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Cover
Mašhad, Kitābḫāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḍawī 300, f. 1v; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v
The “Conjunction” of the Intellect
with the Separate Substances and God:
The Greek and Graeco-Arabic Background

Cristina D’Ancona

Abstract
The Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato’s Cave assumes that beyond discursive reason there is in the soul a power to grasp the intelligible Forms and the first principle: the One, or the Good. In itself beyond knowledge, the One-Good is nevertheless present to the human soul as the ultimate foundation of knowledge which is made possible by the Forms. The perfect simplicity of the One-Good implies transcendence with respect to knowledge; however, the soul can have a grasp of it, provided that it raises itself to the non-discursive mode of knowledge which is typical of the Intellect – a separate substance whose nature is intellection. This Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato’s doctrine of knowledge reached the Latin Middle Ages through various channels and fueled the idea that our mind can indeed get direct acquaintance with the supra-sensible realm and its ultimate principle, God. Surprisingly enough, in the philosophical culture of the Middle Ages, both Arabic and Latin, this account was not seen as incompatible with the Aristotelian theory of knowledge, although the latter is based on abstraction from sense perception and does not grant any contact between the human mind and the Unmoved Mover. This article explores the roots of the medieval intermingling of the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic epistemologies which occurs, in particular, in the theory of the “conjunction” of our mind with the intelligible realm. Based on Alexander of Aphrodisias’ exegesis of the De Anima, this theory originates in Arabic philosophy. Here Alexander and Plotinus merge together in the creation of the so-called ʿaql mustafād / intellectus adeptus.

The pinnacle of man’s cognitive powers is not reason. Above it, there is a kind of cognition which has the same immediacy as sight and which allows those who can activate it to come into contact with the supra-sensible truths - even with God. Such an account of the ultimate perfection of knowledge is best exemplified by Dante’s Paradise XXXIII, 79-99, where the conjunction with God’s infinity is mentioned: tanto ch’io giunsi / l’aspetto mio col valore infinito (80-81: “till I made / my vision one with the Value Infinite”, trans. Langdon). This conjunction allows a human mente (97) to see directly the luce etterna. In the inner part of God’s eternal light the rational structure of the cosmos is visible, contained in a point of perfect simplicity: nel suo profondo vidi che s’interna / legato con amore in un volume / ciò che per l’universo si squaderna (85-87: “I saw that far within its depths there lies / by Love together in one volume bound / that which in leaves lies scattered through the world”, trans. Langdon). In the Convivio, our intellect (mente) features as that part of the human soul that

* I owe warm thanks to Silvia Donati and Concetta Luna. They have saved me from a number of errors; for those which remain I am alone responsible.
participates in the divine nature (Conv. III ii 14). Shortly after, Dante goes as far as to label it “deity”: Onde si puote omai vedere che è mente: che è quella fine e preziosissima parte dell’anima che è deitate. E questo è il luogo dove dico che Amore mi ragiona della mia donna (“So now we may see what is meant by mind, that distinguished and most precious part of the soul which is deity. This is the place in which I say Love speaks to me about my lady”, Conv. III ii 19, trans. Lansing).

Such a possibility granted to a human mind is, at first sight, the opposite of the Aristotelian account of intellection which is abstraction-based and gives no room to any cognitive contact between man and God. It is however well known that the Middle Ages bridges the gulf between the two philosophical traditions, even though their coexistence mostly takes the form of a demarcation between fields: while our daily knowledge develops in a way which can be analyzed in Aristotelian terms, both the visto beatifica of the disembodied souls of the blessed and the unio mystica of some souls here in this life can be conceptualized in the Neoplatonic vein of Dante’s verses.

One of the paths of this Neoplatonic heritage in the Latin Middle Ages was Proclus’ doctrine of the so-called unum in nobis explored by Werner Beierwaltes, to whose memory is dedicated this article. Beierwaltes shed light on the fact that while the mystical tradition mostly assumes that the contact with God is not a matter of intellect, rather of personal experience, the Proclean tradition transmitted in various ways to the Latin Middle Ages fuels the idea that what reaches the One is a cognitive power even higher than intellect.

Besides the Aristotelian and the Neoplatonic accounts of intellectual knowledge and its highest point, a third one spreads in the mature Middle Ages: the Arabic-Latin “conjunction” (ittiṣāl, continuatio or coniunctio) between our mind and the Agent Intellect. What is striking is that in medieval philosophy neither the Neoplatonic heritage nor the Arabic “conjunction” are cast as intuitionist doctrines of knowledge, opposed to and incompatible with the Aristotelian sequence of sensation, memory, experience, and intellection as outlined in An. Po. II 19, 100 a 3-9. Rather, the human soul is often seen as starting from sense perception and reaching, at its pinnacle, a cognitive contact with a self-standing reality independent of and prior to the concepts formed by abstraction. A modest homage to Werner Beierwaltes, this article collects some materials useful to explaining how all these accounts of knowledge merged together in the Middle Ages.

1. Beyond Discursive Reasoning: Beierwaltes and Medieval Neoplatonism

In a condensed contribution to the volume on the metaphysics in the Middle Ages issued from the 2nd Cologne Medievistentagung Beierwaltes called attention to an elusive, yet significant Neoplatonic doctrine that became part and parcel of medieval philosophy: the One is present in the human soul as the ultimate principle of its essence, knowledge (“als der durchtragende Grund seines im Erkennen seien den Wesens”). For the Neoplatonists, he wrote, knowledge does not arise from sense-perception; rather, we know the things perceived because we possess in our souls the Forms which allow us to grasp the rational structure of these things. Now, if the One were indeed external to our souls, the Forms

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themselves would remain outside our reach, because the Forms always bring with themselves, so to speak, the One upon which they depend. The epistemological side of this metaphysical tenet is that identity is the conditio sine qua non of thought; hence, if the Forms preexist in the soul, so does their principle, even though few human souls are or become aware of this presence – exactly as few human souls are or become aware of the preexistence of the Forms in them. Since this Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato’s account of knowledge as recollection was cast by Proclus in iconic formulae which reached the Latin Middle Ages - τὸ ἓν τῆς ψυχῆς, τὸ ἓν ἕνων ἕν, unum anime or unum in nobis - Beierwaltes selected the latter to identify this doctrine.

If considered against the background of the Neoplatonic theory of the One, this is an oxymoronic doctrine indeed. The absolute simplicity required for the One to be the One does not allow us to qualify it by any predicate whatsoever. The One whose ineffability the soul discovers when it reflects about the fact that identity – namely, the principle which makes the predications possible – cannot be expressed in a predicative way is also that principle whose presence the soul discovers in itself, when it analyzes its own knowledge. This means that on the one hand the Neoplatonists place the One beyond knowledge; on the other, they grant our soul access to it: “awake the One-in-us”, says Proclus. How can it ever be possible to combine transcendence and cognitive contact?

The idea that the First Principle cannot be known, let alone adequately named, antedates Neoplatonism. What is typical of Plotinus, whose treatsises mark the rise of a new version of Platonism, is rather the argumentation which supports this claim. On the basis of the referential identity established between the ἱνοπόθετον of Republic 511 B 6 and the ‘one’ discussed in the second half of the Parmenides, Plotinus comes to the conclusion that it is here, in the Parmenides, that the reason why the ἱνοπόθετον is beyond being is given.

2 The formula ἁνεγείρειν τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν ἕν (“Der Begriff des unum in nobis”, p. 263 n. 63) is taken from Proclus’ In Parm., col. 1072.7-8 Cousin = VI, 1072.7-8 Luna-Segonds and col. 1081.5 Cousin = VI, 1081.5 Luna-Segonds; see p. 260 and p. 275 of the “Notes complémentaires” and, for further passages where Proclus mentions the “One in us”, t. IV, p. 188, n. 3 (t. IV/2, pp. 494-5); t. VII, p. 200, n. 4 and p. 205, n. 7 (pp. 485-6).


Once established that the ‘one’ cannot be associated with ‘being’, a necessary consequence is that it escapes knowledge in all its forms: there is no name for it, no discourse, science, sense-perception or opinion (Parm. 142 A 3–4), hence it cannot be named or known in a mode whatsoever (Parm. 142 A 4–6). Far from being a mark of failure, the impossibility to express what the ‘one’ is makes its transcendence evident, provided that the term ‘one’ is capitalized: the One is a principle, not a notion. Being the ultimate foundation of knowledge, this principle cannot be known, lest one is ready to start an infinite regress in search of a further ultimate foundation beyond it. Indeed, knowing means to grasp the nature of the thing known, and this implies comprehending the rational principles that account for it being what it is; now, all these rational principles have their foundation in the One, which as a consequence cannot be known.\(^5\) There are no further principles that account for the principle of identity. Thus, Plotinus rephrases Plato’s ἐπέκεινα οὐσίας as ἐπέκεινα νῷ καὶ οὐσίας.\(^6\) For him in both the Republic and the Parmenides Plato is speaking of one and the same thing: the first principle.\(^7\)

The other horn of the dilemma is the fact that it is the rational soul that reflects about such an ultimate principle; hence, the soul conceives of the One, stating at one and the same time that it cannot be conceived of. For Plotinus the solution of the riddle consists in realising that the object of predications such as that of ‘principle’, or ‘good’, or even ‘one’, is not the first principle itself, rather our relationship with it. What we say about the One counts as an expression of the necessary dependence of all that is not one upon it, by no means as a description of its nature.\(^8\) This shift from speaking about the One to speaking about our dependence upon it is both unprecedented in the Platonic school and conducive to a new topic in the history of philosophy: the so-called via negativa.\(^9\)


\(^6\) J. Whittaker, “Ἐπέκεινα νῷ καὶ οὐσίας”, Vigiliae Christianae 23 (1969), pp. 91-104 (reprinted in Id., Studies in Platonism and Patristic Thought, see above, n. 3).

\(^7\) A comprehensive presentation of the arguments in favour of Plotinus’ interpretation of Plato has been offered by the late lamented Jens Halfwassen, Der Aufstieg zum Einen. Untersuchungen zu Platon und Plotin, Teubner, Stuttgart 1992 (Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 9). First Halfwassen explores Plotinus’ position; then he reads the Parmenides and Book 6 of the Republic in light of Plotinus’ and Proclus’ interpretation, coming to the conclusion that negative theology was already stated by Plato: “Das absolut Eine bleibt somit in der negativen Theologie der Ersten Hypothese selbst ungesagt. Wenn im Vollzug der radikalen Negation alles verneint werden muß, dann muß sich die ἐπόφασις in der ὑπεραπόφασις selbst zur Aufhebung bringen. Platon faßt daher im letzten Satz der Hypothese sämtliche Negationen in eine einzige zusammen: ‘Ist es nun möglich, daß sich all dies mit dem Einen so verhält?’ – Mir jedenfalls scheint: Nein’ (142 A 7-8). Mit dieser letzten Negation hebt sich die negative Dialektik der Ersten Hypothese selbst auf, aber nicht in die Sinnlosigkeit, auch nicht in die Affirmation, sondern in das Unsagbare und in das erfüllte Schweigen von dem Arreheton: Nam per negari et ipse removit omnes abnegationes. Silentio autem conclusit eam de ipso theoria” (pp. 303-4).

\(^8\) VI 9[9], 3.49-55: ‘Επεὶ καὶ τὸ αἴτιον λέγειν οὐ κατηγορεῖν ἔστι συμβεβηκός τι αὐτῷ, ἀλλ’ ἡμῖν, ὅτι έχουμεν τι παρ’ αὐτοῦ ἐκείνου ἐν αὐτῷ· δεῖ δὲ μηδὲ τὸ ἐκείνου μηδὲ ἄντως ἄντως λέγειν ἄντρα σαφοντα, ἀλλ’ ἡμῖν οἷον ἔξωθεν περιθέοντας τὰ αὑτῶν ἑρμηνεύειν ἐθέλειν πάθη ὅτε μὲν ἐγγύς, ὅτε δὲ ἀποπίπτοντας ταῖς περὶ αὐτὸ ἀπορίαις. “For to say that it is the cause is not to predicate something incidental of it but of us, because we have something from it while that One is in itself; but one who speaks precisely should not say ‘that’ or ‘is’; but we run round it outside, in a way, and want to explain our own experiences of it,sometimes near it and sometimes falling away in our perplexities about it” (trans. Armstrong, vol. VII, p. 315).

\(^9\) V 5[32], 6.22-38: ‘Ἀλλὰ ἡμῖν ταὶς ἡμετέραις ὠδὶς ἀποροῦμεν ὅ τι χρὴ λέγειν, καὶ λέγομεν περὶ οὐ ρητοῦ, καὶ ἴσημοσφηνεῖσαν ἑκατονθάλεντα, ὡς ἐνόμασθα. Τάχα δὲ καὶ τὸ ἑν’ ὄνομα τοῦτο ἄραν ἔχει πρὸς τὰ πολλά.”
This might suggest that the solution of the philosophical riddle consists simply in realising that what we know is not the One, rather its concept, namely a mental item corresponding to the philosophical claim that the first principle is necessarily simple. Quite the contrary. Indeed, if our notion of ‘the One’ were what we reach as the ultimate principle of the Forms, neither these nor it would be real: downgraded to abstractions, they would no longer grant the rational structure of the whole cosmos as they do in the Neoplatonic philosophy.
The riddle would be solved, but the entire Neoplatonic universe would fade with it.\textsuperscript{12} Beierwaltes phrased the Neoplatonic move to shift the statements about the One from the One itself to the relationship of its derivatives with it in terms of that “negative Differenz aus allem Seienden” to which he devoted a series of essays, gathered in the 1985 volume \textit{Denken des Einen}.\textsuperscript{13} In the essay “Der Begriff des \textit{unum in nobis} bei Proklos” the focus was on the medieval \textit{Fortleben} of this doctrine, with special emphasis on the difference between the Neoplatonic via negativa and mysticism – if mysticism means irrationalism.\textsuperscript{14}

All in all, the philosophical significance of the doctrine conveyed by the formula \textit{unum in nobis} consists in implementing the Platonic assumption that true knowledge is provided by the Forms through the idea that the soul can go beyond the Forms themselves, and see their principle. The remote model here is obviously the cave of the \textit{Republic}: not only can the prisoner who climbs outside the cave see real things rather than the obfuscated images inside it, he can also cast his gaze to the sun. At variance with the myth of the \textit{Republic}, however, the Neoplatonists do not consider the \textit{ἀνυπόθετον} to be the highest among the Forms (cf. \textit{τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέαν}, Resp. VI, 508 E 2-3); rather, they place it beyond the Forms.\textsuperscript{15} If the soul can see their principle, this means for the Neoplatonists that it can get in touch with the One beyond Intellect.\textsuperscript{16} This interpretation of the \textit{Republic} of course antedates the Middle

\begin{footnotes}


\item[14] Beierwaltes, “Der Begriff des \textit{unum in nobis} bei Proklos” (above, n. 1), p. 258: “Somit ist weder positive noch negative Aussage über das Eine als das Über-Wahre wahr. Die Negation hebt sich auf der Spitze ihrer Möglichkeit selbst in die Sphäre der ursprunghaft Über-Seienden, des Über-Denkenden und Unsgabaren auf, die sie durch die Setzung der negativen Differenz aus allem Seienden herausgesondert und so die Unermeßlichkeit und Unangemessenheit des Einen gegenüber jeglichem denkenden Maß einsichtig gemacht hat. ‘Die Negationen selbst vom Einen zu abstrahieren’ heißt also nicht, daß das Eine zu einem numinos-irrationalen Urgrund verflüchtigt werde, sondern daß sich das Nichts des Einen als die unhintergreifbare Grenze des Denkens und als unsagbarer Ursprung des Seins in immer unähnlicher Entsprechung dem Denken zeige”. As Concetta Luna remarks in her comments to the first draft of this paper, for Proclus the One is beyond intellectual knowledge but can be grasped by a hyper-intellectual form of knowledge, named \textit{ἐνθεαστικὴ ὁρμή} (In Parm. VI 1071.36-1072.5 Luna-Segonds).


