Unconscious Thought in Peripatetic Philosophy

John S. Hendrix

Roger Williams University, jhendrix@risd.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.rwu.edu/saahp_fp

Recommended Citation

In the *De anima* 3.7 of Aristotle, the human intellect thinks the form or *eidos*, and processes it conceptually, as an image, which must be imprinted in the imaginative faculty. In 3.4, the sensible object is related to sense perception as the form of the object is related to intellect, as the intelligible form, in relation to the sensible form, as it is imprinted in the imagination through sense perception. Thus the intellect is to what is intelligible as sense perception is to what is perceptible. The intellect is receptive of the form as an intelligible; it must think the form in order to perceive it, as an intelligible. As sensible form, the objects of sense are only fragmented and disconnected. It is only as the form perceived as an intelligible, or the form as thought by intellect, that the form in the sensible world might make sense or participate in a congruent whole of experience.

In Aristotle’s *De anima* 3.5, knowledge is identical with its object: the object only exists because it is known, or thought, as an intelligible. The relation between intellect and thought and thought and object is not accessible to discursive thought, or *dianoia*; an understanding of the relation requires *nous*, intuitive or unconscious thought as it were. In *De anima* 3.4, although the intellect receives a form as an imprint in sensation and becomes identical in thought with the form, the intellect is not affected or altered in any way by the form or the sense object connected with it. Sense perception is also not affected or altered by the sense objects which it perceives, but intellect is free of the affection and alteration to a higher degree than sense perception. As discursive reason or *dianoia* is connected to sense perception and the corporeal, it is also more subject to those shortcomings, while intellect or *nous* is not connected to sense perception or the corporeal, and is free from the limitations and affectations.

In *De anima* 3.5, Aristotle compared the “active” intellect to light, because light makes potential colors actual, as the active intellect might lead the potential, material intellect to actuality, or the sensible form to the intelligible form, in the images presented by the imaginative faculty. The active intellect would thus lead *dianoia* to *nous*, the corporeal intellect to the incorporeal intellect. The potential, material intellect becomes actual when it can see the intelligible, because it is illuminated by the active intellect, in the
same way that light illuminates colors. The active intellect is seen as eternal and immutable, and is accessible to discursive reason only sporadically and ephemerally, depending on the extent to which the capacities of intellect are developed.

Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. c. 198–209) is the earliest philosopher who saw the active intellect implied in Book III of the De anima of Aristotle as transcendent in relation to the material intellect. He connected the active intellect with the incorporeal and eternal cause of the universe described by Aristotle in Book XII of the Metaphysics. In the commentary on the De anima of Aristotle by Alexander, intellect is seen as consisting of both a material and active element. The active intellect is seen as the cause of the “habitus” of the material intellect (Alexander, De anima, 88), its habit or appearance, form or perfection (85). Through the cause of active intellect, the material intellect develops from the potential intellect “through instruction and habituation,” to varying degrees, depending on the individual. The habitus develops in the material intellect “from its activity in apprehending the universal and in separating forms from their matter,” in other words, from its dianoetic process of the exercising of abstraction and conceptualization, in combination with the extent to which it is illuminated by active intellect in order to see itself from outside itself in its mechanisms, that is, to have consciousness, and to understand the extent to which its mechanisms are manipulated and determined by the processes of perception in relation to intellect, and the unconscious processes of active intellect. The development of the habitus in material intellect requires the element of self-consciousness in thought.

The thought which is an object of thought is immaterial, or unconscious as it were, while the thought of which immaterial thought is an object is material. In the same way, in the De intellectu of Alexander, the “enmattered forms that are potentially objects of thought” become objects of thought, immaterial, through intellect, as intellect separates them from their matter, as it separates itself from its matter, and in that way the enmattered forms become actual just as thought becomes actual, because the enmattered form as object of thought is identical to thought itself: “intellect in actuality is nothing other than the form that is thought of” (108), the intelligible form of the object, which is the object as immaterial object of thought. Knowledge, then, “in actuality is identical with the actual object of knowledge.”

