

«The intelligence that illuminates all of us».
The Presence of Averroes in Bruno's doctrine of Intellect

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*Spinoza's theory of Intellect – an Averroistic Theory?*¹

Olivér István Tóth

(Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz)

Introduction and methodology

Concerning Spinoza's discussion of the intellect there are two possible lines of interpretation. First, one could assume that Spinoza was more or less a Cartesian philosopher. Thus, if Descartes had a doctrine of intellectual cognitions (e.g. concerning intellectual memory, intellectual emotions, etc.), then Spinoza would have also had to include such an account in his system. This would explain Spinoza's claims about the intellect existing independently of the body and surviving even after the destruction of the body, as well as the epistemic superiority of the intellect. This view might also explain the seemingly apparent tension between the identity doctrine of mind and body in Part 2 of *The Ethics*² and the doctrine of the eternal part of the mind

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² All references to the English translation of *Ethics* are from Curley's translation (Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza Vol. 1.*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988²)) with the usual abbreviations: a – axiom, p – proposition, s – scholium, c – corollary, d – definition if it is immediately after the number of the part and demonstration in all other cases. Latin quotes are from

in Part 5.³

Second, recently there have been many attempts to critically follow the footsteps of Wolfson⁴ and understand Spinoza's theory of intellect in its medieval context,⁵ and more specifically in the context of medieval Averroism.⁶ There were some who brought attention to the fact that Spinoza had in his library Joseph Solomon Del Medigo's *Abscondita Sapientiae* in which Elijah Del Medigo's *Behinat ha-dat* (The Examination of Religion) was included.⁷ Elijah Del Medigo in this text provides an Averroistic understanding of the relationship between religion and philosophy that is in some ways similar to Spinoza's own views presented in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Based on this textual evidence, it was argued that an Averroistic influence is

Gebhardt's edition (Spinoza, Benedictus de, *Opera, im Auftrag der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: C. Winters, 1925)) with the usual abbreviations for volume, page and line.

³ Cf. Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Gábor Boros, *Spinoza és a filozófiai etika problémája* (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1997).

⁴ Harry Austryn Wolfson *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁵ Jacob Alder, "Mortality of the Soul from Alexander of Aphrodisias to Spinoza," in *Spinoza and Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 13-35; Carlos Fraenkel, "Maimonides' God and Spinoza's," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no.2 (2006): 169-215; Warren Zev Harvey, "Gersonides and Spinoza on Conatus," *Aleph* 12, no. 2 (2012): 273-297; Julie R. Klein, "By Eternity I Understand: Eternity According to Spinoza," *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly / עיון: פילוסופי רבעון* 51 (2002): 295-324; Julie R. Klein, "Spinoza's Debt to Gersonides," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 24, no. 1 (2003): 19-43; Julie R. Klein, "Something of It Remains: Spinoza and Gersonides on Intellectual Eternity," in *Spinoza and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 177-203; Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Steven Nadler, "Virtue, Reason, and Moral Luck: Maimonides, Gersonides, Spinoza," in *Spinoza and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 152-176.

⁶ Cf. Eric Schliesser, "Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science," in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷ For an overview of Elijah Delmedigo's life and works, see: Jacob Ross, "Elijah Delmedigo," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/delmedigo/>

to be found in Spinoza.⁸

Establishing textual evidence for Spinoza's knowledge of Averroes is hard, but establishing any for his knowledge of Averroes' theory of intellect is close to impossible. Even if he has read *Behinat ha-Dat*, it does not present any specifically Averroist claims

