**The Aristotelian Theory of Agent Intellect**

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[377] Aristotle attributes to animals the cognitive capacity of discrimination (a *dunamis kritikê*). In the case of irrational animals, this capacity to discriminate takes the form of a capacity to perceive. But, in the case of human beings—and this is what distinguishes human beings from animals without reason—this capacity takes two forms: as a capacity to perceive and as a capacity for discrimination or intellectual discernment. Aristotle called this latter capacity *nous*, or the ‘intellect’.

Since this capacity is that which, on the one hand, the irrational animals lack and, on the other hand, makes a human being a rational being, it is quite clear that it is for Aristotle constitutive of human reason in full: the ability to think, to reason, and to make judgments. But it is quite difficult to understand and explain how this alleged capacity to discriminate the intellectually intelligible traits of things could form the basis of all human thought.

However, what makes the Aristotelian theory of human thought almost incomprehensible is the thesis, advanced in *De anima* III, 5 that all human thought, all *noein*, does not presuppose a single intellect, but two intellects, a passive intellect and an active or agent intellect.

From the time of Theophrastus, this thesis has intrigued many readers of Aristotle. It gave rise to interpretations and even to [378] fairly speculative philosophical theories. In particular, it was found that it was difficult to determine the identity and the function of the agent intellect. Regarding the passive intellect, it seems there is nothing but the ordinary human capacity to think. Aristotle insists (with, moreover, a great deal of specifications) on the fact that thinking, like perceiving, is a kind of passion (*paschein*): and the capacity to think is a passive or receptive capacity. What should concern us is the identity and the role of the agent intellect. If the passive intellect is our capacity to think, why do we need, in addition to this, an active intellect?

Aristotle himself seems to answer precisely that question when he begins Chapter III, 5 saying:

Because there is, as in all of nature, some matter for each genus (that which is potentially all things in the genus), and on the other hand the cause and that which is capable of producing (this is what produces all things), the way art is disposed relative to matter, it is necessary that these differences are also found in the soul (430a10-14).

As we have already noted, Aristotle in the previous chapter argues that thinking, like perceiving, is a kind of passion (III, 4, 429a13 ff.; 429b24 ff.; 429b29 ff.). Aristotle also has a complete theory of passion (change, movement and its principles) developed, for example, in his *Physics*. This theory applies to all changes, whether natural or artificial, and thus to thought, since it is a kind of passion.

One of the principles of this theory is: any change, any passion, is composed of two factors; there must be (1) something that can undergo such a change, something that, potentially, is something changed in such a way; and there must be (2) a thing, an agent, which by its action can produce such change. Thinking is a kind of passion, so this principle should also apply to any particular thought. Thinking also presupposes these two factors, a passive capacity and an agent. This is why Aristotle can conclude (430a14-15): "And there is, firstly, an intellect of this kind by which it becomes all things, and, secondly, an intellect of this sort that produces all things."

[379] Obviously, we should not hear the phrases "it becomes all things" and "produces all things" literally [*au pied de la lettre*]. Aristotle explains later on at III, 8, 431b28-432a1, that the intellect does not become the stone when thinking about stone. But what matters most is that the phrases "it becomes ..." and "produces all things" must be understood in the sense of the principle enunciated in the first lines of the chapter. According to this principle, any passion presupposes a factor capable of becoming all things not unrestrictedly, but all things of a given genus. Similarly the manufacturer is able to produce all the things belonging to the genus "building". Because what we are trying to explain here is "thinking", these are the thoughts that the passive intellect can become and the active intellect can produce. It is, therefore, about all things belonging to the genus "thought".

To avoid possible misunderstanding, we should ask: in what sense does the agent intellect produce thoughts? Aristotle himself offers us the example of art. The intellect therefore produces thoughts in the sense that the manufacturer's art produces buildings. It is presumed that, of the four Aristotelian causes, only the agent or the efficient cause corresponds to a modern conception of cause. But it seems that even in the case of the efficient cause, Aristotle does not refer to a causal relationship in the modern sense. We can explain a building and details of its construction by the manufacturer’s art, but it is not a causal explanation in the sense that we understand it. Moreover, Aristotle is not seeking an explanation for the existence of a specific building as such. What he seeks is the explanation for the existence of buildings in general, the general characteristics by which buildings are made and the general manner in which they become buildings. That's what the efficient cause purports to explain. The builder's art thus produces buildings in the sense that it is the art that explains; the builder’s art, in some way, is responsible for general features that enable one to understand that these are buildings. Moreover, it is not art that explains why, in this particular case, at some point, we have building materials, a potential building, and at a later time the constructed building. What is true is that the construction of a building at first, and the building after that, [380] presupposes a passive capacity to become a building and, in addition, an active capacity to build buildings.