The productive intellect is “called from without,” and “comes to exist in us from outside,” because it is immaterial, and because it is itself an object of
thought, as thinking “occurs through the reception of form,” intelligible form, in perception. Actualized thought is able to separate the sensible object as enmattered form and the idea of the object as intelligible form, as it separates the mechanisms of discursive reason in material intellect from the role of the intelligible in perception. Because of this, there must be something at work in thought, in the activity of intellect, for which “what it is to be intellect does not lie in its being thought by us,” that is, unconscious.

Material intellect, in discursive reason, does not think objects of thought; rather, it thinks objects of perception, which are only potentially objects of thought. The object of perception, the sensible form, becomes an object of thought, the intelligible form, “by the agency of the intellect” (110), productive intellect as an agency of active intellect. The activity of intellect is to “separate and abstract by its own power objects of perception that are such in actuality” from the sensible object which accompanies the object of perception, and to define the object of perception as such. The activity of intellect is caused by productive intellect, which makes potential intellect capable of being active, capable of thinking, capable of understanding forms in perception. Active intellect does not produce intellect of itself, but completes intellect which already exists. It enables potential intellect to develop and come to completion, without being affected, or “coming into existence through something else” (111). When potential intellect is developed and completed, it is capable of independently thinking objects of thought.

Because the intellect in habitus can apprehend the intelligible form in independent intellectual activity, and the intelligible form is identical to the act of the intellect in habitus, the intellect in habitus has the ability to “know itself” (Alexander, De anima 86), to be self-conscious. The apprehension of the intelligible form is the product of the cognitive act on the part of the material intellect in habitus, and the apprehension is a result of the identity between the intellect itself and the object which it knows, the self-consciousness, and not the actual knowledge of the object, which is only “per accidens.” Prior to the act of knowing on the part of the material intellect in habitus, “the knowing faculty and the thing known stand apart,” separate and unconnected. The individual is not conscious of the relationship between intellect and sensible objects as they are perceived; reality is structured in unconscious thought. When the habitus is actualized, the distinction between sensible object and the thought of it dissolves. The sensible object no longer has a relation to the intelligible thought, because they can be seen to be identical, as in a double lighting. The sensible object is no longer seen
as matter, but as eidos, incorporeal and intelligible. Sensation is only capable of perceiving objects as matter, as particular existents, thus sensation is not capable of sensing itself in the way that intellect is capable of knowing itself.

The active intellect is the productive intellect, according to Alexander, in contrast to the material intellect, or the material intellect in habitus, in a developmental state. In the De anima (3.5.430a14–15), Aristotle distinguished between the quality of mind which is “what it is by virtue of becoming all things,” and the quality “which is what it is by virtue of making all things,” the making of the actual from the potential. The productive intellect is independent from matter, and is the cause of the existence of the sensible object as form or eidos. That which is most purely intelligible is the cause or producer of all objects of knowledge. The production of an intelligible from a sensible object requires an unconscious, intelligible cause, which is prior to the sensible object. The productive intellect is impassible and unmixed; it has none of the qualities of material existence, of the relations between particulars. The productive intellect is impassible because the passive recipient of its action is substrate matter, that which is subject to change and affect. The productive intellect is thus incorruptible, not subject to the change and affect of which it is the cause. Singular sensible objects are cognized by productive intellect in singular acts, not because of the relation between particulars in productive intellect, but because of the role of discursive reason in material intellect, before the intelligible form has been separated from the material substrate in intellect in habitus.