⁸ Jacob Adler, "Epistemological Categories in Delmedigo and Spinoza," *Studia Spinozana* 15 (1999): 205-230; Jacob Adler, "The Strange Case of the Missing Title Page: An Investigation in Spinozistic Bibliography," *Intellectual History Review* 23, no. 2 (2013): 259-262; Carlos Fraenkel, "Spinoza on Philosophy and Religion: The Averroistic Sources," in *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Smith Justin and Fraenkel Carlos (Dordrecht: Springer/Synthese, 2011), 27-43; Carlos Fraenkel, "Reconsidering the Case of Elijah Delmedigo's Averroism and Its Impact on Spinoza," in *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglioli (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 213-236; Giovanni Licata, *La via della ragione: Elia del Medigo e l'averroismo di Spinoza* (Macerata: EUM, 2013). One could also draw attention to the fact that Elijah Delmedigo had written another treatise, the *Two Treatises (Questions) on the Intellect*, discussing the unicity of intellect and immortality of the soul. The treatise, according to its preface, was written originally (sometime between 1480 and 1482) in Latin on the commission of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and was later – in 1482 – translated into Hebrew by the author. The Latin original has been lost, but there are two extant copies of the Hebrew translation in Milan and Paris (Kalman P. Bland, "Elijah Del Medigo, Unicity of Intellect, and Immortality of Soul," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 61 (1995): 1-22). Elijah Delmedigo died due to complications following cheek surgery in 1493 in Crete, where he composed the text of *Behinat ha-dat* three years prior to his death. The *Treatises on the Intellect* and their translations were composed more than a decade earlier in Italy. Since the reason for translating the original Latin into Hebrew was to educate those Jewish philosophers who did not know Latin and had no access to Christian philosophy (Bland, "Elijah Del Medigo, Unicity of Intellect, and Immortality of Soul," 20), it is very likely that he brought at least one copy to Crete while moving back to his home city in 1490 to become a philosopher and rabbi.

When more than a hundred years later – in 1626 – the grand-nephew of Elijah – Joseph Salomon – arrived from Crete (David Geffen, "Insights into the Life and Thought of Elijah Medigo Based on His Published and Unpublished Works," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 41/42 (1974): 70; Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), 18), he brought a copy of *Behinat ha-dat* to Amsterdam. Joseph Salomon's second published book, *Abscondita Sapientiae*, was published in his absence by his student Samuel Ashkenazi. Samuel compiled it from the manuscripts left behind by Joseph Salomon, who left Amsterdam in a hurry in 1629 because of the scandal caused by the Alexandrian themes in his first published book (Alder, "Mortality of the Soul from Alexander of Aphrodisias to Spinoza," 16). In *Abscondita Sapientiae* Samuel included Elijah's *Behinat ha-dat* (Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 18; Adler, "Epistemological Categories in Delmedigo and Spinoza," 206), perhaps by mistake. At this point, one could speculate that if Joseph Salomon brought one of Elijah's manuscripts to Amsterdam, maybe he brought another as well. Perhaps the manuscript of the *Two Treatises* was just not selected for publication, and maybe through Menasseh ben Israel – a common friend of Spinoza and Joseph Salomon – Spinoza might have known of this manuscript. However, this simply remains unknown.

concerning the intellect. Those medieval authors' knowledge of Averroes' theory of intellect who are quoted by Spinoza is debatable. Hasdai Crescas and Gersonides probably did not read in any other language than Hebrew and the vernacular and thus were not familiar with Averroes' *Long Commentary* available only in Latin and Arabic. Since Averroes' specific theory of intellect is presented there, they could not have known of what had become the defining characteristic of Averroism in the Latin West, namely of the doctrine of the unicity of the intellect.⁹ Maimonides was probably familiar with Averroes' *Long Commentary* view, but he was more interested in topics concerning religion and ethics than the philosophy of mind, and produced a theory of intellect only by implication.¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas was definitely familiar with Averroes' *Long Commentary* position on the intellect, yet, there is no clear textual evidence for the depth of Spinoza's knowledge of Aquinas' work.¹¹

Taking into consideration these limitations on what is known, in this paper a new methodological approach is proposed to the problem at hand. Instead of trying to identify possible sources of Spinoza – either Cartesian or Averroist – a taxonomy of the conceivable positions on the role of intellect in the framework of the Aristotelian tradition is presented. The paper argues that against this background the position of Spinoza can be better clarified. This taxonomy is not intended as a list of positions held by actual philosophers.¹² They are labelled as Alexandrian, Themistian and Averroist

⁹ Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 299.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹¹ Cf. Ursula Renz, "Finite Subjects in the Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹² Proving that – for example – what is referred to as the Alexandrian position was actually held by

only for the sake of simplicity.

In a nutshell, in the paper three possible Aristotelian theories of intellect are constructed and compared to Spinoza's theory. Through this comparison a better understanding of Spinoza's theory of intellect can be achieved. Also, it will be shown that Spinoza's theory is closer to the Alexandrian and Averroist positions than to the Themistian position, which sets him apart from Descartes, whose views are closer to the Themistian position.