In so saying that the agent intellect produces thoughts, Aristotle does not claim that there is a causal influence, or even mechanical influence, of the agent intellect on the passive intellect and one’s thoughts. It is not that the agent intellect must explain, as was often claimed, why in the specific case the potential intellect is an intellect in act. The intellect produces thoughts in the sense that this intellect explains the general or essential characteristics by which these are truly thoughts. To have thoughts, it is not enough merely to have the passive capacity to think; the analogy of the manufacturer’s art also explains that the actualization of this passive capacity to think takes the form of a thought. It is in this sense that thinking, seen as passion or movement, presupposes not only a capacity to think, but also an agent that produces thoughts.

But of course all this does not explain why Aristotle argues that it is an intellect that produces thoughts. In fact, Aristotle’s provision of this explanation to justify the introduction of an agent intellect is quite intriguing. It appears to be obvious to Aristotle that thinking is a kind of passion, which passion presupposes an agent that produces thought in the sense indicated above. But it cannot be the reason why Aristotle utilizes the agent intellect. He could simply utilize the intelligible (*noêton*). In the case of perception, Aristotle explains that perception, in addition to the passive capacity to perceive, presupposes an agent that has the capacity to produce perception and identifies the agent with the sensible (*aisthêton*). We perceive things the way we perceive them, because in general they are as we perceive them. These are the sensible things themselves that result in them being perceived in such a way. Thus, according to the analogy with perception, we would expect that Aristotle, in the case of thinking, would also utilize the intelligible. And indeed, that's precisely what he seems to do. In both *De an*. III, 4, 429a14 and in *Metaph*., L, 7, 1072a30, he says that thinking is a kind of passion through the action of the intelligible (*hupo noêtou tou*). As in the case of perception, Aristotle claims that the intelligible account for why we think in the manner that we think. If I think of a human being as a human being, it is because he is a human being. Why, then, does Aristotle, in the case of thought, not just identify [381] the agent with the intelligible? Why does he introduce, in addition to the intelligible, an agent intellect?

It is all the more surprising since, in the case of perception, Aristotle does not suppose that perception requires two senses, one passive and one active, or that perception, in addition to the sensible thing, presupposes an active sense that makes us perceive the sensible thing. But note that even in the case of perception, Aristotle is not content to simply identify the agent with the sensible thing. In addition to the sensible, he identified light as the agent. He argues that we cannot see without light (418b2, III, 3, 429a4), and sometimes he speaks as if it were light that produces vision (*De sensu*, 6, 447a11). Thus, it seems that we can say that something is visible and it is the light that produces the vision. And the same holds in the case of thought. We can say that something is intelligible and that it is the agent intellect that produces thought. Apparently, the agent intellect takes a role similar to that held by the light in the case of vision. And this interpretation is supported by our text. The first time that Aristotle refers to the agent intellect (III, 5, 430a15), he compares it immediately to light. He says of the agent intellect that it is "a kind of state, such as light, because in a certain way, the light also causes colors in potency to be colors in act."