\item[16] Beierwaltes, “Der Begriff des \textit{unum in nobis} bei Proklos” (above, n. 1), p. 264: “Dieses Ereignis der Einung
Ages and, in the Middle Ages, the arrival of the Proclean formula unum in nobis; but it is the latter which, for Beierwaltes, resonates in Meister Eckhart as well as in Tauler, to merge together with the pseudo-Dionysian negative theology – on which more later. Far from being an instance of irrationalism, these late medieval accounts of the unio mystica inherit from Proclus – either directly or via Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite – the idea that a point of contact exists between the highest part of the human intellect and the First Principle beyond being: the unum in nobis, also labelled apex mentis.

2. Apex mentis

The Middle Ages came into contact with “mystical theology” in the 9th century with the appearance of the Corpus Areopagiticum in Latin translation, and Beierwaltes was of course well aware that the Dionysian version of negative theology had become mainstream since then. Proclus’ unum in nobis counts as another expression of the idea – aired everywhere in the Corpus, but especially in the Mystical Theology – that there is a power in the human soul even higher than intellect, and this power can unite with God. Ten years before the Cologne Medievistentagung where Beierwaltes presented his paper, the Patrologist Endre von Ivánka had published a long learned essay on the prehistory of the medieval apex mentis, and Beierwaltes addressed his readers to it for further research. The essay by von Ivánka unearthed a document dating from the end of the 15th century: the catalogue of the library of the Erfurt Cartusians, where the books are ideally ordered

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18 E. von Ivánka, “Wanderung und Wandlung eines stoischen Terminus”, Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie 72 (1950), pp. 129-76. This was for him an example of that “Transponierung der antiken Gedankenlemente in die christliche Sphäre” (p. 131), to which he devoted the first part of his long essay. In the case of the human strive for knowledge of the first principle, the key of the transfer is for him Augustine’s transformation of the Platonic intellectual vision into amor, a transformation which paves the way for the medieval “mystisches Erkennen” (p. 144).

19 Von Ivánka, “Wanderung und Wandlung”, p. 147, refers to P. Lehmann, Mittelalterliche Bibliothekskataloge Deutschlands und der Schweiz. 2. Bistum Mainz und Erfurt, München 1928, pp. 221-593; I owe to the kindness of my colleague and friend Concetta Luna the information that follows. The manuscript Erfurt, Bistumsarchiv, Hist. 6 was compiled in 1475 by Jakob Volradi and another friar named frater N. The books of the library were ordered as a mystical ascension: “Innerhalb der geistlichen Dachkonstruktion wird zwischen einer Spitze, in der alles zusammenläuft, und den beiden großen Seiten des Dachs unterschieden. Den drei Dachteilen werden eine prima, secunda und tertia via anagogica zugeordnet. Die zwei Dachseiten stehen für die secunda und tertia via und werden aus den Signaturengruppen E und F gebildet, die zudem jeweils mit den Seelenvermögen intellectus und affectus verknüpft werden. Die Dachspitze bezeichnet die Signaturengruppe D, wobei diese auch mit dem apex mentis und der syndesis gleichgesetzt wird. Das Dach des domus spiritualis, repräsentiert durch den menschlichen Geist, und der spirituelle Weg, der mithilfe der Bücher in der Erfurter Kartause beschritten werden kann, kulminieren somit in der Signaturengruppe D, der prima via anagogica, die mit einer eigenen Bezeichnung bedacht wird: Sie heißt via mystica”, says Lehmann, whose edition is still the reference work on the Erfurt catalogue. Lehmann, however, omitted some of its parts, which were studied later on: the so-called Prohemium longum has been edited by A. Märken, Das Prohemium longum des Erfurter Kartäuserkatalogs aus der Zeit um 1475, Peter Lang, Bern-Berlin-Bruxelles-New York, 1998.
as a domus spiritualis sive edificium ipsius mentis humane ascending from multiplicity to unity so as to reach the summum cacumen sue simplificationis. Here the human mind is ready, says the Cartusian monk Jakob Volradi, to encounter the First Principle: in quo (i.e. the cacumen) omnium rerum principium attingat.20 According to von Ivánka, this formula echoes, together with the Neoplatonic legacy transmitted by the pseudo-Dionysius, a Christian adaptation of the Stoic ἱγμονικόν.21 This adaptation was, in von Ivánka’s eyes, chiefly the work of Origenes. Not only did Origenes in his commentary on John’s Gospel endorse the Stoic account of a rational ἱγμονικόν placed in the middle of our being, he also identified it with the Christian Logos: von Ivánka highlighted the ambivalence of this idea, because the Logos who “lived among us” (καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, John 1:14) coincides for Origenes with the Stoic Logos omnipresent both in the cosmos and in the human body.22 Transformed in this way into the divine Logos present in us, the ἱγμονικόν / principale cordis was ready to operate as our point of contact with God.23 According to von Ivánka, Origenes’ adaptation of the Stoic ἱγμονικόν superseded the Platonic idea of continuity between the levels of human knowledge and its Christian versions – typically, Augustine’s ratio inferior and superior. Thus, Origenes created for von Ivánka a long-lasting model: that of an extra-rational power of knowledge innate in the human soul and waiting to be awakened by those who strive for union with God.24


22 Von Ivánka, “Wanderung und Wandlung” (above, n. 18), p. 155: “Zugleich ist aber – das ist die merkwürdige Ambivalenz dieser Begriffe bei Origenes, die jeweils zugleich einen ontologisch-geistepsychologischen und einen religiösis-heilsgeschichtlichen Sachverhalt ausdrücken – der Logos, d. h. die geistige Kraft, die “in unserer Mitte” steht (Jo 1, 26), obwohl er derselbe ist, der “im Anfang bei Gott war”. So ist der persönliche Logos zugleich das geistige Prinzip, das durch alle Geistwesen erossen ist, deren inneres Geistprinzip dementsprechend (ganz im Sinn der stoischen ἀπόσπασμα-Lehre) als ein Teil dieses All-logos betrachtet wird”.
In the Middle Ages this topic came to merge together with the Augustinian and pseudo-Dionysian traditions of thought, both inspired by Neoplatonism. Von Ivánka was ready to acknowledge that the Neoplatonic influence was prevailing in the medieval statements about a cognitive contact between the human soul and God; however, for him it was the “Nachwirken der originistischen Dreiteilung” of man as ψυχικός, λογικός, and πνευματικός which set the tone of the medieval unio mystica. Both Hugues and Richard of St. Victor, for instance, speak of an acumen mentis placed beyond the rational faculty of the human mind. An outline of the mystical literature of the 12th and 13th centuries follows, which is meant to illustrate how this tradition of thought intermingles with the pseudo-Dionysian intelligentia deiformis. The landing point is Bonaventure, whose itinerary of the human mind ab imis ad summa begins with sense-perception and culminates in the mentalis excessus, also called apex mentis.

It goes without saying that this account of the modes of the human knowledge is different from and incompatible with the Aristotelian one, both per se and in its medieval version. Suffice it to mention the widespread logical tradition of the Latin Middle Ages based on the late antique Organon, with its account of language as containing terms which refer to concepts in the soul, which in turn refer to items in the world. Together with the epistemological assumptions rooted in Porphyry’s Isagoge which became familiar in the Latin-speaking world through an uninterrupted chain of readers of Boethius’ translations,
also the 12th century Latin versions of the De Anima29 and Parva naturalia30 formed the background for theories of knowledge inspired by Aristotle and exemplified in the Scholastic axiom nihil in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu. It is tempting to conclude that the two accounts of knowledge, the Aristotelian and the Neoplatonic, coexisted side by side never to intermingle with each other. It is also tempting to speculate that the Aristotelian model was meant to account for the knowledge of the embodied soul or, to use the medieval formula, for the human being in statu viae, while the Neoplatonic model worked well as a conceptualization of that supernatural status which, in centuries of exegesis of the Pauline vision of God face to face, was destined to become in the Middle Ages the so-called visio beatifica.31 This reconstruction, however, does not account for the continuity of the six degrees of knowledge which Bonaventure lists in an ascending order from sensus to the excessus mentis.32 On a larger scale, it does not account for the intermingling of the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic epistemologies typical of the medieval philosophers writing both in Arabic and Latin who claim, with different emphasis and often conflicting arguments, that our knowledge is indeed rooted in sense-perception, but at a given point of its development comes into contact with the intelligible realm itself. This is admittedly too wide a question to be dealt with in an article, but some steps can be outlined in the development of the idea that the human mind can ascend ab imis ad summa, to put it in Bonaventure’s language. In what follows I argue that the theory of the “conjunction” of our intellect with the Agent Intellect is a case in point for the creation of a new theory, which depends upon the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic accounts of intellection, but does not overlap entirely with either.

3. Intellect: a power of the soul, a separate substance

A well-known Aristotelian conundrum is that on the one hand intellection seems to arise from our innate power to extract the qualities from the objects perceived,33 while on the
other it is described as the actualization of a potentiality, a process which depends upon an external agent. Both accounts feature in the *De Anima*, and this suggests that Aristotle saw no inconsistency at all between them. However, the nature of the external agent and its interaction with the human faculty to intelligize did not cease to puzzle the Aristotelians from Theophratus onwards. The systematization of the theory of the νοῦς ποιητικός came much later, with Alexander of Aphrodisias.

Faced with the passage of Book III of the *De Anima* where Aristotle mentions a ποιητικόν at work in our intellection and compares it with what light does in our vision, in his own *De Anima* Alexander adopts apropos this active principle another Aristotelian expression, in its turn quite enigmatic. He labels it νοῦς θύραθεν, echoing *De Gen. an.* II 3, 736 b 27. This is not an unprecedented move: Theophrastus raised an aporia on this

κεχωρισμένον, ἐν τοῖς εἰδέσθι τοῖς αἰσθητών τὰ νοικά ἢ ἀπ’ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἤτει καὶ πάθη, καὶ διὰ τούτῳ ὡστε μὴ πίστευκαί νομίζει· ἡδὲ ἔνθελ- ὑπάθειν ἀνεθεὶν ἂν μάθων. ὁ δὲ τὸ θεωρεῖ· ἀνάγκη ἂν φάντασμά τι θεωρεῖ· τὸ γὰρ φάντασμα ὥστε πιστάνω τις ἢ ἀπήνοι ὑπίσ. "But since there is nothing, it seems, that is beyond, separated from, perceptible magnitudes, it is in the perceptible forms that the intelligible objects are found – both those that are spoken of in abstraction and those that are states and affections of perceptible things. And this is why without perceiving, no one could learn or comprehend anything, and when one contemplates, one must at the same time contemplate an appearance. For appearances are like perceptions, except that they are without matter": Aristotle, *De Anima*, Translated with Introduction and Notes by C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett, Indianapolis - Cambridge 2017, p. 58.

34 Arist., *De Anima* III 5, 430 a 14-22: καὶ ἐστὶν ὁ μὲν τοιοῦτος νοῦς τὰ πάντα γίνεσθαι, ὁ δὲ τὰ πάντα ποιεῖν. ὡς ξές τις, ὅλον τὸ φῶς· τρόπον γὰρ τις καὶ τὸ φῶς ποιεῖ τὸ δύναμει ὄντα χρώματα ἐνεργεία χρώματα. καὶ οὕτως ὁ νοῦς χωριστὸς καὶ ἀπαθής καὶ ἀμιγής, τῇ ὑστέρᾳ ἄν ἐνέργεια. ἀλλ’ ἡ τιμίωτερον τὸ ποιοῦν τοῦ πάσχοντος καὶ ἡ ἁρκη τῆς ὑπίσ. ὑπάθεις. Τὸ δ’ ἀρτο ἐστὶν ἢ κατ’ ἐνέργειαν ἐπιστήμην τῷ πράγματι· ἡ δὲ κατὰ δύναμιν χρῶν προτέρα ἐν τῷ ἑν. ὡς δὲ ὅλε ὁ ἐνεργείᾳ τῆς ἁρκης, ἀλλ’ ὡς ὁτὲ μὲν νοεῖ ὁτὲ δὲ ὁ νοεῖ. “And in fact there is one sort of understanding that is such by becoming all things, while there is another that is such by producing all things in the way that a sort of state, like light, does, since in a way light too makes potential colors into active colors. And this [productive] understanding is separable, unaffected, and unminged, being in substance an activity (for the producer is always more estimable than the thing affected, and the starting-point than the matter), nor sometimes understanding and at other times not”, trans. Reeve (above, n. 33), p. 55. – Reeve (above, n. 33), n. 364 p. 161, deletes Τὸ δ’ αὐτὸ—οὐδὲ χρῶν, since this sentence occurs also at III 7, 341 a 1-3; he also deletes ἀλλ’ in the sentence ἀλλ’ ὡς ὁτὲ μὲν νοεῖ ὁτὲ δὲ ὁ νοεῖ. 35 Early in the history of Aristotle’s school the ποιητικόν mentioned in the *De Anima* was connected with the admittedly enigmatic “intellect coming from outside” of the *De Gen. an.* II 3, 736 b 27, as documented by P. Moraux, “À propos du νοῦς θύραθεν chez Aristote”, in *Autour d’Aristote. Recueil d’études de philosophie ancienne et médievale offert à Monseigneur A. Mansion*, Publications Universitaires de Louvain, Louvain 1955, pp. 255-95; see also Id., “Le De Anima dans la tradition grecque. Quelques aspects de l’interprétation du traité, de Théophraste à Thémistius”, in G.E.R. Lloyd - G.E.L. Owen (eds.), *Aristotle on Mind and the Senses. Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium Aristotelicum*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge - London - New York - Melbourne 1978, pp. 281-324, and J. Jolivet, “Études dans l’histoire de l’Intellact Agent”, in A. Hasnawi - A. Elamrani-Jamal - M. Aouad (eds), *Perspectives arabes et médiévales sur la tradition scientifique et philosophique grecque*, Peeters - IMA, Leuven - Paris 1997 (reprinted in Id., *Perspectives médiévales et arabes*, Vrin 2006, pp. 163-74).