Themistius (317–c. 387) made use of Alexander’s De anima in his commentary on the De anima of Aristotle. While in the thought of Alexander thought and perception are intimately connected, almost identical, Themistius goes to much greater length to differentiate the two. Sense perception must be distinguished from reasoning, and there are many varieties of the capacity for reasoning. In contrasting sense perception and reason, Themistius does not distinguish between the types of reason as established in the Aristotelian tradition: intellect (nous), thinking (noësis), capacity for reasoning (logikê dunamis), and discursive thinking (dianoia). Thinking is divided into the capacity for imagination and the capacity for judgment, and the two are clearly distinguished, as belief and assent play no role in imagination. Imagination (phantasia) is that part of thinking which is most closely related to sense perception, because imagination depends on the reception of the sensible image, and the retention of the image in thought, the mnemonic residue. Imagination is a necessary precondition for intellect, but the two must still be
distinguished. Imagination is the process in which an image or *phantasma* “comes to exist in us” (Themistius, *De anima* 89)\(^5\) as an imprint or *tupos* and “form of the sense-impression” or *aisthêma* in the soul. It is concluded from this that imagination is a capacity or *hexeis* of the soul for discernment, excluding the faculties of belief or assent. Imagination must be a faculty for discernment for Themistius because the *phantasma* must be in part a product of thought and not just a pure imprint of the sensible object; it must be an intelligible, not just a sensible.

According to Themistius, sense perception must be distinguished from imagination because imagination occurs in sleep while sense perception does not. Imagination thus requires an unconscious thought activity, something other than discursive reason, but not self-conscious, an element of *noesis* as a product of active intellect, intellect from without. While sense perception is both potential and actual, like material intellect, both tied to the sensible object and incorporeal, potential sense perception, the engagement with the sensible, corporeal object, does not occur in dreams. Dreams only consist of the residues of sense perception, the mnemonic residues of the traces of the imprints, or *enkataleimmata*, involving the intelligible as a product of active intellect. Themistius points out that it is difficult to distinguish between the activity of perception and the activity of imagination in relation to the sense object as it is perceived, that is, between the sensible and intelligible form, and the activities of discursive reason and *nous*.

Such a distinction would require a consciousness of the influence of active intellect, and a self-consciousness of reason in perception. Imagination is active while sense perception focuses on the object; sense perception acts on the sensible object as imagination acts on sense perception. The imprint is formed as sensible and intelligible simultaneously, but the intelligible endures in *memoria* while the sensible does not. In the *De anima* of Themistius, the relation between the object of sense perception and sense perception is the same as the relation between sense perception and imagination in part because both require the imprinting of the *eidos*, the former being the sensible, the latter being the intelligible. The enfolding of the *phantasia* in material intellect constitutes the process of actualization or entelechy of the material intellect to active intellect, in the perfection of the imagination through sense perception: imagination is “perfected by progressing to actuality through the agency of sense perception, just as sense perception is through the agency of the objects of perception.”

The material intellect for Themistius cannot be identical to the objects
that it thinks; it must remain potentially all things, which differentiates it from actual intellect, through the influence of productive intellect, which becomes identical to the objects that it thinks. The material intellect is “none of the objects that exist prior to its thinking” (Themistius, De anima 94), and is thus not real or actual, but potential. Intellect as both material and actual can be compared to a line which is both bent and straight, one line in two different states. Potential intellect is something (to tode), according to Themistius, as matter is something, while actual intellect is “what it is to be something” (to tōide einai; Themistius, De anima 100), as the sensible object as form in the soul is what it is to be something. In the same way, the thinking subject as potential intellect is “I” (to egō), while the thinking subject as actual intellect is “what it is to be me” (to emoi einai). The thinking subject is the “intellect combined from the potential to the actual,” in becoming, in discursive, conscious thought, while “what it is to be me” comes from actual intellect, in producing, in intellection, which involves unconscious thought. The potential thinking subject and the actual thinking subject are distinct. The actual thinking subject is the product of productive intellect, which is made possible by potential intellect, which is made possible by the imagination, which is made possible by perception. Perception, imagination, and potential intellect together can only allow for the potential thinking subject; productive intellect, as distinct from what makes it possible, alone allows for the actual thinking subject. Productive intellect alone is a “form of forms,” an incorporeal intelligible, while perception, imagination and potential intellect are tied to the corporeal and are only substrates, as matter is only a substrate for the form of a sensible object.