Aristotle's theory of light and its role in relation to vision is rather obscure. For this reason, I am reluctant to delve into the scientific details of this analogy. But even without going into these, we can refute a misunderstanding about this analogy. It was sometimes understood as follows: to see, we need light because it is the light that makes colors visible, which allows colors in potency to become colors in act, in the sense that now they become visible colors. One is tempted to accept this interpretation not only for its internal plausibility, but also for another reason. At the end of Chapter IV, Aristotle asserted that the forms of material concrete things are potentially intelligible. Thus it was assumed that the agent intellect has the function to make these potentially intelligible forms actually intelligible, in the same way that light now makes visible the potentially visible forms. But this presumption conflicts with the fact that it does not agree at all with the comparison Aristotle offers us. Aristotle does not say that the [382] light transforms the potentially visible into the actually visible, but that it transforms the potentially colored into the actually colored. And the term ‘actually colored’ has a specific meaning that comes from Aristotle’s remarks made with respect to the actually sensible in *De an.* III, 2, 425b26 ff., especially 426a13-14. The act of the sensible coincides with the act of sense, and so the act of color is the same as vision, even if there is a formal difference. By producing color in act, therefore, light produces vision. Similarly, we should assume that the agent intellect does not make the potentially intelligible actually intelligible, but it turns the potentially understood into the actually understood. The agent intellect is not a prerequisite for the intelligibility of things, it is a factor, an agent, necessary for their being understood.

So far we have emphasized the analogy between thinking and perceiving, but, in looking at this analogy, we found a fundamental difference: thinking presupposes an agent intellect, while perceiving does not presuppose an active sense, but rather light. This suggests that the need for an active intellect should be explained by the fundamental difference between thinking and perceiving. Also, according to Aristotle himself, there is a significant difference between perceiving and thinking. As he explains in *De an.*, II, 5, 417b19 ff, this difference is this: in the case of perceiving, the acts of the agent, for example the visible, are external, while in the case of thinking the objects of thought are in some sense in the soul itself. In other words: to see a red thing, there must be an external red thing that one can see; but one can think the same red thing even if there is no currently external red thing; to think a red thing just is to have the concept of a red thing.

In *An. post.*, II, 19, Aristotle calls this disposition of the soul by which we have adequate concepts of things, and by which we have the capacity to recognize these things, *nous* or ‘intellect’. So you could imagine that he supports the following theory: if we meet a human being, we need two intellects to recognize that this is a human being: (1) a passive and receptive intellect capable of receiving an impression, or a thought like "it is a human being" and (2) an active intellect, formed by the disposition of the soul in which we have [383] adequate concepts of things and are able to apply them, and which makes us recognize what we see as a human being. In fact, recently, Barnes[[1]](#footnote--1) has adopted this interpretation of the intellect.

But it is difficult to see how such an interpretation is consistent with the indications that Aristotle is giving us about the agent intellect. The intellect of the *Second Analytics* is an intellect generated by perception and experience in the course of natural human development (see II, 19, 100a2), while the intellect of *De anima*, III, 5 is eternal. Indeed, given its description as eternal, immortal, indestructible and essentially in act it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is the divine intellect of book Lambda of the *Metaphysics*.

However, commentators of Aristotle have been reluctant to accept this identification for two reasons. First, the language of Aristotle in this chapter suggests that the intellect is very closely tied to the individual soul, and that, perhaps, it is part of it, which suggestion does not seem at all to accord with an interpretation that the agent intellect is the divine intellect. Moreover, it was found difficult to explain satisfactorily how it could be said that the divine intellect produces human thoughts.

So start by looking closely at the language of III, 5. There are four formulations that suggest that this intellect is an integral part of us. (1) 430a13-14: Aristotle says that the difference between passive intellectual capacity and agent should be located in the soul, which is to say within the soul [*l'intérieur de l'âme*]. (2) 430a22: he argues that the intellect, when separated, is just what it is by its nature, suggesting that during life the active intellect is not separate from the soul. (3) 430a23: Aristotle says that it is only the agent intellect that is immortal, apparently in contrast with the rest of the soul, which is mortal. And (4) 430a23-24: he notes that we do not remember, because the agent intellect is impassible, while the passive intellect is corruptible.

But it seems to me that all these texts admit of another interpretation. As for the first three, I'll explain how God can be considered a principle operating within every human [384] soul without ceasing to be the first principle of all. Regarding the final text, I offer an interpretation, perhaps already suggested by Theophrastus, that Aristotle is referring here not, as one might assume, to forgetfulness of a disembodied previous life or to forgetfulness of a later incarnation, but, in general, to the faults of human reason, to cases of neglect, error, confusion.