36 Above, n. 34. 37 Alexander Aphrodisiensis, *Præter Commentaria Scripta Minora: De Anima liber cum Mantissa*, ed. I. Bruns, Reimer, Berlin 1887, pp. 90.9-91.4: ὡμικα δὲ τοιοῦτος καὶ τὰ ἐξ ἀνεργίας, ὡμικα ὤστη ταῖς μεθύμνησις. φθαρτὸς θὰ ἐν τοιούτω νοῷς, τοῦτατόν τὰ τοιαύτα νοηματα. ὡς δὲ τὸ νοοῦμενα κατὰ τὴν ἀυτοῦ φύσιν ἄπτει τοιοῦτον, ὁνο νοεῖται· ἀπὸ τὸ νοοῦμεν ἄπτει καὶ ἄξαρθρον ὁνο νοεῖται. ἐν τοιούτως καὶ ὄστητι τὸ νοοῦμεν καὶ ἄξαρθρον. καὶ ὁ νοῦς ἄν ὁ τοιούτω νοοῦς ἄξαρθρος ἄπτει, ὡς ὁ ἀποκειμένης τις καὶ ὑπερος ἄν γὰρ σῦ τῆς ὑπος, ὡς ἄπτε πολύμενης, φθειρειμένης φθειρεῖται. φθειρειμένης συμφθείροιτο ἀν καὶ ὡς ὧνο καὶ ἄστεντος ἀυτοῦ, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἀνεργίας τοῦτο, ὡς ἐνδει ἀυτοῦ, ὡς ἀυτοῦ γνώμην (τὸ γὰρ ὁμοιόθεται τὸν νοοῦμεν ἐκάστη, ὡς
point, wondering whether the intellect was an innate faculty of the soul or something that supervenes in us from outside. His solution was that it is “encompassed in the generation (συμπεριλαμβανόμενον)” of the soul.38 Faced with Theophrastus’ doubt, Alexander had no problem with supervenience; indeed, he went far beyond it. Not only there is a νοῦς θύραθεν, it also is a separate substance, the highest. For him (i) the πονητικόν of the De Anima, (ii) the “intellect from outside” of the Generation of Animals, and (iii) the divine Intellect of the Metaphysics refer to one and the same substance: the Unmoved Mover.

In his endeavor to explain how this principle interacts with our power to intelligize, Alexander elaborates more on Aristotle’s items (i) and (ii) – remember that when dealing with (iii) Aristotle makes no mention of any relationship whatsoever with our intellect, and pour cause, since (iii) is isolated and transcendent, with no contact at all with the sublunar world where the souls dwell. Still, Alexander is explicit in declaring that (i) is (iii). Apropos Aristotle’s analogy with light and colours, he explains that the separate Intellect, being in itself supremely intelligible, allows the enmattered forms to be intelligible.39 Indeed, as the


39 Alex. Aphr., De Anima, pp. 88.23-89.11 Bruns: καὶ ἐπεὶ ἐστὶν ὑλικὸν τῆς νοῦς, εἶναι τινὰ δὲ καὶ πονητικὸν νοῦν, ὡς ἀετὸς τῆς ἐξίεως τῆς τοῦ ὑλικοῦ νοῦ γίνεται. εἰς δὲ ἀν ὀντὸς τὸ κυρίως τε καὶ μάλιστα νοέτων εἴδος.
colours of the objects are potentially visible and become actually so only if there is enough light, also the ἐνύλα εἰδή are potentially intelligible and become actually so because of the supreme νοητὸν, which is nothing more than the divine Intellect itself. This account parts company with Aristotle. It is true that the identity between the divine νοῦς and its νοητὸν is an Aristotelian doctrine; as for the so-called “causality of the maximum” (in itself a Platonic tenet), it is endorsed also by Aristotle; however, the reason why the separate Intellect is the supreme νοητὸν is cast by Alexander in non-Aristotelian terms. In fact, nowhere does Aristotle say that the divine Intellect possesses in itself ἀυτὰ τὰ νοητὰ, the true intelligibles, for the good reason that there are no such items in his universe. In Alexander’s De Anima, in contrast, the reason why the Agent Intellect is the cause of both the other intellects’ intellection and the existence of intelligible items consists precisely in the fact that the Agent Intellect has in itself ἀυτὰ τὰ νοητὰ.  

τοιοῦτον δὲ τὸ χωρίς ὑλῆς, ἐν πάσιν γὰρ τὸ μάλλιστα καὶ κυρίως τι ἢ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀίτιον τοῦ εἶναι τοιούτως, τὸ τε γὰρ μάλλιστα ὅρατον, τοιοῦτον δὲ τὸ φῶς, καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις τοῖς ὅρατοις ἀίτιον τοῦ εἶναι ὅρατοις, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ μάλλιστα καὶ πρῶτος ἐκάθειν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐκάθεις ἀίτιον τοῦ εἶναι τοιούτως—τὰ γὰρ ἀλλὰ ἐκάθεια τῇ πρὸς τούτῳ συντελεῖσθαι κρίνεται. καὶ τὸ μάλλιστα δὴ καὶ τῇ κύριῳ φύσει νοητὸν εὐλόγως ἀίτιον καὶ τῆς τῶν ἄλλων νοησεως, τοιοῦτον δὲ ἐν εἰρήνῃ ὅ τι ποιητικὸς νοῦς. εἰ γὰρ μή ἦν τοιοῦτον φύσει, οὐδ᾽ ἂν τῶν ἄλλων τοῖς νοησεως ἀμυνθηκεῖ, ὡς προειρηται. ἐν γὰρ πάσιν ἐν οἷς τὸ μὲν κυρίως τὰ ἑστῶτα, τὸ δὲ δευτέρως παρὰ τοῦ κυρίου τὸ εἶναι ἐξελθεῖ. ἔτι, εἰ ὁ τοιοῦτος νοῦς τὸ πρῶτον αἴτιον, ἀ τείχε καὶ ἁρχὴ τοῦ εἶναι πάνω τοῖς ἄλλοις, εἰρήνὴν καὶ ταύτῃ ποιητικῆς ἀτύχος αἴτιον τοῦ εἶναι πάνω τοῖς νοουμένοις. English trans. Fotinis (above, n. 37), pp. 116-7: “So that as there exists one intellect that is material, there should be too an intellect that is productive, which will be the cause responsible for the developed state which the material intellect can achieve. This intellect will be too that form which is intelligible in the supreme degree, the one that is completely independent of matter. For it is a general rule that in any order of reality, the being which best exemplifies the perfection of that order is the cause of that being other existents of that kind. Thus light, for example, is at once the most visible of all things and the cause whereby other visible things are visible; so too the supreme and highest good is the cause of goodness in other good things, since their goodness is measured by reference to the first good. It is therefore altogether reasonable that the supremely intelligible, one that is intelligible by its own nature, should be the cause of knowledge in other things; and if it is thus the cause of knowledge, it will be a ‘productive’ intellect. For, as we have argued above, if there did not exist some object that is by nature intelligible, then nothing else could ever come to be intelligible; and [as we argued just now] wherever beings are ranked according to their degree of perfection, a being of lesser perfection owes its existence to the more perfect being. Another argument rests on the assumption that the supreme intellect is the first cause, in that it is the cause and source of being for all other things. But this intellect will therefore be ‘productive’ by the very fact that it causes the being of all the intelligibles”.


41 Alex. Aphr., De Anima, p. 89.11-18 Bruns: ἔτι, εἰ ὁ τοιοῦτος νοῦς τὸ πρῶτον αἴτιον, ἀ τείχε καὶ ἁρχή τοῦ εἶναι πάνω τοῖς ἄλλοις, εἰρήνην καὶ ταύτῃ ποιητικῆς ἀτύχος αἴτιον τοῦ εἶναι πάνω τοῖς νοουμένοις. καὶ ἐστὶν ὁ τοιοῦτος νοῦς χωριστὸς τε καὶ ἀπάθης καὶ ἁμαρτής ἀλλὰ, δέ πάντα κύκλω ἡ τοιοῦτον αἴτιον ἐχει ὡράρχης. χωριστοὶ τε γὰρ καὶ αὐτός αὐτόν ἐν διά τούτῳ. τῶν γὰρ ἐνόμων εἶναι ὡράρχης ἡ λόγῳ μόνον ἡ φύσιν αὐτῶν εἶναι τοῦ ἐπὶ τῆς ὑλῆς χωρίσματος. ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀπάθης, ὡς τὸ πάσχον ἐν πάσαιν ἡ ἁρχή καὶ τὸ ὑποστηκέναι. ἀπάθης δὲ ἅν καὶ μὴ μεμιγμένως ὑλὴ τινὶ καὶ ἁρματῆς ἑστὲν, ἐνεργείαν ὡς καὶ εἶδος χωρίς δυναμεῖς τε καὶ ὑλῆς. τοιοῦτον δὲ ἐν διδασκαλεῖται ὑπ᾽ Ἀριστοτέλειος τὸ πρῶτον αἴτιον, καὶ καὶ κυρίως ἑστὲ νος, τὸ γὰρ ἄλοχον εἴδος ὁ κυρίως νοῦς. English trans. by Fotinis (above, n. 37), pp. 117-8: “Another argument rests on the assumption that the supreme intellect is the first cause, in that it is the cause and source of being for all other things. But this intellect will therefore be ‘productive’ by the very fact that it causes the being of all the intelligibles. Now this productive intellect is separated, impassible, not mixed with anything else; all these properties belong to it because it is independent of matter. Its immateriality is the reason for its existing as separated, a reality solely for itself. No material form is separable except by an act of reason, since separation from their matter spells destruction
Another work by Alexander, or put together on the basis of Alexander's working drafts, proved to be much more influential than his *De Anima*. This is known as the *De Intellectu*, i.e. the second text in the collection of short writings labelled *Mantissa*, “Supplement”. The two works concur on the main point, namely the idea that the *ποιητικὸν* of the *De Anima*, the *νοῦς θύραθεν* of the *De Gen. an.*, and the divine *Intellekt* of the *Metaphysics* designate one and the same principle. However, the role of this principle in causing our intellection features differently in the two works. Instead of granting the intelligibility of the ἐνυλα εἶδη, as it does in Alexander's *De Anima*, the Agent *Intellekt* of the *De Intellectu* enables the potential intellect, namely a faculty of our soul, to make them intelligible.

for material forms. The productive intellect is moreover impassible, because the passive recipient of action, wherever it occurs, is always substrate matter. And since the productive intellect is thus impassible and without any admixture of matter, it is also incorruptible; it is actuality and form that contains neither potentiality nor matter. Aristotle has proved, moreover, that the intellect possessing all these properties is the first cause, and thus intellect in the supreme degree; for a completely immaterial form is the highest form of intellect*. The distinction between the enmattered forms and the true forms located in the divine Intellect was remarked by Ph. Merlan, *Monopsychism, Metaconsciousness, Problems of the Soul in the Neoplatonic Tradition*, M. Nijhoff, The Hague 1963, pp. 9-84. Edited by Bruns (above, n. 37). Cf. R. Sharples, “Alexander of Aphrodisias. What is a Mantissa?”, in P. Adamson – H. Baltussen – M. W. F. Stone (eds.), *Philosophy, Science and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic and Latin Commentaries*, I, Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, London 2004, pp. 51-69. Fotinis saw no problem of authorship and translated the *De Intellectu* as an appendix to his English version of the *De Anima*. Subsequently, the authorship was challenged: cf. *Two Greek Aristotelian Commentators of Aristotle. The De Intellectu Attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius’ Paraphrase of Aristotle De Anima 3. 4-8*, Introduction, Translation, Commentary and Notes by F. M. Schroeder - R. B. Todd, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 1990. An outline of the scholarly opinions is provided in *Alexander of Aphrodisias. Supplement to On the Soul*, translated by R. W. Sharples, Duckworth, London 2004; see below n. 46.

42 Alex. Aphr., *De Intell.*, p. 108.22-109.1 Bruns: θύραθεν ἐστὶ λεγόμενος νοῦς ὁ ποιητικός, οὐκ ἀν χωρίς καὶ ἀν καὶ δυναμὶς τις τῆς ἡμέρας ψυχῆς, ἀλλ’ ἐξουθενίσκεται γνώμην ἐν ἤμεν. οταν αὐτὸν νοήσῃ, εἰ γε κατὰ μὲν τὴν τοῦ ἐΐδους ἔλον τον νοεῖν γίνεται, το δὲ ἐστιν εἴδος δύων καὶ μὲν μεθ’ ἄλλων ὄντα οὐ ποτε οὐκ αὐτῷ ἐν μῇ ἀντικείμενον αὐτῷ ἐπερείκειν νοεῖται. χωριστὸς δὲ ἐστιν ἐκ οὗ τοιούτου ἄν εἰκών, ἐπεὶ μὴ ἐν τῷ νοεῖσθαι κατά μὲν ἐκ ή ἐρωτεύσεις κατὰ μὲν ἐκ τοῦ ξένου νοεῖσθαι ἐκ νοεῖσθαι γίνεται, ἀλλ’ ἐστιν τῇ ἀνθρώπου κατακυκλώσας, ἐνεργεία νοῦς τοιούτου, ἀντωνωρία, ὃς ἐστιν τῷ τοιοῦτῳ νοεῖν κατὰ μὲν τοιοῦτον εἴδος, εἰκών, ἐκ νοεῖσθαι ἀνθρώπους ὡς ’Ἀριστοτέλους καλεῖται νοεῖν τῆς ἐνυλα εἴδης, as it does in Alexander's *De Anima*, the Agent *Intellekt* of the *De Intellectu*. 43 Alex. Aphr., *De Intell.*, p. 108.16-22 Bruns: εἰ δὲ τέι τῶν ὄντων ἐστὶν ἐνεργεία νοεῖν τῇ αὐτῶ ὄντω διὰ καὶ εἶ αὐτῷ τὸ εἶναι τοιούτου ἤτοι τῷ ἐνυλα εἴδει, ὃ παρὰ τοῦ χωρίζοντος κατὰ τῆς ἀνθρώπου κατὰ τῷ νοεῖν νοεῖν, το τοιοῦτον ἐνεργεία νοεῖν ἐστὶ νοεῖν ἐκεῖ, νοεῖν γὰρ το κατ’ ἐνεργεία νοεῖται, τούτο δὲ τῷ νοεῖται τῇ αὐτῷ φύσει καὶ κατ’ ἐνεργεία νοεῖται, αἰτία γνώμην τῷ ὑλικῷ νῷ τῇ τῆς τοῦ πρὸς τὸ τοιοῦτον εἴδος ἁναφορὰν χωρίζεται το εἰκών καὶ μιμεῖσθαι καὶ νοεῖν καὶ τῶν ἐνυλα εἴδων ἕκαστον καὶ ποιήσει νοεῖται αὐτῷ. English trans. by Sharples (above, n. 42), pp. 29-30: “If then there is any of the extant things that is intelligible in actuality in its own nature, and because it is immaterial possesses of itself the [property] of being such, not deriving it from an intellect that separates it from matter, such a thing is intellect in actuality always. For what is intelligible in actuality is intellect. This thing that is both intelligible in its own nature and intellect in actuality comes to be the cause of the material intellect’s, by reference to such a form, separating and imitating and thinking of the enmattered forms as well, and making it intelligible”.