The thought of the material intellect, in discursive reason, is subject to time, while the thought of productive intellect, actual intellect given by active intellect, is not, as Themistius explains in De anima 101. In the De anima of Aristotle, “in the individual, potential knowledge is in time prior to actual knowledge” (3.5.430a), subject to time, but outside the individual potential intellect, there is no temporal relation between potential and actual intellect. Actual intellect is “mind set free from its present conditions…immortal and eternal,” incorporeal. Mind as passive, in its material potentiality, is destructible and subject to time, as in the ephemerality of the phantasmata, but mind as active is free from its material conditions; the intelligible is permanent and not subject to temporal duration. Discursive thinking is equivalent to thinking in time; time is not present in the same way in unconscious thought or dreams.
When intellect thinks an object in matter, intellect and object are distinct, according to Themistius (Themistius, *De anima* 97), but when intellect thinks the immaterial object, the intelligible, as it has become an intelligible through the illumination of the productive intellect, “what thinks and what is being thought are identical.” The same would be said for vision: when the perceiver sees the enmattered object, perception and object are distinct, but when the perceiver sees the intelligible form in the mind’s eye, illuminated by the productive intellect as an intelligible, what sees and what is seen are identical, as what is seen is the product of what sees unconsciously.

In the *Risala fi l’-aql* of Abu Nasr Alfarabi (c. 872–951), also known as *De intellectu*, or *Letter Concerning the Intellect*, actualized intelligible becomes an object of thought in discursive reason, in actualized intellect; it becomes a concrete form of the abstract. The actualized intelligible is the articulation of the intellectual insight, which can be counted and included in a totality, as Alfarabi says in the *Risala*, “when [the intelligibles] become intelligibles in actuality, they become, then, one of the things existing in the world, and they are counted, insofar as they are intelligibles, among the totality of existing things” (Hyman, p. 216). The actualized intelligibles lead discursive reason back to the intelligibles themselves, which are their source, while the sensible leads discursive reason back to its source, the intelligible. In the *Risala*, when the actualized intelligible becomes the object of the thought of the actualized intellect, the actualized intelligible and the actualized intellect are identical, as “that which is thought is then nothing but that which is in actuality an intellect” (Hyman, p. 216). The intellect in actuality is only so in relation to the form of the actualized intelligible; the intellect remains potential in relation to other intelligibles which are still potential, in the material, and have not become actual. When intellect becomes actual in relation to all intelligibles, and intellect becomes the actualized intelligibles themselves, then the object of the thought of intellect, the actualized intelligibles, is intellect itself: “when it thinks that existent thing which is an intellect in actuality, it does not think an existing thing outside of itself but it only thinks itself,” in unconscious thought.

According to Alfarabi, “when the intellect in actuality thinks the intelligibles which are forms in it, insofar as they are intelligibles in actuality, then the intellect of which it was first said that it is the intellect in actuality, becomes now the acquired intellect,” the third of the Aristotelian senses, *intellectus adeptus* or *nous epiktetos*. For the acquired or actualized intellect which thinks itself as an intelligible, “the statement ‘that which belongs to us
in actuality as an intellect’ and ‘that which is in us in actuality as an intellect’ is the very same statement,” in relation to “those forms which are not in matters and which never were in them,” according to Alfarabi (Hyman, p. 217). That which we perceive and think is our own intellect, which constitutes the forms which define matter. But intellect as the object of its own thought is inaccessible to conscious reason.

For Alfarabi, intellect ascends from the material to the agent intellect as it ascends from the particular to the eternal, from the multiplicity of divisions to the unity and simplicity of that which is indivisible. In the ascent to agent intellect, we ascend “to the things which are more perfect in existence,” and we ascend “from that which is best known to us to that which is unknown” (Risala, Hyman, p. 219), in the unconscious. The knowledge of things which are most accessible to intellect is the lowest form of knowledge; in order to develop, intellect must come to grasp the knowledge which is least accessible and most unconscious.