In my view, the interpretation that the active intellect is part of us, in the sense that each of us has his own agent intellect, and thus we are immortal to the extent that at least our agent intellects survive death, is not acceptable both for its implications and for the implausible theory of thinking that would result. These unacceptable consequences seem to be the following. (1) We should admit, in the ontology, a depressing number of immaterial beings. (2) In fact, because of the eternity of the genus, we should accept an actual infinity of agent intellects. (3) We can only accept an infinity of agent intellects agents that wait for a whole eternity to one day be integrated into a human soul. (4) These agent intellects are not distinguished from each other in any way, except that they will be integrated into different souls. But, again, this interpretation makes the Aristotelian theory of thinking unappealing. The agent intellect always think. We do not know exactly what it thinks. But according to the scanty information that Aristotle gives us, it seems that it is the eternal truths of theoretical science. In this case, Aristotle would support the thesis that every human thought, every act of discrimination or intellectual discernment, presupposes that somehow we already had, innately, all theoretical science. But it is exactly this argument, which recalls the Platonic doctrine of recollection, that Aristotle refutes in the *Second Analytics*. He categorically denies that there is any knowledge that is innate.

Let's move to the assumption that the agent intellect is the divine intellect. In favor of this hypothesis, it can be argued on the basis of the following considerations: that, having compared the agent intellect to light, Aristotle continues: "And it is this intellect that is separable (or 'separate'), unmixed, impassible, and being essentially in act "(430a17-18). Aristotle characterizes the divine intellect [385] in the same way in the *Metaphysics* when he says (L, 6, 1071b20) that the essence of the divine intellect might [*pourrait*] meet this description, because it applies to the divine intellect as a first principle. Moreover, the characterization 'unmixed' (*amigês*) cannot be understood as anything other than an allusion to the doctrine of Anaxagoras; *amigês* is not in the philosophical vocabulary of Aristotle.

Already in chapter II of the first book (405b19 ff.) Aristotle alluded to this doctrine of Anaxagoras according to which the divine intellect is separate and unmixed: "Anaxagoras maintains that only the intellect is impassible and it has nothing in common with the other things." But Aristotle asks, if it is impassible and it has nothing in common with other things, how and in what way could it be cognizant of those things? What Aristotle wants to say is this: if thinking and intellectual discrimination are a kind of passion, and every passion implies that the changing thing and the agent have something in common, then the intellect of Anaxagoras can not take cognizance of things because it is impassible and has nothing in common with these other things. Obviously, Aristotle finds this problematic. For in *De an.*, III, 4, 429a18-20, he returned to the doctrine of Anaxagoras, "…it is necessary that the intellect, because it thinks all things, is unmixed, as Anaxagoras said." And later, in the same chapter, at 429b22-24, Aristotle remarks: "But we might ask how the mind thinks, if it is simple and impassible and has nothing in common with anything, as Anaxagoras says."

Why is Aristotle so worried about the Anaxagorean doctrine of the intellect? The answer seems clear. Anaxagoras had argued that there is only one intellect, the divine intellect, and he characterized the intellect as separate, unmixed and impassible, at least according to Aristotle. It is necessary to distinguish the two intellects, the divine intellect and the human intellect. Human intellect is essentially a capacity that can be exercised or not. Moreover, it is a passive or receptive capacity. Thus its act, thought, is a kind of passion. The divine intellect, for it’s part, is not essentially a capacity that God could exercise or not. It is activity. And for this reason, this act, the divine thought, cannot be regarded as a kind of passion.

[386] If we return to Chapter IV, we see that Aristotle very carefully avoided saying without clarification that thinking is a kind of passion. He said, very cautiously, "*If* thinking is like perceiving, it must be a kind of passion [...] or something similar" (429a13-14). Similarly, "…*if* thinking is a certain passion" (429b24-25). As it is quite clear that the position he takes is to say that human thinking is a kind of passion (cf. 429b29 ff.), he seems to refer—when he speaks so cautiously—to the impassivity of the divine intellect. It is true that the human intellect is also somehow impassible and unmixed (cf. 429a15, 419a18). But it is true only with a number of clarifications. The divine intellect alone is truly separate, unmixed and impassible. Anaxagoras was right in declaring the divine intellect separate, unmixed and impassible, but he was wrong in asserting this about intellect in general without clarification.

