the *formae imaginativae*, or mnemonic residues. The *formae* act on the material intellect after they have been illuminated, and material intellect is transformed into speculative intellect, which combines the material and productive intellects, the physical and eternal or archetypal, corporeal and incorporeal. The *formae imaginativae* themselves are both physical and archetypal, sensible and intelligible.

Averroes describes the material intellect, *intellectus materialis*, or passible intellect, as the transparent medium in relation to the *intellectus agens*, as light. As with Plotinus, in the relation between *nous* and discursive reason, the activity of the *intellectus agens* must precede that of the *intellectus materialis*. In the *intellectus passibilis*, individual representations are distinguished, in the *virtus aestimativa naturalis*. The material form is seen as color in relation to the light, from the *intellectus passibilis*, the *intentio* in the imaginative faculty, or *phantasia*. In other words, as Averroes says in *De anima* 3.3.18, “the

relation of the intentions in imagination to the material intellect is the same as the relation of the sensible to the senses.”⁴ The material intellect receives the active intellect, or agent intellect, in the same way that transparent bodies “receive light and colors at the same time; the light, however, brings forth the colors” in *De anima* 3.5.36. The intelligible form results from the cooperation of the material and agent intellects.

As in Plotinus, when the intelligible is received by the material intellect, it is subject to generation and corruption, multiplicity and accident. The intelligible form, when it is connected to the sensible form in material intellect, is not a permanent mnemonic residue as an archetype, but is fluctuating and impermanent in its corporeal manifestation. But the intelligible form does not disappear when its corresponding sensible form does, it merely ceases to participate in the sensible form. In *De anima* 3.1.5, “And if intelligibles of this kind are considered, insofar as they have being *simpliciter* and not in respect of some individual,” as universals, “then it must truly be said of them that they have eternal being, and that they are not sometimes intelligibles and sometimes not, but that they always exist in the same manner...” The intelligible form can participate in the sensible form of its own volition, or the volition of the agent intellect, but the sensible form cannot participate in the intelligible form, in its corporeal limitations, in the same way that color, for example, because it is tied to the corporeal body, cannot participate in light, although they are perceived simultaneously and are undifferentiated in perception.

According to Averroes, all individual material intellects are capable of some ability to form concepts and abstract ideas at a basic level, but beyond that intellectual development varies among individuals according to the level of volition. Intelligibles are apprehended the more completely as knowledge of the material world is greater, as knowledge of sensible objects depends on knowledge of intelligibles. Complete knowledge of the material world results in complete unity between the material intellect and the active intellect, the final entelechy achieved in the “eve of life.” Knowledge and understanding are possible only in actualized intellect, which must no longer be potential intellect. Intellectual knowledge, and philosophy itself, which is eternal, as an intelligible, must be seen as the ultimate goal of human life, and the cause of the most perfect bliss.

¹ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

² Franz Brentano, *The Psychology of Aristotle: In Particular His Doctrine of the Active Intellect* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 11.

³ Philip Merlan, *Monopsychism Mysticism Metaconsciousness, Problems of the Soul in the Neoplatonist and Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), p. 85.

⁴ Franz Brentano, *The Psychology of Aristotle*, p. 10.