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The difference between the two accounts was noticed in 1942 by Paul Moraux, who also challenged the authorship of the De Intellectu. Nowadays there is general scholarly agreement that the latter is indeed by Alexander in the sense that it was written by him.

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45 P. Moraux, Alexandre d’Aphrodise exégète de la noétique d’Aristote, Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres - Librairie Droz, Liège - Paris 1942, pp. 109-42, called attention to the fact that in Alexander’s De Anima the divine nous gives to the enmattered forms their intelligibility, while in the De Intellectu it grants to the potential intellect the power of abstraction: “ce n’est plus sur l’objet de connaissance qu’agit l’intellect agent, mais bien sur le sujet connaissant (…)”. Il ne fait aucun doute que le De Anima et le De Intellectu appartiennent bien à une même veine en ce sens qu’ils incarnent une même tendance de l’exégèse aristotélicienne et qu’ils s’opposent ainsi à d’autres courants du péripatétisme (…). En effet, une foule de traits communs convergent aux deux ouvrages une physionomie particulière: ce sont essentiellement la croyance à l’unité et à la transcendance du νοῦς ποιητικός, son assimilation à l’intellect divin, l’attribution à l’intelligence humaine de tous les actes de connaissance, abstraction y compris, et finalement la qualification de νοῦς ὑλικός appliquée à la Divinité en tant qu’elle entre en rapport avec l’intelligence humaine. Ces traits fondamentaux, qui ont caractérisé le mouvement aristondiste au long de son évolution, se retrouvent à la fois dans le De Anima et dans le De Intellectu; on peut donc conclure à une affinité certaine entre les deux systèmes exposés dans ces écrits. Mais dans ces cadres généraux identiques s’insèrent de notables divergences. (…) Cette conception différente entraîne à son tour une modification dans l’action du νοῦς ποιητικός: dans la perspective du De Anima, ce dernier jouait, dans la connaissance humaine, le rôle de cause éloignée, en conférant, au titre de premier intelligible, un principe d’intelligibilité aux êtres dépendant de lui; cette causalité divine se renforce dans le De Intellectu, puisque, selon ce traité, le νοῦς ποιητικός communique au νοῦς ὑλικός la ξένη νοητική qui lui permet d’abstraire” (pp. 126 and 132-3).

46 Moraux, Alexandre d’Aphrodise (above, n. 45), pp. 135 and 136-7: “Reconnaissons-le: si l’Exégète était l’auteur des deux traités, il aurait vraisemblablement tenté de justifier, fût-ce d’une manière assez concise, son changement d’attitude. (…) Pour nous résumer, disons que l’un des deux traités ne constitue pas le développement de l’autre; que rien ne permet de considérer l’un comme une correction de l’autre; enfin, que les termes techniques de première importance y sont employés dans des sens nettement différents. Ces constatations nous autorisent à affirmer que les deux ouvrages ne correspondent pas à deux étapes de la pensée d’Alexandre, mais qu’ils s’opposent entre eux comme des productions d’auteurs différents”. B.C. Bazán, “L’authenticité du De Intellectu attribué à Alexandre d’Aphrodise”, Revue Philosophique de Louvain 71 (1973), pp. 468-87, pointed to Alexander’s attempt at solving a major problem of his De Anima, namely, the fact that the abstraction is attributed to the νοῦς ὑλικός, which however is a mere potentiality; hence in the De Intellectu Alexander made the Agent Intellect impart the abstractive power to the potential intellect. Bazán’s argument sounded convincing to Moraux, who in his 1978 study “Le De Anima dans la tradition grecque” (above, n. 35) accepted Alexander’s authorship; however, at variance with Bazán, who had considered the De Intellectu as a revision of the De Anima, Moraux understood it as a draft superseded by the more mature De Anima. According to Fotinis, p. 322, “there does not seem to be any contradiction between the noetic operations that the productive intellect has in each treatise”. In contrast, F.M. Schroeder, “The Potential or Material Intellect and the Authorship of the De Intellectu. A Reply to B. C. Bazán”, Symbolae Oslobdenses 57 (1982), pp. 115-25, contends that this treatise is not by Alexander, rather by a later unknown author who combined Alexander’s and Plotinus’ accounts of intellation. See also Id., “The Provenance of the De Intellectu attributed to Alexander of Aphrodiasia”, Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale 8 (1997), pp. 105-20. For P. Accattino, Alessandro di Afrodisia, De Intellectu, introduzione, testo greco rivisto, traduzione e commento, Théâme, Torino 2001, the De Intellectu is genuine but results from distinct pieces of work written early in Alexander’s career; Sharples, Alexander of Aphrodiasia. Supplement to On the Soul (above, n. 42) concurs with him; see the note below.

47 Sharples, Alexander of Aphrodiasia. Supplement to On the Soul (above, n. 42), p. 2: “Accattino 2001 persuasively argues that § 2, On Intellect, which has historically been the most influential of the entire collection, is an early work by Alexander. It is composed of three originally separate sections, of which the first (A) is an exposition of Alexander’s doctrine of intellect, developed and in important respects modified in his later DA, while the second and third sections (B and C) record treatments of the topic which he heard in school discussion, probably from one of his teachers, followed in B by his own development of the argument and in C by his rejection of it”. For a different opinion (the author of the De Intellectu combines Alexander’s views and Neoplatonism) see F.M. Schroeder - R.B. Todd, “The De Intellectu Revisited”, Laval théologique et philosophique 64 (2008), pp. 663-80.
but not however in the sense that it was a treatise that he had refined for publication. It is the De Intellectu, and especially its final part, that forms the background for the rise of the topic of the “conjunction” between the human and divine minds. This topic had its remote origins within the context of the early translations from Greek into Arabic carried out in the first half of the 9th century. Between the end of the century and the beginning of the 10th a decisive step in the history of the Aristotelian psychology in Arabic was made: the translation of Alexander’s De Intellectu. The topic became crucial in the subsequent developments of Arabic-Islamic philosophy from al-Fārābī (d. 950 AD) onwards. A full-fledged analysis cannot be provided in this article; I will nevertheless try to outline the genesis of this topic as it occurs in the Arabic version of the De Intellectu.

4. “Conjunction”: the Graeco-Arabic Background

As mentioned above, the De Intellectu falls into three part. The first (labelled Section A) contains Alexander’s ideas, while the second and third (Sections B and C) respectively present and discuss the position of another philosopher whose identity has been the subject of a prolonged scholarly controversy.48 In his endeavor to solve the difficulties raised about the νοῦς θύραθεν, this philosopher advances a solution of his own. The objections against Aristotle he has to face are based on two contrasting features which derive from the De Gen. an. on the one hand, and the Metaphysics on the other. We know from the Metaphysics that the divine Intellect is incorporeal; but we are also told in the De Gen. an. that the intellect comes to be in us “from outside”. How is this possible, given that an incorporeal entity cannot be in a place nor move from place to place? The solution offered by this philosopher is that the Intellect does not ‘move’: it is already present in matter as an οὐσία in another οὐσία. Being intellect in actuality, ἐνεργεία, it operates uninterruptedly. Its action consists in activating the potentiality of our souls to intelligize: when such a pure actuality intermingles with our potentiality, intellection arises. In the opinion of this scholar, our potentiality to intelligize is a sort of tool utilized by the divine Intellect.

Alexander of Aphrodisias, On Intellect, p. 112.5-21 Bruns

βουλόμενος δὲ τὸν νοῦν ἀθάνατον δεικνύναι καὶ φεύγειν τὰς ἀπορίας ἃς ἐπιφέρουσιν τῷ θύραθεν νῷ ἀνάγκην ἔχοντι τόπον ἀλλάττειν, οὐ δυναμένῳ δὲ, εἰ γέ ἐστιν ἀσώματος, οὔτε ἐν τόπῳ εἶναι οὔτε μεταβαίνειν καὶ ἄλλοτε ἐν ἄλλῳ γίνεσθαι, κατὰ ἰδίαν ἔπεισαν ἐλεγεῖν τοιάδε περὶ τοῦ νοῦ ἐν παντὶ εἶναι τῷ θνητῷ λεγομένου σώματι. καὶ δὴ ἔφασκεν τὸν νοῦν καὶ ἐν τῇ ὕλῃ ὡς οὐσίαν ἐν οὐσίᾳ καὶ ἐνεργείᾳ εἶναι ἃς ἐνεργοῦνται τάς κύτους ἐνεργείαις. ὅταν μὲν οὖν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος τοῦ κραθέντος πῦρ γένηται, ἢ τοιούτῳ ἐκ τῆς μίξεως, ὡς καὶ ὄργανον δύνασθαι τὸ νῷ τούτῳ παρασχεῖν, ἢς ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ μίγματι τούτῳ (ὅτι ἐστὶν ἐν παντὶ σώματι. σῶμα δὲ καὶ τοῦτο, τοῦτο τὸ ὄργανον δυνάμει νοεῖ θάτερος ἀδύνατον εἶναι τῇ παντοτελῇ ἐνεργείᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐσίαν. καὶ τῆς ἐκείνης ἐνεργείας, ὃν ὁ θεός ἐντὸς ἑαυτοῦ καλεῖ, καὶ τῆς ἐκείνης ἐνεργείας, ὃν θεός τοὺς ἄθανατον ἡμῖν νοεῖν.

48 See the preceding note. The three parts are subdivided as follows: Section A: pp. 106.19-110.3 Bruns; Section B: pp. 110.4-112.5; Section C: pp. 112.5-113.24.
He wanted to show that the intellect is immortal, and to avoid the difficulties which they bring against the ‘intellect from without’ which must necessarily change its place but cannot, if it is incorporeal, either be in place or change its place and be in different places at different times. So, following his own individual idea, he said things like the following about the intellect that was said to be in every mortal body. He said that intellect is in matter as one substance in another substance and [is so] in actuality, and always performs its own activities. When, from the body that was blended, there comes to be fire or something of this sort as the result of the mixture – for it is in every body, and this too is a body – then this instrument is said to be intellect potentially, supervening on this sort of blending of bodies as a suitable potentiality for receiving the intellect that is in actuality. When [the intellect that is in actuality] takes hold of this instrument, then it is active as through an instrument and in relation to matter as through matter, and then we are said to think. For our intellect is composed of the potentiality, which is the instrument of the divine intellect [and] which Aristotle calls intellect in potentiality, and of the activity of that [divine intellect]. And if either of these is not present it is impossible for us to think (trans. Sharples, pp. 39-40).

It goes without saying that Alexander cannot share such an account of the interaction between the Agent Intellect and our intellectual power, and he is wary of stating from the outset that, far from being a reliable account of the Aristotelian position, this is an ἰδία ἐπίνοια, a personal opinion which misses Aristotle’s point in many respects. The attempts at identifying the philosopher Alexander is alluding to and the understanding of the nature of the De Intellectu go hand in hand, because it is chiefly on the grounds of his reply that this work has been increasingly seen as a draft for personal use, rather than as a treatise submitted to ekdosis by its author.\(^49\) Indeed, the beginning of the passage quoted above is abrupt and the best candidate for the philosopher whose positions are criticized is an “Aristotle” who had been mentioned earlier in the text, at the beginning of the so-called Section B.\(^50\) This “Aristotle” cannot be Aristotle of Stagira. Not only does Alexander say to have “heard” him uttering such doctrines – clearly impossible unless one is ready to take loosely the verb “to hear”.\(^51\) There is a much more compelling reason: his position


\(^{50}\) The sentence (p. 110.4, Bruns) is as follows: Ἰδιὰ δὲ περὶ νοῦ τοῦ θύραθέν παρά Ἄριστοτέλους. Ἀκούειν ἐπίνοιαν Following the interpretation of this passage advanced by J. Opsomer – R. Sharples, “Alexander of Aphrodisias, De Intellectu 110.4: ‘I Heard This from Aristotle’. A Modest Proposal”, The Classical Quarterly 50 (2000), pp. 252-6, Sharples, Alexander of Aphrodisias. Supplement to On the Soul (above, n. 42), p. 32 translates: “I also heard about the intellect from without from Aristotle [things] which I preserved”. The alternate translation, which makes the problem evident, runs: “I also heard from Aristotle things about the intellect from without which I preserved”. This translation, which renders more literally the flow of the Greek sentence and construes ἀκούειν with παρά, entails the impossibility of identifying “Aristotle” with Aristotle of Stagira, because Alexander could not have “heard” anything “from him”. Various attempts have been made to solve the riddle. They go from interpreting loosely “hearing from” to searching for another “Aristotle”. In this second case, the best candidate is Aristotle of Mitylene, the teacher of Alexander of Aphrodisias. This solution was proposed, independently of one another, by P. Moraux, “Aristoteles, der Lehrer Alexander von Aphrodisias”, Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 49 (1967), pp. 169-82, and P. Accattino, “Alessandro di Afrodisia e Aristotele di Mitilene”, Elenchos 6 (1985), pp. 67-74.

\(^{51}\) For this problem various solutions have been proposed: see Opsomer - Sharples, “Alexander of Aphrodisias, De Intellectu 110.4” and Sharples, Alexander of Aphrodisias. Supplement to On the Soul (above, n. 42), p. 38 n. 92.
is criticized by Alexander, something that does not tally with the latter’s stance towards Aristotle. Hence, one is left wondering who held these ideas. Interesting as this question may be, it cannot retain us here, because the key point in the genesis of the topic of the “conjunction” between our intellect and the Agent Intellect consists precisely in the fact that the puzzling features mentioned above are lacking in the Arabic version.

As we have just seen, what alerted the scholars to the problems of the final part of the De Intellectu (Section C) was the sentence (beginning of Section B) where Alexander reports to have “heard” Aristotle’s account and, immediately afterwards, repeats somehow unnaturally the name “Aristotle”. In the Arabic version of this passage, instead, both difficulties are watered down.

It is only natural that the first problem – that of the beginning of our Section B – did not trouble the translator, Ishāq ibn Hunayn (d. 910 AD). The scion of a family of Christian learned doctors and translators which became prominent in Baghdad thanks to his father Hunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873 AD), Ishāq ibn Hunayn played a crucial role in the transmission of Aristotle’s works and commentaries on them. Although he was well-versed in the Aristotelian tradition and particularly interested in the De Anima, he was definitely not in a position to notice that there was something strange in the claim that Alexander of Aphrodisias “heard” Aristotle’s teaching. In all likelihood Ishāq was in the dark about the span of time in centuries between the master and his exegete. As for the

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52 At the beginning of his De Anima, p. 2.4-9 Bruns, Alexander says in as many words that what Aristotle says is unconditionally true and that he will stick to his teaching: “Just as I have great reverence for Aristotle’s works on other subjects, since I find more truth in the views passed down from him than in what others have claimed, I regard what he states in his theory of the soul in the same way as well. I will therefore have fulfilled my aim if I can set out his claims about the soul as clearly as possible and offer suitable arguments to show how each of them is well formulated” (trans. Caston, above n. 37, p. 31).