Commentators have found the phrase *ho kai houtos nous chôristos kai amigês kai apathês* (430a17) difficult to understand. They tried to hear it in the sense that intellect, that is to say, the agent intellect, as the intellect that we discussed in Chapter IV, is separate, unmixed and impassible. But already Zeller[[2]](#footnote-0) had objected that this way of hearing the sentence is not natural. One would expect in this case a phrase like *kai de kai ho houtos nous* ... or *kai houtos de ho nous* ... But I believe that Aristotle means that it is only the intellect, that is to say, the divine intellect, which meets Anaxagoras’ unqualified description and that Anaxagoras was right in speaking of the divine intellect.

Finally, a comparison of the agent intellect to light can only bring to mind the image of the sun in Plato's *Republic* with the doctrine of the Idea of the Good as the source of both the being and the intelligibility of things. This is why the identification of the agent intellect with the first principle or God seems so attractive.

So to understand how the divine intellect could be considered as the agent, the efficient cause of all human thought, we must consider how God is the first principle. In general, if we consider the divine intellect of Aristotle and its primacy [*primauté*], we think about a first mover that moves the celestial sphere and, in this way, indirectly, the stars and sublunary things. [387] But we should remember that in the thought of Aristotle, God is bound much more intimately and directly to the being and behavior of sublunary things. In the *Metaphysics* (L, 7, 1072a26-27 ff.), the first mover moves as the Prime Intelligible [*premier intelligible*] and the Prime Desirable [*premier désirable*]. How does Aristotle think of it as the Prime Desirable? In *De an.*, II, 4, 415b1, he explains the reproduction of plants and animals by their desire for the divine. He argues that, therefore, all the natural behavior of these living beings are due to the divine. Obviously the plants have no desires in the *strict sense*. And animals, even if they have desires, do not want the divine in the sense that we could say that they want something to eat. But in their behavior they follow a plan finalized for their reproduction and thus their perpetuation, if not as individuals, at least as a species. Thus, they are able to participate in the eternal and divine as much as possible for plants and animals. What matters here is that Aristotle argues that it is the Divine itself that guides the animals in their behavior by guiding them in their desires. Thus the divine operates inside of animals as it provides some structure and content to those desires.

As for human beings, how they participate in the divine as much as possible seems evident. It is in thinking, specifically thinking eternal theoretical truths and, finally, this fundamental theoretical truth, the existence of God, that we participate in the divine as much as we can. All our natural behavior and also our natural desires are aimed at achieving this end. Thus the divine gives structure and content to our desires that can only be explained in relation to it.

But human beings are endowed with reason. They are guided by desires of reason. Thus, not only human desires in general, but also the thought of practical reason must have a structure and content that is used to realize the end and that can only be explained in relation to God. But if that end is constituted ultimately by the contemplation of God and theoretical science, human thought in general must have a structure and content that conforms to this purpose. It is therefore both desires and thoughts that are intelligible only in relation to this end and so in relation to God.

In *Eth. Eud.*, VIII, 2, 1248a15 ff., Aristotle poses the following question: is it by chance that we act the way we [388] act? One would assume that even if our behavior is the result of our thoughts and deliberations, one thought is not explained by another thought or deliberation by another deliberation, but by chance. Aristotle agrees that thought is not explained by another thought, but he tries to avoid both infinite regress and the conclusion of the argument that behavior is due to chance by assuming a higher principle in the soul that explains thinking. He says (1248a24 ff.): “What we seek is this: what is the principle of movement in the soul?” And he responds:

Obviously this is God, as in the universe as well as in the soul. The principle of reason is not reason but something superior (*kreittôn*). But what could be more superior with respect to science and to intellect than God?

This is not an analogue of God, such as intellect or reason, which prevails in the soul; rather, it is God itself that is the principle of the operations of the soul—even its thoughts—within the soul. Of course, this way of speaking is, in some way, metaphorical. But this metaphor seems to have fairly precise content. In the development of the organism, there is a moment when the organism is able to think. At that moment, God becomes active in the organism as the principle of its thought.