In the Liber Naturalis (al-Tabiʿiyyat) of Avicenna or Ibn Sīnā (c. 980–1037), the potential knowing of the material intellect is actualized when intelligibles are projected onto it from the purely intellectual and incorporeal, which is the active intellect, which is capable of abstracting intelligible forms. According to Avicenna, “the cause for giving intelligible form is nothing but the active intellect, in whose power are the principles of abstract intelligible forms” (6.5.5).7 Cogitative knowledge is different from knowledge of principles or intelligibles, which requires the participation of active intellect in actual intellect. Cogitative reason is necessary to ascend from material intellect to actual intellect, involving the stage which is called intellectus in habitu, habitual intellect. Intellectus in habitu is described as an intellect as a state, nous kath hexin, a state of preparedness for intellect. Intellectus in habitu is an intellect in act, intellectus in effectu, though not in constant act, only when turned towards active intellect. Intellectus in habitu operates according to principles or first intelligibles, in the participation of active intellect, when the intelligible is present in it, as reflected, illuminated or emanated by active intellect, in an acquired intellect, an intellectus accommodatus, or an intellect acquired from outside human intellect, accommodatus ab extrinsecus. The intellectus in habitu leads to an actualized intellect, which is able to separate itself from the corporeals of sense perception and the mechanisms of material intellect. In the Liber Naturalis, “Thus the rational soul, being in a certain kind of union with the forms, is
capable of having present in it free from all admixture the forms that come from the light of the active intellect itself” (6.5.5).

Active intellect and material intellect are mediated by the intellect which is both active and potential, intellectus in habitu, which is a state of preparedness for intellection in the participation of active intellect. It is a precondition for knowledge of both sensibles and intelligibles in material intellect, in the connection between the soul and the corporeal. Once the soul is separated from the corporeal, it no longer requires the preparatory sensory potencies assimilated in the sensus communis, and is capable of union with the active intellect, insofar as it can receive the participation of active intellect. “But when the soul is once freed from body and from the accidents of body, it will be capable of union with the active intellect, and in this intellect it shall find intelligible beauty and eternal delight” (Liber Naturalis 6.5.6).

Material intellect is present in human intellect from birth, according to Avicenna. Material intellect then progresses to the stage of intellectus in habitu, then to actualized intellect, in which it can be participated in by active intellect. Intellectus in habitu is capable of operating according to principles, principia conoscendi, while actual intellect is capable of operating according to intelligibles. Both the principia conoscendi and the intelligibles come from without, from active intellect; they are not properties inherent to material intellect. The memory of the principle or intelligible is not an actual memory, as principles and intelligibles are incorporeal, so a trace of them cannot be retained. A memory of an intelligible is actually the memory of the knowledge of the intelligible, not the intelligible itself, as it is reflected onto the oculus mentis in the illumination of the active intellect. Human intellect cannot possess the intelligible or the trace of the intelligible; it can only possess the knowledge or awareness of the intelligible, in its heightened state of functioning as material intellect in intellectus in habitu or actualized intellect. Conscious thought can only be aware of the presence of unconscious thought.

The immediate sensible perception can have no permanence until it has been transformed by the agent intellect into a universal, and processed in incorporeal intellection. The sensible form is then received by the soul and becomes the material of the acquired or obtained cognition, intellectus adeptus or intellectus accommodatus, and actual cognition is possible. The acquired cognition is the acquired intellect, nous epiktetos, but is not the same as the intellectus in habitu, which is discursive reason as distinct from agent intellect. In relation to Aristotle’s doctrine of passive and active intellect, the ac-
tive intellect becomes the foundation for intellection, as mediated by the intellectus in habitu in combination with the intellectus adeptus.