53 Alex. Aphr., De Intell., p. 110.5-6 Bruns: τὰ γὰρ κινήσαντα Ἀριστοτέλη εἰσαγαγεῖν τὸν θύραθεν νοῦν, τὰῦτα ἐλέγετο εἶναι. English trans. by Sharples, Alexander of Aphrodisias. Supplement to On the Soul (above, n. 42), p. 32: “The things that prompted Aristotle to introduce the intellect from without were said to be these”. Were the two Aristotle of lines 4 and 5 one and the same, the pronoun “he” would be expected to replace the name ‘Aristotle’ in the second occurrence. Furthermore, this sentence refers clearly to an exegesis of the doctrine of the intellect from outside. This tips the scale towards the distinction between the two “Aristotle” – Aristotle of Mitylene, the teacher of Alexander of Aphrodisias, at line 4 (if one agrees with Moraux and Accattino) and Aristotle of Stagira at line 5 – as suggested by these two scholars (see above, n. 50). Note, however, that Sharples does not concur with Moraux and Accattino on the identification of the ‘Aristotle’ mentioned here by Alexander with Aristotle of Mitylene.


55 This results chiefly from the entry on Aristotle’s De Anima in the K. al-Fihrist (see the note below). For further information on this entry and on Ishāq’s translation see A. Treiger, “Reconstructing Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn’s Arabic Translation of Aristotle’s De Anima”, Studia graeco-arabica 7 (2017), pp. 193-211, with reference to earlier scholarship.

awkward repetition of Aristotle’s name, Ishāq’s solution is simple: he replaces the second occurrence with the expression “for him, bihi” a preposition with the personal pronoun huwa suffixed.57 The result is that the verbs βουλόμενος and ἔλεγε at the beginning of our Section C are referred to the only Aristotle known to Ishāq and his readers. Thus the whole passage made up by our sections B and C amounts to an exegesis by Alexander of Aristotle’s tenet, not as the account of and reply to the ἰδία ἐπίνοια of someone who might or might not be Aristotle of Mitylene, but whose personal ideas prompted in the Greek De Intellectu a criticism that is missing in the Arabic version.58 Here we have, in contrast, Aristotle wanting to establish that the intellect is immortal. In this endeavor to assert the immortality of our intellectual soul, he has recourse to the “acquired” intellect. The second voice in the passage is Alexander’s, who explains this doctrine.

A third name features in the passage that I am going to quote below, that of Ishāq himself. A marginal note which was included in the main text at an unknown but surely ancient time informs of Ishāq’s perplexity about the meaning of the sentence he was translating, and sheds light on his personal interest in the issue at hand. The Arabic text is still in need of a critical edition and the text below is only a draft. The marginal note is printed in the main text in square brackets, although its nature is clear insofar as it breaks the syntax of a sentence which, without it, flows perfectly well.60

Alexander, On Intellect, Arabic version, pp. 195.3-196.8 Finnegan = pp. 39.18-40.11 Badawī

57 The sentence quoted above, n. 53, is rendered as follows:

"I understood about Aristotle on the acquired intellect that what occurred to him which moved him towards the introduction of the acquired intellect was the following" (p. 189.11-12 Finnegan = p. 36.19-20 Badawī).

58 This is not the place to comment extensively upon Alexander’s passage, but let me mention the polemical allusion to the Stoic doctrine of the total blend among bodies, a doctrine that Alexander repeatedly criticizes and which was combined with Aristotle’s ideas about intellect by the philosopher who is the subject of the verbs βουλόμενος and ἔλεγε. Alexander’s wording “and this too is a body” marks his disagreement and verges on incredulity: how can one think to account for Aristotle’s views, if one assumes that the intellect is a sort of omnipresent body which is present in matter “as a substance in a substance”?


60 The Arabic version of the De Intellectu has been edited twice and the editors made different decisions: Finnegan kept the marginal note in the main text, but separated it from the latter by means of a typographical device; Badawī moved it to the apparatus. Not having all the manuscripts at my disposal, in the notes 1-15 above I limit myself to record the differences between the two editions and to advance two conjectures.
As he wants to show that the intellect is immortal and that it is freed from the strictures which affect it, he mentions the acquired intellect, I mean what follows in this discourse from the fact that the intellect would descend in several places, something that is impossible for it, given that it is incorporeal; hence it cannot be in a place or move or be sometimes in a place and sometimes in another; this and other similar things he says about the intellect in the way of an indication. He says that the material intellect which is said to be in every body is said to subsist as a substance in a substance, and that it is in actuality as long as it is performs its actions. In so far as this body is mixed up in a good mixture which is apt to serve as an instrument to this intellect which is found in this mixture, it is extant in every body. This instrument is a body as well, and is said to be potential intellect: it is a power which comes to be from this blend which occurs in bodies to receive the active intellect. When it subsists in this instrument, then it operates as a craftsman who possesses an instrument operates through an instrument, and since it is enmatted and operates through matter, at that point we can intelligize too, because our intellect is composed out of the potentiality which is an instrument [Isḥāq says: "this intellect, namely the intellect in actuality which here Aristotle labels either 'divine' or 'instrumental', later on is labelled by Aristotle 'intellect in potentiality'. I think that by this he indicates that intellect which is in us only in potentiality, because it is acquired, though being in itself in actuality; as a matter of fact, it intelligizes and operates in us through the power which is in us, and is its instrument arising in un from the mixture] of the divine intellect which is labelled by Aristotle 'intellect in potentiality', and out of the activity of that intellect. Should we be deprived of one of these two, no matter which one, it would impossible for us to intelligize.

The intellect “mustafād, acquired” which is presented as Aristotle’s key notion is a shortcut of the intellect “acquired from outside, mustafād min harīgin” which in the Arabic text translates Alexander’s ἐξωθεν γινόμενος. Commenting upon the “acquired intellect”,
the Arabic Alexander says that Aristotle is giving an “indication, išāra”, namely he is alluding to a doctrine to be further developed. To this end, he takes the floor to elaborate more on the nature of this intellect, as is made clear by the expression aʿnī, “I mean”, which has no counterpart in the Greek.

Not only what in the Greek De Intellectu was the critical report of an opinion turns out to be, in the Arabic version, Alexander’s exegesis of a genuine Aristotelian doctrine, but there is more. A significant shift in meaning appears, if compared with Alexander’s report. The Greek ἐν τῇ ὕλῃ is rendered as al-ʿaql al-hayūlānī, “the material intellect”.62 While the Greek Alexander says that for the philosopher whose ideas he is discussing the intellect is present in matter, ἐν τῇ ὕλῃ, as an ousía in another ousía,63 Ishāq seems to understand the expression τὸν νοῦν ἐν τῇ ὕλῃ as a sort of syntagm indicating the same “material intellect” which is mentioned at the beginning of the treatise.64 Hence, it is described as something which is present in the body as a substance in a substance, thus paving the way for a new version of Alexander’s ideas about intellecction.

For the Greek Alexander the intellect is a faculty which arises in us from the mixture of the bodily elements, from natural growth, and eventually through education; this power of the soul is prepared to intellecctize the νοητά with the aid of the divine Intellect. In the Arabic rendition, instead, the potential intellect is indeed “a power which comes to be from this blend which occurs in bodies to receive the active intellect”, but it soon transforms into a substance whose name is ʿaql mustafād. Both the intellectual human soul and the separate Intellect are substances. At the end of his account of Aristotle’s doctrine, the Arabic Alexander presents him as harshly criticizing the doctrine of the aṣḥāb al-maẓalla – an unusual rendition for the “those of the Porch”65 – for having failed to understand that the divine Intellect is mufāriq, separate.66

A separate intellectual substance makes another substance, the intellect of our soul, capable of intelligizing. At variance with the divine Intellect, the substance which is our intellectual soul is not separate, rather is united with our body. To summarize, Alexander’s account of the “indication” given by Aristotle about the immortality of the intellect is that the enmattered intellect which makes use of the body is a substance which, in turn, is an instrument of the divine, separate Intellect.67

Is this a complete misunderstanding of the De Intellectu? If one bears in mind the elusive nature of this piece of work and the different interpretations of contemporary scholarship, one should at least conclude that if the case, the misunderstanding was prompted by the

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62 This is so if I am not wrong in going for al-ʿaql al-bayūlānī, a reading which results from Finnegan’s retro-version of the Latin (see above, n. 3 of the apparatus) against al-ʿaql wa-l-bayūlā (the reading of both editions).
63 An idea, let me repeat it, that Alexander does not accept: see above, pp. 192-3.
64 At the beginning of the De Intellectu, Alexander says: Νοῦς ἐστι κατὰ Αριστοτέλη τριττός, ὁ μὲν γάρ τίς ἐστι νοῦς ὑλικός, and the corresponding Arabic version runs: العقل عند أوسطو ثلثة أَضربٍ أحدها العقل الهيولاني, p. 181.3 Finnegan = p. 31.15 Badawī.
65 The Greek τοῖς ἀπὸ τῆς Στοᾶς (p. 113.13) translates as أصحاب المظللة (lit. “those of the sunshade”) p. 198.9-10 Finnegan = p. 41.15 Badawī, instead of the more common aṣḥāb al-riwāq.
66 Alex. Aphr., De Intell., p. 113.12-21 Bruns = pp. 198.8-199.9 Finnegan = pp. 41.13-42.3 Badawī.
67 Note that in the Arabic version Alexander’s critical remark “and this is a body” (see above, n. 58) changes its meaning totally, because it refers to the human body rather than to the Intellect as it does in the Greek.
text itself. But there is much more to be said, and the crucial role of Ishâq’s version in the rise of the doctrine of the “conjunction” requires that we broaden the focus to the context of his translation.

A turning point in the history of the reception of the Aristotelian epistemology in the Arab world was the fact that the De Intellectu was translated after Plotinus’ Enneads. Another decisive fact was that the Arabic version of Plotinus circulated under the name of Aristotle. More or less half a century before the time when Ishâq was busy translating Aristotle, a basic set of works by Plato, Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Plotinus, and Proclus had become available to the Arab readership interested in the Greek philosophical legacy. This early and, in many respects, decisive stage in the Graeco-Arabic transmission was the work of al-Kindī (d. circa 866 AD), who gathered around him at the Abbasid court a group of translators and scientists. Among the translations carried out in this circle, a selection of Plotinus’ Enneads is of special importance for the present purpose. It has been demonstrated by the late lamented Marc Geoffroy that it was here, in the Arabic Plotinus, that Ishâq found the expression “acquired intellect” which features in his translation of Alexander. If we take into account the fact that the Arabic Plotinus circulated under the label of a “Theology” by “Aristotle”, it comes as no surprise that the passages dealing

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71 At the beginning of the pseudo-Theology, “Aristotle” says the following (ʿA. Badawī, Aflūṭīn ʿinda l-ʿarab. Plotinus apud Arabes. Theologia Aristotelis et fragmenta quae supersunt, Dār al-naḥḍa al-miṣriyya, Cairo 1955, pp. 5.10-6.12 (revised after the forthcoming critical edition prepared under the aegis of the ERC project “Greek into Arabic. Philosophical Concepts and Linguistic Bridges):

...
with the relationship between the soul and the separate Intellect were understood as his exposition of the succinct, even enigmatic claims of De Anima III 5. Thus, in the subsequent generation of scholars interested in Greek science and philosophy the Arabic Aristotle - in fact, Plotinus - set the tone for the interpretation of the ποιητικόν of the De Anima, as well as of Alexander’s De Intellectu.

It is time now to analyze in greater depth the details of this convoluted transmission. As we have just seen, the expression ʿaql mustafād was coined during the early stage of the Graeco-Arabic translations. The broader context in which it appears for the first time is the version of the passage of Plotinus’ On the Three Principal Hypostases, V 1[10], where he claims that the soul is indeed of the same nature as the Intellect – a pivot of his interpretation of Platonism – but should not be put on equal footing as it. The soul and the Intellect are in a sense like fire and heat: they share the same nature, but one is the cause, and the other is the effect: without the intelligible level of the reality there would be no soul, exactly as without fire there is no heat. An even better comparison is that between a son and his father: they share the same nature, but one is brought to perfection by the other (something that does not happen in the case of fire and heat).

V 1[10], 3.7-20

οἶον λόγος ὁ ἐν προφορᾷ λόγου τοῦ ἐν ψυχῇ, φέεται τοι καὶ αὐτή λόγος νοεράς και ἡ ἐν αὐτῷ, τὴν ἄλλην ὑφισταμένην. Οὖσα οὖν ἀπὸ νοοῦ νοερά ἐστι, καὶ ἐν λογισμοῖς ὁ νοῦς αὐτῆς καὶ τελειώσις ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ πάλιν οἷον πατρὸς ἐκθρέψαντος, ὁν ὑπόστασις αὐτῆς ἀπὸ νοοῦ ὁ τε ἐνεργεία λόγος νοου αὐτῆς ὁρωμένου. Οταν γάρ ἐνίδῃ εἰς νοοῦ, ἔνδοθεν ἔχειν καὶ οἰκεῖα ἃ νοεῖ καὶ ἐνεργεῖ. Καὶ ταύτας μόνας δεῖ λέγειν ἐνεργείας ψυχῆς, ὅσα νοεράς καὶ ὅσα οἰκεῖαν· τὰ δὲ ἐνεργεία διὰ ἐκτανό διάνοιαν καὶ πάθη ψυχῆς τῆς τοιαύτης.

Just as a thought in its utterance is an image of the thought in the soul, so soul itself is an image of the expressed thought of Intellect, and its whole activity, and the life which it sends out to establish another reality; as fire has the heat which remains with it and the heat which it gives. But one must understand that the activity on the level of Intellect does not flow out of it, but the external activity comes into existence as something distinct. Since then its existence derives from Intellect soul is intellectual, and its intellect is in discursive reasonings, and its perfection comes from Intellect, and its thought becomes actual in its seeing of Intellect. For when it looks into Intellect, it has within it and as its own what it thinks in its active actuality. And we should call these alone activities of the soul, all it does intellectually and which spring from its own home; its inferior activities come from elsewhere and belong to a soul of this inferior kind (trans. Armstrong, V, pp. 19-21).