Thus, in my opinion, one can understand the language of *De anima*, III, 5 which seems to suggest that the agent intellect is tied so closely to the individual soul that it cannot be God. Now we can understand how Aristotle can say that the difference between passive and agent intellect is in the soul. We also understand how Aristotle can say that the agent intellect can separate from the soul. If the body loses its capacity to think, the principle of its thought becomes inoperative. And we can easily see how the agent intellect alone survives the death of the organism.

So far, we have left out the most important part. God is not only the Prime Desirable, but it is also the Prime Intelligible. Calling it the Prime Intelligible means that there is nothing that can be understood except in relation to it. Things, all things, are intelligible only in relation to their principles and, ultimately, the first principle. To understand things is to see them in their precise relationship with this first principle, to see them in the light of this derivative relation to the [389] first principle. I suggest that it is in this sense that the agent intellect is analogous to the light. We cannot see colors without illumination. But as we have seen, this is not because we need light to make colors visible and that once made visible by the light we can see them. Similarly, we cannot discern the intelligible without the agent intellect. But this is not because we need the agent intellect to make them intelligible, and that once made intelligible by the agent intellect, we can understand them. We cannot understand the form, for example, of human being apart from its relation to the first principle, which, consequently, is also the principle of common understanding. Therefore, we can say that God produces thoughts in two different ways. First, as the ultimate object of our desire it makes us understand things by giving structure and content to the desires that make us able to contemplate and to scientific theory. Second, as the ultimate object of intellection it makes us understand things in the sense that it is the source of all intelligibility.

From a philosophical perspective this interpretation may seem unappealing. We find, perhaps, little illuminating regarding human thought. But we should not be deceived by the omnipresence of God in the theory sketched above.

Aristotle claimed that being able to think is to be able, for example, to recognize a human being as such. He also claims, in my opinion, that being able to discern, to fully discern, a human being as such is to be able to understand human beings in their relationship to the principles that explain them. That is why recognition, according to Aristotle, consists in understanding. In other words: to recognize a human being as such presupposes that one has an adequate concept of human being. But what makes this concept adequate is not that it corresponds to an adequate generalization, or that it is the result of a process of abstraction from the variable details of the individuals that comprise the concept. What makes the concept to be adequate is membership in a system of concepts, among which appear earlier and more fundamental concepts that enable us not only to explain the concept of a human being, but also to explain human beings themselves and their behavior. Thus all thought presupposes a system of concepts, hypotheses, and explanations. And this seems to me [390] worthy of discussion, although it is not believed that this system of concepts is the concept of God, nor is it the presupposition of its existence, and explanations with respect to it, that play the key role in this system.

In Aristotle's theory, the structure of thought is a reflection of a similar structure of reality. What corresponds to the concept of human being is the essence of human being. But what is the essence of a human being? One might think that this is something that all human beings have in common, something that can be isolated and identified in every human being. I believe that this conception of the essence makes us forget that the essence of human being is such that it explains human beings and their behavior in a way that it includes some explanatory relations. Perhaps we do not believe that there are essences, but some of our theoretical concepts are similar to the concept of essence, such as, for example, the concept of fundamental particles or the concept of primary qualities. Obviously, there are no fundamental beings or elementary particles outside the explanatory relationships that link them to other entities.

Finally, we must not forget the other aspect of the agent intellect in the Aristotelian theory: its role as the Prime Desirable. Of course I do not believe that God is the principle of my soul’s motion and so of my thought. But I am not prepared to deny that thinking has a purpose in human life, that thinking is explained in relation to this end, that what constitutes human thought as such is, among others things, it’s explicability in relation to that end, and that this end has an influence on the structure and content of human thought. In other words, it seems that the idea that all human thought, even theoretical thought, at its core, is practical (in the sense that it serves to realize human life) is an idea worthy of discussion. We should not forget that even for Aristotle, theory is the most elevated form of *praxis*.

That is why I hope the same chapter 5 of Book III, for all its difficulties and obscurities, will reveal to us the deep insight of Aristotle, if we have the patience to follow to the end the meager directions that Aristotle provides.

(*French text revised by J.-B. Gourinat and C. Viano*)

1. J. Barnes, “Aristotle’s Concept of Mind,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 72 (1971-72), 101-114. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen*, II, 2, 1879, p. 571n2. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)