In the following, first Aristotle's views are presented and, in the second section, the three ideal types of the theories of intellect are introduced by showing how they are related to Aristotle's initial remarks. In the third section, it is argued that Spinoza had a theory of intellect that is commensurate with the theories of the Aristotelian tradition, and therefore the ideal types presented in the first section can be used as methodological tools. Finally, in the fourth section it is shown that there is no conclusive evidence for interpreting Spinoza's theory of intellect either as Averroist or Alexandrian. Yet, the way his theory is interpreted has important ramifications for the overall interpretation of his philosophy of mind. Therefore, the question whether Spinoza had an Averroistic theory of intellect is not merely of interest to those who are interested in Spinoza's historical sources and intellectual context, but rather to anyone who is interested in his philosophy in general.

Alexander of Aphrodisias, and if so in which one of his works, would itself require a monograph.

1. Aristotle's ambiguous claims about the intellect

Aristotle's most important remarks¹³ on the role of the intellect can be found in his *De anima* (On the Soul),¹⁴ where he presents his philosophy of mind, along with explanations of principles of life. There, he introduces his distinction between three types of mental states: perceptions (*aisthēmata*), imaginations (*phantasmata*) and intellections (*noēmata*), each of which represents a higher or more refined cognition of potentially¹⁵ the same object. Most of the perceptions¹⁶ are infallible: when someone sees a white person, he or she might wrongly attribute to that person his or her whiteness, but he or she cannot err in believing that he or she sees whiteness (DA II.6 418a15-18). These perceptions are what one perceives directly – and this is the reason why one cannot fail to perceive them correctly – whereas the more complex objects of perception are perceived only indirectly (DA II.6 418a21-26). The more

¹³ Another important source is his *Metaphysics*, but there he discusses the metaphysical status of the divine intellect and its relation to the immortality of the human soul rather than questions related to epistemology and philosophy of the (finite) mind.

¹⁴ I will cite *De anima* from the following edition with the usual abbreviation of DA followed by the number of the book, the number of the paragraph and the Bekker pagination and line number (Aristotle, *On the Soul; Parva Naturalia; On Breath*, trans. W. S Hett (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2000)). I have consulted the following editions as well: Aristotle, *De Anima Books II and III*, trans. D. W. Hamlyn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Aristotle, "De Anima (On the Soul)," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed Richard McKeon and trans. W. D. Ross (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 535-606; Arisztotelész. "A lélek," in *Lélekfilozófiai írások*, trans. Steiger Kornél, Brunner Ákos and Bodnár István (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2006), 7-96; Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Christopher Shields (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)). My interpretation presented in this section was greatly influenced by: Ronald Polansky, *Aristotle's De Anima: A Critical Commentary* (Cambridge–New York–Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Whether they are about the same object depends on our interpretation of the relationship between the objects of imagination and perception on the one hand, and enmattered and intelligible forms on the other.

¹⁶ That is, leaving aside accidental and common perceptions: the distinction between these and imaginations might become fuzzy (DA III.3 428a11-12).

basic perceptions are integrated into more complex imaginations, which are neither true nor false (DA III.3 428a2-5), yet have the potential to motivate actions on their own – that is, without holding a relevant belief (*doxa* or *pistis*) (DA III.3 429a6-9). These imaginations differ from beliefs: beliefs cannot be changed voluntarily without having good reasons, whereas imaginations can be formed by an act of will (DA III.3 427b19-22). Also, contrary beliefs cannot be held at the same time, while beliefs contrary to imaginations can be held (DA III.3 428b3-9).

In addition to perceptions and imaginations, which both require the use of bodily organs, there are also intellections, which are cognitions independent of the body. Intellections are actions of an incorruptible and unaffected divine substance – the intellect¹⁷ – independent of the other mental operations. Aristotle justifies this claim by citing the everyday example of a person with an aging body and a bright mind. Those mental operations – perceptions, imaginations, and the like – that depend on the use of bodily organs become weaker when the body becomes feebler. Yet, there are other mental capacities that operate equally well whether the body is old and weak, or young and strong. According to Aristotle, this indicates that those mental operations that can be performed whatever state the body is in, do not depend on the body and belong to the intellect (DA I.4 408b20-3).

The claim that the operation of the intellect does not depend on the specific states of the body is the Separability of the Intellect doctrine. Aristotle provides two more arguments for this doctrine. First, intellect has to be completely devoid of nature in

¹⁷ Or perhaps only the active intellect, see: DA III.5 430a23-25.

order to potentially become anything.¹⁸ Bodily organs being actual objects must have a determinate nature and therefore the intellect cannot depend on a bodily organ for its operation (DA III.4 429a25-29). Second, the intellect receives immaterial forms. Immaterial forms cannot be instantiated by material objects since then they would cease to be immaterial. As a result, the intellect itself has to be immaterial (DA III.4 429b10-23).