This passage was translated into Arabic as follows:

pseudo- Theology of Aristotle, pp. 108.17-109.15 Badawī (modified)

[…] فإنه مثل من العمل العقل كما أن المطلق الظاهر إنا هو مثل للمنطق الباطن الذي في النفس وكذلك النفس إنا هي مطلق العقل، وفعلها كله إنا هو بمنع العقل، والحياة التي تفيدها على الأشياء إنا هي أكثر من الأثر للعقل، وفعل العقل بأسره هو النفس، والعقل
والنفس إنما هو منزلة النار والحرارة؛ أما العقل فكائن النار وأما النفس فكأجخرية من النار على شيء آخر، غير أننا وإن كان العقل والنفس إنما هو منزلة النار والحرارة فإن الحارة إنما تسيل من النار مثلما تسلك سلكاً إلى أن تأتي إلى النشيء القابل لها فتكون فيه؛ وأما العقل فإنه ينبث في النفس من غير أن تسيل منه قوة من قواه. ونقول إن النفس عقلية إذا صارت من العقل غير أنها وإن كانت عقلية فإن عقلها لن يكون إلا بالفكرة والروية لأنه عقل مستفاد فن أنجذ ذلك صارت تفكر وتروى لأن عقلها ناقص. والعقل هو ممتّم لها كالآب والأبن فإن الآب هو المربيّ لابنه والمتميم له. فالعقل هو الذي يتميم النفس لأنه هو الذي ولدها. ونقول إن شخص النفس إنما هو من العقل والنطق الكائن بالعقل إنما هو للعقل لا للشيء الواقع تحت البصر. وذلك إن النفس إذا رجعت إلى ذاتها ونظرت إلى العقل كان كل فعلها مسنودًا إلى العقل. وينبغي أن لا نضيف فعل من الأفاعيل إلى النفس العقلية إلا الأفاعيل التي تفعل النفس فعلًا عقليًا وهي أفاعيلها الذاتية الممدوحة الشريفة. وأما الأفاعيل الدنيا المستدامة فلا ينبغي أن تنسب إلى النفس العقلية بل إنما تنسب إلى النفس البهيمية لأنها آثار واقعة على هذه النفس، لا على النفس العقلية.

Just as the expressed speech is a pattern of the inner speech that is in the soul, so the soul is the speech of the mind, and all her activity is by the aid of the mind, and the life which she pours forth upon things is one of the imprints of the Intellect. The activity of mind in its entirety is soul. Mind and the soul are in the position of fire and heat. Mind is like fire and soul is like the heat that is emitted from fire upon something else. But although mind and soul are in the position of fire and heat, heat flows and proceeds from the fire until it comes to the thing which receives it, so as to be in it, whereas mind stays within the soul, without any of its powers flowing out from it. We say that the soul is intellectual, since she comes from mind, though if she is intellectual her mind will be only by thought and demonstrative reasoning, since it is an acquired intellect, and therefore she comes to think and reflect because her mind is defective, while mind perfects her like father and son, for the father is the rearer and perfecter of his son, and mind is that perfects soul, because it is he that begot her. We say that the individual substance of the soul is from mind, and the reason existing in actuality belongs to mind and not to anything that falls under the sight. For when soul returns to herself and looks at mind, all her activity is related to mind and we must not ascribe any of her activities to the intellectual soul except the activities which soul performs intellectually, they being her essential, praiseworthy and noble activities, whereas the base reprehensible activities must not be related to the intellectual soul but must be related to the brute soul, because they are imprints that fall on this soul and not on the intellectual soul (trans. Lewis, p. 267, modified).

That the Intellect brings to perfection the soul means, in the original passage as well as in its Arabic version, that our innate faculty of reasoning culminates in a genuinely intellectual performance only because there is a higher level of reality, that of the intelligible Forms, which elicits the soul’s reasoning. The intelligible reality is the starting point of our rational knowledge and at one and the same time is its pinnacle, echoing in this respect Plato’s “line of knowledge”, where the διάνοια prepares the νοῦς.

It is revealing that to Plotinus’ ἐν λογισμοῖς corresponds “by thought and demonstrative reasoning” (bi-l-fikra wa-l-burhān), a detail which shows the mix of Aristotelianism and
Neoplatonism typical of the “circle of al-Kindi”.72 Also the expression ʿaql mustafād reveals a similar mix, as it combines the Neoplatonic participation of the soul to the Intellect with the Peripatetic exegesis of the De Anima. One might be tempted to conclude that there was confusion and poor sensitivity to the difference between the Aristotelian and Platonic epistemologies; but one should resist the temptation. As a matter of fact, it was Plotinus who adapted to his Platonic epistemology a typical feature of the Peripatetic one: the analogy between the human faculty to intelligize and matter. Alluded to in Aristotle’s De Anima, the analogy was transformed by Alexander into one of the kinds of intellect, the νοῦς ὑλικός. As he often does, Plotinus endorses the idea that the soul is a sort of matter if compared to the Intellect, and adapts this analogy to his own doctrinal framework. The Intellect, whose nature is to be the perfect actuality of all the intelligible Forms, is by the same token also the origin of the principles of reasoning; the soul “receives” them and without them it would be impossible for it to reach true knowledge. Indeed, without them the soul’s knowledge would remain doxastic.

V I[10], 3.20-23

 νοῦς οὖν ἐπὶ μᾶλλον θειοτέραν ποιεῖ καὶ τῷ πατὴρ εἶναι καὶ τῷ παρεῖναι· οὐδὲν γὰρ μεταξὺ ἢ τὸ ἑτέρος εἶναι, ὡς ἐρεξεῖς μέντοι καὶ ός τὸ δεχόμενον, τὸ δὲ ός εἰδος· καλὴ δὲ καὶ ὁ νοῦ ὅλη νοειδῆς οὕσα καὶ ἀπλη.

Intellect therefore makes soul still more divine by being its father and by being present to it; for there is nothing between but the fact that they are different, soul as next in order and as the recipient, Intellect as the form; and even the matter of Intellect is beautiful, since it has the form of Intellect and is simple (trans. Armstrong, V, p. 21).

The Arabic version of Plotinus’ passage runs:

pseudo-Theology of Aristotle, p. 109.16-18 Badawī (modified)

ثم نقول إن النفس شريفة بالعقل، والعقل يزيدها شرفا لأنه أبوها وغير مفارق لها، ولأنه لا وسط بينهما، بل النفس تتلو العقل وهي قابلة لصورته لأنه بمنزلة الهيولى. ونقول إن هيولى العقل شريفة جدا لأنها بسيطة عقلية.

Then we say that the soul is noble because of the mind and the mind increases her in honour because it is her father and does not part from her and because there is no intermediary between them; no, the soul follows the mind, receiving the form because she is in the position of intellectual matter. We say that the matter of the mind is exceedingly noble because it is simple and intellectual (trans. Lewis, p. 267).

None of the Arab readers of Aristotle’s De Anima73 would suspect that the tenet above was not by the same author. It comes as no surprise that Ishāq ibn Hunayn, who was interested in Aristotle’s De Anima and keenly aware of its problems,74 had in his memory these formulae


73 Arist., De An., III 5, 430 a 10-14.

74 See above, n. 55.
when translating Alexander’s De Intellectu. The influence of “Aristotle’s” Theology explains how the three kinds of “intellect” listed by the Greek Alexander became four in the Arabic Alexander: the “acquired intellect” was added, as pointed out by Marc Geoffroy.  

Now, besides the affinity between the two texts - the Arabic Plotinus which came first, and the Arabic Alexander which adopted its terminology for Alexander’s νοῦς θύραθεν - there is a significant difference between them. Alexander was explicit in claiming that the Intellect “from outside” is the divine νοῦς of the Metaphysics: God, the first principle of the whole universe. Plotinus was equally explicit in claiming that the divine νοῦς cannot be the first principle. In so far as it thinks itself, it is not perfectly simple, especially if one follows Alexander’s idea that the objects of its eternal thought are αὐτὰ τὰ νοητά – as Plotinus does.  

The intelligible Forms are many, and this prevents the divine Intellect from being the ultimate origin of the whole reality, because such a principle must be perfectly simple, without any multiplicity whatsoever. Plotinus’ claim that the Intellect is indeed a divine substance, but comes second, features in the treatise On the Three Principal Hypostases quoted above, as well as in other parts of the Enneads translated into Arabic. What proved decisive for the development of the Arabic-Islamic philosophy is the fact that the typically Plotinian metaphysics of the three principles – the One, the Intellect as its first offspring, and the soul as the lowest level of the divine realm – is proclaimed by “Aristotle” to be the theological pinnacle of his own Metaphysics.  

As a translator, Ishāq obviously did not alter the doctrines expounded in the De Intellectu: the identity between the ποιητικόν of Aristotle’s De Anima and the divine Intellect of the Metaphysics features with no modification or misunderstanding in the Arabic version. At variance with Ishāq, the philosophers who endorsed the Greek legacy made a change to Alexander’s doctrine. The vast majority of them sided with Alexander in the interpretation of the ποιητικόν as a separate principle external to the soul, but did not endorse its identity with God. In contrast, they adopted a metaphysical system where the First Principle was the Plotinian One, and its first offspring was an Intellect highest in rank among the separate substances, which in turn were conceived of as both intellectual principles and celestial movers. The doctrine of the soul, also in its epistemological aspects, shows a similar mixture of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic features, and nowhere is this more evident than in al-Fārābī’s works.  

A philosopher and Aristotelian scholar, al-Fārābī (d. 950 AD) was a reader both of the Arabic Alexander and the Arabic Plotinus. He inherited from them in his understanding of the human intellection, as clearly shown in his Epistle on the Meanings of ‘Intellect’.  

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75 See above, n. 70.


77 See the passage quoted above, n. 71.

78 Alex. Aphr., De Intell., p. 113.2-6 Bruns = pp. 197.10-198.2 Finnegan = p. 41.4-8 Badawī.

79 Averroes’ stance deserves an analysis which cannot be carried out here. It is, however, worth noting that even though he does not accept the Farabian-Avicennian emanation of the Intellect from the One, the Agent Intellect as a separate substance remains as a metaphysical item of his universe.

80 Another aspect of the Arabic adaptation of the Greek ideas on the first principle is the fact that Plotinus’ One and the Aristotelian divine Intellect often merge one into the other. This topic is beyond the scope of the present article.
This treatise is reminiscent of Alexander’s De Intellectu as it aims to classify the meanings of this term for Aristotle; more specifically, it is reminiscent of Ishāq’s translation as it includes in the list the ‘aql mustafād typical of this translation. For al-Fārābī, the “acquired intellect” of the human soul results from a sort of transformation of the actual intellect of an individual human being, namely his faculty to intelligize taken in its performing an act of intellection. When the objects of intellection are the intelligible realities, they act as forms which come to be within a subject (mawḍuʿ): at this point the acquired intellect arises as a property of the actual intellect.

al-Fārābī, Epistle on the Meanings of ‘Intellect’, pp. 20.1-3; 22.2-4; 23.8-24.5 Bouyges

So, once the actual intellect intellects the intelligibles that are forms for it as actual intelligibles, the intellect, which we first called the actual intellect, now becomes the acquired intellect. (...) The acquired intellect is like a subject for those [forms], and the acquired intellect belongs to the actual intellect (...). Then if one ascends by degrees from prime matter to the nature that is the corporeal form in prime matter, then up to this essence and then up to that which is above it to reach the acquired intellect, one will have reached something like the outermost boundary and limit to which the things related to prime matter and matter reach. When one ascends from [that], it is to the first level of immaterial beings, that of the Active Intellect (trans. McGinnis - Reisman, pp. 73-4, modified).82

The intellectual knowledge is placed by al-Fārābī at the top of an ascending scale whose starting point is sense-perception. Once abstracted from matter, the forms of the objects perceived are ready to be grasped by our intellect when it performs its operation (‘aql bi-l-ḍīl’). At this point, a transformation takes place. Since these forms are no longer images stored in the soul, rather they are concepts, they cease to belong to the realm of the things related to matter. As objects of intellectual knowledge, they reveal themselves to be intelligible forms. It is clear from the passage above that for al-Fārābī our soul is a sort of point of contact where the enmattered forms of the visible world and the intelligible forms which grant true

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81 Alfarabi. Risalat fi ṿl-‘aql. Texte arabe intégral en partie inédit établi par M. Bouyges S.J., Imprimerie Catholique, Beirut 1938 (Bibliotheca Arabica Scholasticae. Série arabe, VIII. 1). English trans. by J. McGinnis - D.C. Reisman, Classical Arabic Philosophy. An Anthology of Sources, Hackett, Indianapolis 2007, pp. 68-78. They remark (pp. 54-5) that al-Fārābī “integrates a sophisticated theory of the intellect into this metaphysical framework, which develops the notion that the Active Intellect of Aristotle’s De anima III 5 is a self-subsisting substance, one that plays a role not only in human cognition, but also in generation and corruption in the sublunar realm”.

82 McGinnis - Reisman translate “ويكون العقل المستفاد للعقل الذي بالفعل” as “whereas it is like a form for that [potential intellect]”; also, they translate “إلى تلك الذات ثم إلى ما فوق ذلك حتى إذا انتهى إلى العقل المستفاد” as “to [the potential intellect] and above that to the acquired intellect”. 
knowledge meet each other. The outcome of this contact is the “acquired intellect”. Above it there is the first level of the purely immaterial beings: the Agent Intellect. It is this separate substance - the lowest, if one proceeds from the top down - that for al-Fārābī coincides with the ποιητικόν of the De Anima. This separate substance is also the ruler of the sphere of the Moon: the tenth intelligence. It brings to actuality both the faculty of the soul, which is only a potential intellect, and the enmattered forms, which are only potentially intelligible.

al-Fārābī, Epistle on the Meanings of ‘Intellect’, pp. 24.6-25.3 Bouyges

العقل الفعال الذي ذكره أرسطالس في المقالة الثالثة من كتاب النفس هو صورة مفارقة لم تكن في ماده ولا تكون أصلا وهو بنوع ما هو عقل بالفعل قريب الشبه من العقل المستفاد وهو الذي جعل تلك الذات التي كانت عقل الفعل بالقوة عقلًا بالقوة وجعل المعقولات التي كانت معقولات بالقوة معقولات بالفعل.

What Aristotle calls the “Active Intellect” in Book III of De Anima is a separate form that has never been and never will be in matter in any way. In its species it is an actual intellect very similar to the acquired intellect. It is what makes the potential intellect an actual intellect, and it is what makes the potential intelligibles actual intelligibles (trans. McGinnis – Reisman, p. 74).

The two intellects - that which is a “separate form” and the faculty of the human soul - are more than similar to each other: for al-Fārābī, they share the same species.

al-Fārābī, Epistle on the Meanings of ‘Intellect’, p. 27.8 Bouyges

والعقل الفعال هو من نوع العقل المستفاد.

The Active Intellect belongs to the same species as the acquired intellect (trans. McGinnis – Reisman, p. 75).