Sense objects of themselves are subject to the fluctuating and impermanent collection of unrelated particulars that constitute the material world. The same is true of the sensible form in the phantasia, as long as it is connected to the corporeity of the sensus communis and the phantasia in cogitative reason. As the sensible form is processed as the intelligible form and stored in imaginatio as phantasmata and in memoria as intentiones, the mnemonic residues can be retained by cogitative reason and vis aestimativa to varying degrees, to the extent of the participation of active intellect, so that intellect is seen as a kind of palimpsest of traces of forms and thoughts of varying clarity in relation to cognition, conscious thought.

Unconscious thought might be seen as the intelligible in cognition in the Aristotelian model, as connected to sense perception, only accessible to conscious thought or actual intellect to varying degrees; unconscious thought would be seen as thought participating in something outside itself, the archetypal intelligible which is the product of the illumination of active intellect. For Aristotle, as can be seen in the third book of De anima, thought participates in something external to itself, the active intellect. Full access to intelligibles as illuminated by the active intellect is only possible for Avicenna when the soul is released from the body in a state of beatitude, when intellection is detached from sense perception, though such detachment is possible to varying degrees in the actualization of intellect, though only at various moments, subject to the temporal and spatial limitations of the human soul and conscious reason.

The active intellect of Averroes or Ibn Rushd (1126–98) can be seen as a form of unconscious thought. In his Long Commentary on the De anima, 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 speculativus, acquired intellect, and the affect of agent or active intellect. Material intellect contains only the possibility of being united with active intellect; all material intellects are equally potential. The phantasm in imagination 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 3.5.36,8 “this sort of action,” of the active 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 perceived form in _imaginatio_, in the unconscious, as it were.

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,” the _species sensibilis_, “so that the separate rational faculty can perceive it,” as a reflected image in the _oculus mentis_, “and extract the universal intention,” the intelligible, “and finally receive, i.e., comprehend it.” In the words of Franz Brentano, “Once they have done this, and once the activity of the active intellect has made the images intelligible in unconscious thought, the material intellect, which stands to all intelligible forms in the relation of potentiality, receives from the images the concepts of sensible things.”

The material intellect, _virtus cogitativa_, in that it is tied to the particulars of sense perception, is a singular entity in each individual, and cannot produce meaning or communication, cannot unite the cognitive faculties of each individual. The active intellect, on the other hand, in that it is capable of formulating intelligibles, which are incorporeal and not tied to the materials of individual sense perception, is able to unite particular individuals engaging in cognition in order to create a shared intellection which produces communication and meaning. This is sometimes referred to as “monopsychism.” In _De anima_ 3.1.5, “And since it has already been shown that the intellect cannot unite with all individuals by multiplying according to their number with respect to that part that is the opposite of intellect qua form,” material intellect, “the only thing that remains is that this intellect unites with all of us through the union with us of concepts or intentions present to the mind…”. It is thus a “collective unconscious.” While the operation of the _virtus cogitativa_ is particular to each individual, the intelligible form, which it receives from the active intellect, is universal and shared by every individual, as it is retained as a permanent archetype in intellection.

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 mnemic 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. As Aristotle said, “Mind does not think intermittently” (_De anima_ 430a10–25). Mind is always thinking, consciously and uncon-
sciously. In the *De anima* of Averroes, 3.1.5,11 “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 active intellect, but the sensible form cannot participate in the intelligible form, in its corporeal limitations.

The material intellect of every individual is capable of receiving the intelligible form; individual material intellects receive intelligibles from the unconscious active intellect to varying degrees, depending on the extent to which the individual aspires to intelligible knowledge. It is not that the material intellect is not always thinking and does not always have the potential to receive intelligibles, it is just that it is not always united with active intellect. It is through the perfected union between the material intellect and the active intellect that intelligibles are apprehended, and that a beatific state can be achieved by the most complete apprehension of them as possible.

---

8 Ibid., p. 10, n. 49, 3.5.36, Fol. 178b.
9 Ibid., p. 10, n. 48, 3.1.7, Fol. 167b.
10 Ibid., p. 10, n. 52, 3.1.5, Fol. 164b.
11 Ibid., p. 11, n. 55, 3.1.5, Fol. 165b.