Although al-Fārābī does not say more than this, the species common to the Agent Intellect and the human intellectual soul can hardly be other than that of the immaterial substances. At this point, all is ready for a move which is destined to have long-lasting consequences in the later stages of Arabic-Islamic philosophy. It is the claim that the Agent Intellect cannot be the First Principle itself, a claim with which al-Fārābī parts company with Alexander of Aphrodisias. As we have seen before, Alexander was explicit in making the ποιητικόν of the De Anima and the divine Intellect of the Metaphysics one and the same principle.83 Not so for al-Fārābī.

al-Fārābī, Epistle on the Meanings of ‘Intellect’, p. 33.6-7 Bouyges

فمن ذلك يتبين أنه ليس فيه كفاية في أن يكون هو المبدأ الأول لجميع الموجودات إذ كان يفتقر إلى أن يعطي مادة.

It is clear from this that [the Active Intellect] is not sufficient itself to be the First Principle of all existents, since it needs to be given some matter on which to act (trans. McGinnis – Reisman, p. 77).

83 Above, pp. 195-6.
While the Agent Intellect operates on a potentiality, the First Principle needs no substrate whatsoever to perform its universal action. Hence, if the Agent Intellect operates on a potential intellect, this entails the consequence that it is not the First Principle, as al-Fārābī suggests by contrasting “the First Principle of all existents” with the Agent Intellect. The separate substance described in Aristotle’s De Anima as the cause of our intellection cannot be the Unmoved Mover of the Metaphysics: the latter is the cause of the whole universe, whereas the former actualizes the potentiality to intelligize, hence it is the cause of a specific perfection.

The hidden assumption of al-Fārābī’s statement is a typically Neoplatonic notion of causality which circulates in the Graeco-Arabic philosophical literature from the early stage of the translations of the circle of al-Kindī. That only the First Cause operates with no substrate whatsoever, while every other principle needs something to act upon, is a pivot of what we call the Liber de Causis, but which the Arabic readership knew as the Book of Aristotle’s Exposition of the Pure Good.84 This well-known adaptation of selected materials from Proclus’ Elements of Theology shares with the pseudo-Theology of Aristotle the idea that the separate Intellect is different from and second to the First Principle. Even without embarking upon the question of the sources of al-Fārābī,85 one can confidently say that he took inspiration not only from Alexander’s De Intellectu, but also from these two Neoplatonic works.

It is from in the Arabic adaptations of Plotinus and Proclus which had been created in the first half of the 9th century that al-Fārābī got the idea that for Aristotle the First Cause and the Agent Intellect did not coincide - as had been maintained by Alexander. The attribution of both the pseudo-Theology and the Liber de Causis to Aristotle is also the reason whereby Alexander, whose De Intellectu was translated after Plotinus’ and Proclus’ works, ended up siding with “Aristotle’s” tenet that the soul is a sort of noble, spiritual matter to be informed by the Intellect.86

Thus, the topic of the “acquired intellect” appears to be intrinsically connected with the doctrine of the wāhib al-ṣuwar (dator formarum), the intellectual substance whose cosmological role is to provide the sublunar world with the forms. The lowest in the hierarchy of the celestial movers, it also “imprints on the soul the intelligible forms”, to adopt Avicenna’s formula for an idea which traces back to al-Fārābī.87 With this theory

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86 Compare the passage of the pseudo-Theology quoted above, pp. 199-200, with the following passage of the Liber de Causis, prop. 3, p. 5.14-16 Badawī (modified):

وذلك أن العلّة الأولى أبدعت أنْية النفس بتوسّط العقل، ولذلك صارت النفس تفعل فعلًا إلّهيًا. فلما أبدعت العلّة الأولى أنْية النفس صبّرتها كبساط العقل يفعل العقل فيها افعالًا إلّهية.

Thus, after the first cause created the being of soul, it placed it as something subject to an intelligence on which it carries out its activities. Because of this, then, an intellectual soul carries out an intellectual activity”. English trans. by Taylor in St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Book of Causes, translated by V. A. Guagliardo O.P.–Ch.R. Hess O.P.– R.C. Taylor, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 1996, p. 19.

87 For more information on this point cf. my article “Aux origines du dator formarum. Plotin, l’Épître sur la
al-Fārābī created a model for Avicenna and, chiefly through him, for centuries to come in Arabic-Islamic philosophy. The “conjunction” of the highest faculty of the rational soul with the lowest separate intelligence was destined to become one of the most typical features of Arabic-Islamic philosophy in the mature Latin Middle Ages.

5. Intellectus adeptus

If the separation from and subordination to God of the Agent Intellect is typical of the Arabic reception of Aristotle’s elusive claims in Book III of the De Anima, the Latin reception of the Dator formarum is characterized by the fact that the Agent Intellect returns to be identified with God. The Arabic tenth intelligence is abandoned, and the Agent Intellect is seen as another name for Augustine’s magister interior. In the De Anima of Dominic Gundisalvi, the translator of Avicenna’s De Anima into Latin, the action of the Agent Intellect on the soul and the Augustinian illumination merge together.

5.1. Intellectus adeptus

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88 Avicenna writes: “We say that the theoretical faculty (al-quwwa al-naẓariyya) in man also comes into actuality from potentiality, through the illumination of a substance whose nature is to produce light. This is because a thing does not come into actuality from potentiality by itself but through something else which gives it actuality. The actuality which this substance gives to the potential human intellect is the intelligible forms. There exist then something which from its own substance confers and imprints on the soul the intelligible forms. This entity thus has in its essence (‘inda huwa) the intelligible forms (ṣuwar al-maʿqūlāt) and is therefore essentially an intellect. (…) This something is in itself a sufficient cause to bring the other intellects from potentiality into actuality; it is termed, in relation to the potential intellects which pass into actuality, active intellect”, trans. by F. Rahman, Avicenna’s Psychology. An English translation of Kitāb al-Naḡāt, Book II, Chapter VI with historico-philosophical notes and textual improvements of the Cairo Edition, Oxford U.P., London 1952, pp. 68-9; Arabic text, Ibn Sīnā, al-Naḡāt min al-ɡarīb fi bab al-daḥlāt, ed. M.T. Dānešpazūh, Dānešgah Tehran, Tehran 1985, pp. 64–89; Arabic text, Ibn Sīnā, al-Naḡāt min al-ɡarīb fi bab al-daḥlāt, ed. M.T. Dānešpazūh, Dānešgah Tehran, Tehran 1985, pp. 64–89; Arabic text, Ibn Sīnā, al-Naḡāt min al-ɡarīb fi bab al-daḥlāt, ed. M.T. Dānešpazūh, Dānešgah Tehran, Tehran 1985, pp. 64–89. Cf. also Avicenna’s De Anima (Arabic Text); being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Šifāʾ, ed. by F. Rahman, Oxford U.P., London - New York - Toronto 1959, pp. 234.14-238.18. For a commentary on Avicenna’s doctrine of the four kinds of intellect and its Latin reception by Dominic Gundisalvi cf. D.N. Hasse, “Das Lehrstück von den vier Intellekten in der Scholastik: von den arabischen Quellen bis zu Albertus Magnus”, Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales 66 (1999), pp. 21-77.

89 R. Walzer, “Aristotle’s Active Intellect (νοήμα πωτηρικός) in Greek and Early Islamic Philosophy”, in Plotino e il neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma 1974, pp. 423-36, considers that “the Active Intellect as a minor cosmic transcendent principle” is a distinctive feature of al-Fārābī’s reception of the Greek legacy (p. 433). See also Jolivet, “Étapes dans l’histoire de l’Intellect Agent” (above, n. 35).


91 This point was remarked first by É. Gilson, “Les sources gréco-arabes de l’augustinisme avicennisant”, suivi de L. Massignon, “Notes sur le texte original arabe du De Intellectu d’al-Farabi”, Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age 4 (1929-30), pp. 5-149 and pp. 150-58 (L. Massignon), reprinted as a volume, Vrin, Paris 1986 (same pagination). For an outline of the Latin reception of the Dator formarum and the intellectus adeptus
and reactions to the *Dator formarum* in the Latin world cannot be dealt with here as they deserve, and one may surely side with the scholars who remark that the cosmological role of this principle, once abandoned by Averroes, did not survive in the new context. However, neither Averroes nor the Latin readers of the Arab Peripatetics discarded the epistemological role of the Agent Intellect, now identified with the *Dator formarum* of the Farabian and Avicennian tradition.

It is well known that in the 13th century the nature of the Agent Intellect was part and parcel of the harshly debated question of the individuality vs universality of the human power to intelligize. This topic is beyond the scope of the present article; thus, I will limit myself to say that when the Agent Intellect was not identified with a part or a power of the human soul itself, it was conceived of as another name for God, the source of light and truth for the soul in Augustinian vein. The illumination of the soul was no longer the task of the Arabic tenth intelligence. One may then conclude that the adaptation of Alexander’s *De Intellectu* and the Farabian ideas outlined above in Section 4 remained typical only of Arabic-Islamic thought. But the ‘*aql mustafād* was not completely discontinued. A Latin posterity was granted to this Graeco-Arabic new entry by the translation into Latin of al-Fārābī’s *Epistle on the Meanings of ‘Intellect’,* by that of Avicenna’s *De Anima,* and that of Averroes’ *Long Commentary* on Aristotle’s *De Anima.* I will discuss here, as a conclusion, only one example of this posterity, to support the claim that with this doctrine the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic epistemologies intermingled also in the Latin world.

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93 Hasse, “Avicenna’s ‘Giver of Forms’ in Latin Philosophy” (above, n. 87).

94 As Davidson has it, “Although he repeatedly revised his position on the active intellect’s role as a cause of sublunar existence, Averroes remained firm throughout his career regarding the active’s intellect nature. Like his predecessors among the Arabic Aristotelians, he consistently construed it as an incorporeal substance transcending the human soul; and he took for granted that it is the last link - or, in his *Long Commentary* on the *De Anima*, which raises the material intellect to the status of the last of the eternal incorporeal substances, the penultimate link - in the hierarchy of incorporeal intelligences” (p. 315).

95 The favorite, yet not unique interpretation of Thomas Aquinas: see the note below.

96 I have tried to show that Thomas himself, who was the main proponent of the agent intellect as a power of the human soul, was not alien to posit also a separate source of intellection for the human soul: “Elementi di neo-platonismo nella teoria della conoscenza di Tommaso d’Aquino (Q.d. De Veritate, 10, 6 e Super librum de causis, prop. 13[14])”, in A. Bertolacci – A. Paravicini Baglioni (eds.), *La filosofia medievale tra antichità ed età moderna. Saggi in memoria di Francesco Del Punta (1941-2013)*, SISMEL – Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze 2016, pp. 325-62.

97 Above, n. 81.

98 Above, n. 90.

In the epoch-making year 1270 which saw a climactic moment of the conflict between the Faculty of Arts and the Paris church, the Dominican friar Giles of Lessines sent to Albert the Great, who was in Cologne, a letter asking for advice on fifteen questions.\textsuperscript{100} The first of these was about intellect. Giles of Lessines informed Albert that the \textit{magistri Parisienses} taught (\textit{proponunt in scholis}) that a unique intellect is shared by the whole mankind (\textit{quod intellectus omnium hominum est unus et idem numero}). Albert’s discussion of the doctrine of the potential intellect as a separate substance common to all the individuals of the species ‘man’ includes a survey of the position of Aristotle and his school. According to Albert, the Aristotelians (\textit{Peripatetici}) held about the intellect a doctrine which was common to all of them, which he labels \textit{antiqua positio}. Later, two interpretations took the floor, in opposition to one another.\textsuperscript{101} A discussion follows which culminates in the claim that the \textit{antiqua positio} – recorded, according to Albert, by al-Fārābī – entails that the faculty to intelligize is the species of all the intelligible contents, and by no means a passive potentiality waiting for them.\textsuperscript{102} This said, Albert disposes quickly of the doctrine taught in Paris which caused Giles of Lessines’ dismay. This theory does not meet with his approval: if one understands philosophy, says Albert, one cannot side with the idea of the potential intellect as something existing independently of and, so to speak, above all human beings who allegedly have recourse to it.\textsuperscript{103} The \textit{nova positio} held by Greek and Arab Peripatetics seems to be more promising:

\begin{quote}
Albert, \textit{De XV Probl.}, pp. 32.62-33.57 Geyer
Post hos Graeci sapientes, Porphyrius scilicet et Eustratius, Aspasius et Michael Ephesius et quam plures aliis venerunt praeter Alexandrum, qui Epicuro consentit, qui omnes intellectum hominis intellectum possessum et non de natura intelligentiae existentem esse dixerunt.
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{101} Albert, \textit{De XV Probl.}, p. 31.50-53 Geyer: “In philosophia igitur Peripateticorum non nisi duas novas positiones invenimus a se valde differentes et unam antiquam in qua non differunt Peripateticii, sed omnes uniformiter conveniunt”. The “ancient position” is Anaxagoras’, who held that the human faculty to intelligize – the \textit{intellectus possibilis} – is separate, pure, and free from any determination which might impede the incoming of data from outside. On the basis of this assumption, says Albert, some wrongly thought that the potential intellect could not be individual, since individuality entails determination (p. 34.37-52 Geyer). The two \textit{novae positiones} are respectively (i) that of the Greek \textit{sapientes} and the Arabic \textit{philosophi}, on which more later, and (ii) that of Avicebron (Ibn Gabirol, d. circa 1085). Although Albert’s own position is different from (i), and although (ii) is judged not genuinely Peripatetic, Albert’s main point is to establish that none of the Peripatetic accounts of intellecction, be they ancient or new, elicit the interpretation of the \textit{magistri Parisienses} who alarmed Gilles of Lessines. I owe this illuminating analysis of Albert’s argumentation to Silvia Donati, who has been so kind to share with me her interpretation of Albert’s passages discussed in this article (see also below, n. 108, n. 111, and 113).

\textsuperscript{102} Albert, \textit{De XV Probl.}, p. 32.55-59 Geyer: “Hoc igitur omnium Peripateticorum antiqua est positio secundum quod Alfarabius determinavit. Ex qua sequitur intellectum possibilem intelligibilium omnium esse speciem et non omnino esse materialem ad ipsa”.

\textsuperscript{103} Albert, \textit{De XV Probl.}, p. 33.55-61 Geyer: “Et quia ad philosophos loquimus, qui talibus perfecte debent esse instructi, his amplius non insistimus”. 
Et quem Graeci sapientes possessum, eundem Arabum philosophi Avicenna, Averroes, Abubacher et quidam alii adeptum esse dicebant, quia id quod possessum est, alius est et alterius naturae a possidente. Dicunt enim, quod cum anima intellectualis hominis sit imago totius orbis et sola omnis orbis capax et forma organico corpore deputata per naturae convenientiam, necessarium est ipsam esse imaginem intelligentiae illius quae est decimi orbis. (...) Hac tali positione facta, sequitur quod sicut se habet intelligentia decimi orbis ad intelligentiam orbium superiorum, ita se habet anima intellectualis quae est in homine ad intellectus orbium superiorum. Et ideo, sicut <in> intelligentia decimi orbis possessa et adepta sunt formaliter intelligentiae superiorum, eo quod informant ipsam ad operationem intellectualem, ita in anima sunt lumina intelligentiarum adepta et possessa ab illustratione intelligibilium, et sicut intelligentia ultimi ordinis se habet ad potentias elementorum, sic se habet anima ad distinctiones et operationes organorum. (...) Ex his de necessitate sequitur intercultur intellectum hominis a tali natura animae quae organica est esse possessum et adeptum a natura superiori.

After these <ancient Peripatetics> came some Greek scholars: Porphyry, Eustratius, Aspasius, and Michael of Ephesus, and several others all of whom - with the exception of Alexander of Aphrodisias who sides with Epicurus – maintained that the intellect of man is a possessed intellect, by no means something which shares the nature of the separate intelligence. By the way, the same entity which the Greek scholars labelled ‘possessed’ was said to be ‘acquired’ by the philosophers of the Arabs: Avicenna, Averroes, Abu Bakr

They say, in fact, that since man’s rational soul is the image of the whole universe and is the only one to be capable of understanding the universe albeit being a form charged with the care of an organic body for the good order of nature, by necessity it is the image of the intelligence of the tenth sphere. (...) Once such a position is established, the consequence is that the intelligence of the tenth sphere stands with respect to the intellects of the higher spheres as the intellectual soul stands with respect to the intelligence of the superior spheres. Hence, as in the intelligence of the tenth sphere the higher intelligences are possessed and acquired in the manner of form, as they inform it, making it apt to perform the intellectual operation, so in the human soul the lights of the intelligences are acquired and possessed thanks to the illumination of the intelligibles; furthermore, the intelligence of the lowest order stands with respect to the elemental powers as the soul stands with respect to the differences and the operations of the bodily organs. (...) It follows by necessity from these premises that the human intellect is possessed and acquired from a higher nature by that soul which has to do with the bodily organs.

This passage has been commented upon from a number of perspectives. It shows to what extent Albert is conversant with the Byzantine commentaries, known to him through Robert Grosseteste’s translation of the commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics by

104 Albert’s source is Averroes, Commentarium magnus in Aristotelis De Anima, p. 397.299-311 Crawford. As the latter remarks in his introduction, p. XV, the translator into Latin Michael Scot uses here the form “Abubacher” for Ibn Bāǧga (whose complete name is Abū Bakr ibn Bāǧga). Usually the Latin “Abubacher” stands for Abū Bakr ibn Tufayl, while the usual rendition of Ibn Bāǧga’s name is “Avempace”. On the consequences of this double naming of the same philosopher in the Latin tradition see A. De Libera, Averroës. L’intelligence et la pensée. Sur le De Anima, Flammarion, Paris 1998, p. 207 n. 142.
Eustratius of Nicaea – a work which provides him with information on an entire tradition of Aristotelianisms.\textsuperscript{105} In addition, the impact on Albert’s philosophy of the theory of the “conjunction” between our intellect and the separate substances has been discussed.\textsuperscript{106} Finally, the part which I omitted in the citation above contains a famous Albertine saying which has been commented upon time and again: \textit{opus naturae est opus intelligentiae}.\textsuperscript{107}

For the present purpose, let’s focus on the account of the intellectual part of the human soul provided by this \textit{nova positio}. It is shared by Greek and Arabic Peripatetics, who held that the human soul comes into possession of the intellect, thus implying that the two – our soul and the intellect – are different from one another. This idea, says Albert, is expressed more clearly in the Arabic version than in the Greek one, because the Arab Peripatetics call this intellect “acquired”, and what is acquired is, by definition, different from that which acquires it – a difference which is less clear if one uses the term \textit{possessus}, as the Greek Peripatetics do. Not only. While the latter limit themselves to stating that the intellect which comes into possession of the human soul does not coincide with the separate substance (\textit{intelligentia}, in Albert’s terminology),\textsuperscript{108} the Arab Peripatetics elaborate more on this point. Indeed, they proceed to establish a comparison between the separate intelligences and

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\textsuperscript{105} M. Trizio, “\textit{Qui fere in hoc sensu exponunt Aristotelém}. Note on the Byzantine Sources of the Albertine Notion of \textit{intellectus possessus}”, in L. Honnefelder - H. Möhle, S. Bullido del Barrio (eds.), \textit{Via Alberti. Texte, Quellen, Interpretationen}, Aschendorf, Münster 2009 (Subsidia Albertina, 2), pp. 79-101.\\
\textsuperscript{108} J. Jolivet, “Intellet et intelligence. Note sur la tradition arabo-latine des XII\textsuperscript{e}-XIII\textsuperscript{e} siècles”, in S.H. Nasr (ed.), \textit{Mélanges offerts à Henri Corbin}, Tehran, 1977, pp. 681-702 (reprinted in Id., \textit{Philosophie médiévale arabe et latine}, Vrin, Paris 1995, pp. 169-80), remarks that “(…) le couple intelligence/intellect met une dualité là où les vocabulaires grec et arabe n’avaient chacun qu’un seul terme. (…) le cas d’Averroès est confus. Il n’en est pas de même de l’Ibn Sinâ latin – Avicenne. (…) \textit{Le De Anima} dans sa forme médiévale, accessible dans l’excellente édition qu’en a donnée S. Van Riet, nous fournit tout ce que nous pouvons souhaiter. Cette traduction, qui date d’après 1150 et est l’œuvre commune de Dominicus Gundissalinus et d’Ibn Dawûd, utilise les mots ‘intelligence’ et ‘intellect’ d’une façon parfaitement regulière et précise. Le premier désigne toujours l’agent de la connaissance intellectuelle, comme dans les \textit{Questions anonymes} sur le \textit{Traité de l’âme}; c’est, disait Gilles de Rome, la dizième intelligence, que lui-même, comme bien d’autres, nomme intellect agent et qu’ici s’appelle quelquefois intelligence tout court, mais le plus souvent intelligence agent (\textit{intelligentia agens}). Quant au mot ‘intellect’, la traduction latine l’emploie quand il est question de ce qui est intellectuel dans l’âme humaine” (quoted after the reprint, pp. 173 and 175). Although Albert does not endorse the theory of the tenth Intelligence as the cause for the soul to possess the intelligible forms, in the passage quoted above he clearly states that the soul owes the illumination of the intelligibles to the light of the separate intellectual substances.
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the human soul. The tenth Intelligence, they maintain, acquires the intelligible forms from the separate substances above it and also rules what is below it, namely the elemental powers of the sublunar world. Similarly, the human soul acquires the intelligible forms from the separate substances above it, and also rules the bodily organs. Such is their theory, and even though Albert does not explicitly side with it, he does not condemn it either, as he did, in contrast, with that of the *magistri Parisienses*, who misunderstood the status of the intellect, turning it into a unique power shared by mankind as a whole. That the *intellectus adeptus* is individual necessarily follows from the fact that it comes into possession of the individual soul of an individual human being.\footnote{Albert, *De XV Probl.*, p. 33.70-80 Geyer: “Ex his autem facile convincitur, quod cum illud quod est imago intelligentiae ex ea parte qua comparatur ad qualitates elementales, nec unius naturae sit nec unius potentiae nec unius puritatis, quod anima unius non est anima alterius, igitur possidens in uno non idem quod possidens in alio. Si autem hoc concedere necessarium est, cum secundum possidentia et adipiscientia secundum esse differant possessa et apta, sequitur necessario, quod intellectus possessi et apti secundum esse singulariter differant in quolibet”.
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Interesting as it may be, this point cannot retain us here. It is more germane to the present question Albert’s understanding of the relationship between the theory of these commentators and Aristotle’s doctrine. In his *De Anima* Albert makes use of the same set of ancient authors in a section entitled *digressio* on “the cause and the mode of the conjunction of the Agent Intellect with us”.\footnote{Alberti Magni (...). *De Anima* ed. C. Stroick, Aschendorff, Münster 1968, III 3, 11 (“Et est digressio declarans veram causam et modum coniunctionis intellectus agentis nobiscum”).} After having declared siding with Averroes and in part also with Ibn Bāǧǧa and al-Fārābī on the issue of the *causa coniunctionis*, Albert claims that the intelligible contents (*intellecta speculata*) rise in us in two ways: *per naturam*, and this is the case with the axioms (*dignitates demonstrationis primae*) and *per voluntantem*, as the outcome of study, enquiry, and teaching. Now, all these depend ultimately on the Agent Intellect, which infuses intelligibility in them. How does this happen? It happens because the Agent Intellect makes the intelligible objects actually intellected by our mind (*faciendo haec intellecta secundum actum esse intellecta*). In this way, the Agent Intellect operates in us as an efficient cause.\footnote{Albert, *De Anima*, p. 221.70-86 Stroick. I am grateful to Silvia Donati for pointing out that elsewhere (*De Intell. et intell. II, c. 5, 8, 9; Metaph. XI, tr. 1 c. 9; De Unitate intellectus*) Albert maintains that when our intellectual faculty increases in its capability to intelligize, it becomes apt to grasp the light of the separate intelligences. This is the status indicated by the expression *intellectus adeptus*.}

Albert, *De Anima*, pp. 221.87-222.14 Stroick

Et quia omnibus his influit intellectualitatem et denudationem, sunt omnia sibi similia in hoc quod separata sunt et nuda; et ideo in omnibus his accipit continua intellectus possibilis lumen agentis et efficitur sibi similior et similior de die in diem. Et hoc vocatur a philosophis moveri ad continuatatem et coniunctionem cum agente intellectu; et cum sic acceperit omnia intelligibilia, habet lumen agentis ut formam sibi adhaerentem, et cum ipse sit lumen suum, eo quod lumen suum est essentia sua et non est extra ipsum, tunc adhaeret intellectus agens possibili sicut forma materiae. Et hoc sic compositum vocatur a Peripateticis *intellectus adeptus* et divinus; et tunc homo perfectus est ad operandum opus illud quod est opus suum, inquantum est homo, et hoc est opus, quod operatur deus, et hoc est perfecte per seipsum contemplari et intelligere separata. Et iste modus et ista coniunctionis causa concordat cum Aristotele in X Ethicae, ubi fere dicit istorum, et praecipue concordat Eustratio et Michaeli Ephesio, qui fere in hoc sensu exponunt Aristotelem ibidem.
Since it infuses intellectuality and immateriality in all these items, they all resemble it as they are separate and immaterial: for this reason the potential intellect receives uninterruptedly the light of the Agent Intellect in all these items and becomes day to day more similar to it. For the philosophers this means proceeding towards contact and conjunction with the Agent Intellect; since this is the way in which the potential intellect reaches all intelligible forms, it has the light of the Agent Intellect as an inherent form; and since this latter is its light, and its light, far from being outside it, coincides with its essence, it follows that the Agent Intellect is inherent in the potential intellect as the form does in matter. The entity which results from such a composition by the Peripatetics is called “acquired” and “divine” intellect: at this point the human being has reached the perfection that enables him to perform his action, that which pertains to him as a human being; this is the same action performed by God, namely to contemplate perfectly through himself and to intelligize the separate beings. This mode and this cause of the conjunction are in agreement with Aristotle, who says almost the same in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and even more in agreement with Eustratius and Michael of Ephesus, who explain Aristotle almost in the same way when commenting upon *EN* 10.

Albert was keenly aware of the fact that the doctrine of the *intellectus adeptus*, namely the idea that the conjunction with the separate substances allows the human soul to imitate the divine self-intellection, was to a large extent a later reworking of Aristotle’s statements about the soul and its intellectual power. Still, for him such a reworking – both in its Greek and Arabic versions – was not alien from Aristotle’s genuine way of thinking. The tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with its claim that the theoretical activity of the human soul is somehow divine, counted as proof that these Peripatetics did not go astray. Albert ignored their Neoplatonic allegiance; nevertheless, he did not fail to remark the affinity of this position with “Plato’s”.

The Neoplatonic doctrine of participation entered Alexander’s *De Intellectu* when Isḥāq ibn Ḥunayn adopted the ‘āql mustafād of the pseudo-*Theology*. Since then, this expression has not ceased to convey a typical mix of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic elements in the epistemologies of the Arab philosophers. Their general account of the way in which the human beings reach knowledge is shaped by this mix, and even more by al-Fārābī’s decisive move to keep apart the highest separate substance – God – and another separate substance, lower in grade, which provides the human soul with the intelligible forms: the Tenth Intelligence.

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113 In *De Anima* III 3, 11.21-31 Albert is explicit in claiming that Aristotle's *De Anima* III 5 means that the agent intellect is *pars et potentia animae*. For him, Averroes parts company with Aristotle on this issue, even though Albert’s phrasing quite strangely implies that it is Aristotle who parts company with Averroes: “Nos autem in dictis istis nihil mutamus, nisi hoc quod etiam Aristotelis mutasse videtur, quando dixit quod ‘sicut in omni natura’ in qua est patiens, etiam est agens, et ita oportet esse ‘etiam in anima has differentias’. Per hoc enim videtur nobis, ut dictum est supra”. In this passage I follow Silvia Donati’s suggestion to read at l. 21-22 *mutamus* and *mutasse* (with manuscript C) instead of *imitamur* and *imitasse* (with Stroick).
114 Albert, *De XV Probl.*, p. 33.65-69 Geyer: “In hac autem adaptione nobilissima omnes Peripatetici radicem dixerunt esse immortaltatis et per ipsam homines in deos transponi et transformari, et tales Platonis philosophia heroas quasi semideos appellat”.

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This specific trait of the Arabic-Islamic theories of intellection was not accepted in the Latin Middle Ages. Here, however, the intermingling of the Aristotelian and Platonic-Neoplatonic doctrines of knowledge was similar to that which characterizes the Arab reception of Alexander’s *On Intellect*, and the Farabian-Avicennian theory of intellection. Also in the Latin Middle Ages, especially after the spread of Aristotle’s *De Anima* and *De Sensu et sensato*, our knowledge starts from sense perception and our concepts are abstractions; nothing is in the intellect without having been grasped by sense perception. However, many philosophers and theologians did not hesitate to claim that the pinnacle of the human cognitive faculty consists in an intellectual vision of the intelligible truths and – with qualification – even of God. Bonaventure’s continuous line ascending from sense perception to the *apex mentis* is an example of such intermingling of philosophical traditions: its remote beginning was the Christian adaptation of the Stoic-Platonic *Logos*, but this theory reached its consolidated form in late Antiquity, with the Neoplatonic doctrine of the παρουσία of the transcendent One to the soul. A similar mix appears also in Albert the Great, but now the *apex mentis* has another name: *intellectus adeptus*. The Neoplatonic origins of this idiosyncratic interpretation of Aristotle’s *De Anima* are even more evident: the highest human faculty is not discursive reason, rather an intellectual power to grasp the intelligible truths as the separate intelligences do. Against this philosophical background one can better understand why it is possible for a human *mente*, to use Dante’s wording, to “see” the eternal light of God.