Although the intellect, being immaterial, is unaffected, it must be receptive to some forms because intellection is constituted by accepting a form in the intellect, just as sensing is constituted by accepting a form in a sense organ: “as the sensitive is to the sensible, so must intellect be to the intelligible” (DA III.4 429a17-18; translation modified). Since according to Aristotle something can only acquire a property – receive a form – that it already has potentially, and the intellect is able to intellect anything, it has to be potentially everything, and therefore – surprisingly – actually nothing before its operations (DA III.4 429a21-27, 429b23-430a5). The intellect first – in its first potentiality – is not able to exercise its power on its own, but after having become identical to an intelligible – having reached its second potentiality – it is able to exercise its capacities with regard to these intelligibles on its own. Since the intellect is only potentially everything and nothing before its acts, when it exercises its capacities and acts, it is in terms of its actuality identical to its acts. By actualizing an intelligible form, it intellects simultaneously the form as a form of something and the very same form becomes a constituent part of itself. That is, every act of intellection is directed simultaneously at the external object and at itself (DA III.4 429b6-11). The claim that

¹⁸ The intellect has to be potentially anything on the assumption that it can intellect everything – more on this in the next paragraph.

the intellect is identical to its acts and therefore every act of intellection is simultaneously the knowing of an external object and of itself is the doctrine of The Identity of Knower and Known in Intellection.

Besides being distinguished from perception and imagination by their relationship to bodily organs, intellections also differ in terms of their objects: enmattered sensible forms are cognized by perception and imagination, whereas immaterial essences are cognized by the intellect (DA III.4 429b11-23). All the more fitting given that Aristotle has already claimed that intellect is immaterial, so it would not be able to receive enmattered forms which are themselves not intelligible (DA III.4 430a7-9).

Yet, if it is not the enmattered forms that the intellect cognizes, then where do intellectual cognitions originate? Aristotle accepts the general principle that only something possessing a quality in terms of actuality can bring out that quality in another from potentiality to actuality. Therefore, he introduces the distinction of the active intellect¹⁹ – that is every intelligible form in actuality – and the material intellect – which is pure potentiality for receiving these forms (DA III.5 430a10-13). The active intellect is to the material intellect like light to color: just as it is light that turns the potentially sensible color into an actually sensible color, it is the active intellect that turns the potentially intelligible²⁰ into something actually intelligible (DA III.5 430a17-19). In a similar way to the sensing of proper sensibles, intellections of essences are infallible. The cognizer can fail to attribute a sensible property to an object, yet

¹⁹ In this paper, agent and active intellect are not distinguished.

²⁰ What exactly the potentially intelligible is, depends on the particular interpretation of Aristotle: it could be either the sensible, the imagination, or the material intellect. Cf. Deborah L. Black, “Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Aquinas’s Critique of Averroes’s Psychology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (1993): 349-385.

cannot fail to recognize the sensible property: whiteness might be the whiteness of this or that person, but it is certainly white. Likewise, a knower can fail to attribute an intelligible essence to an object, yet cannot fail to intellect the intelligible essence: the intelligible form of humanity might be the intelligible form of this or that particular person, but it is certainly of humanity (DA III.6 430b28-32). Since intellections of essences are infallible in this way, they are not of this or that object, they are of the intelligible and immaterial essence itself. For an essence to be of something an imagination is needed that links the intellection to a particular object of cognition, just as a more complex cognition is required in the case of a basic perception to link it to a particular object of perception (DA III.7 431a16-17, 431b3-8). This claim that the intellect produces infallible knowledge of essences is The Infallibility of Intellect doctrine.

In this section, the following characteristics of an Aristotelian theory of intellect were identified: (1) the separability doctrine, according to which the intellect is separate from the body and does not use bodily organs for its operations; (2) the identity doctrine, according to which the intellect is identical to its acts and therefore knows itself by knowing its own acts, (3) the infallibility doctrine, according to which the intellect produces infallible knowledge of essences.

2. Three possible Aristotelian positions on the intellect

Aristotle's description of the intellect has generated much controversy. Most importantly as far as we are concerned, it was intensified by Averroes, who shifted the

focus of the discussion from the active to the material intellect.²¹ In this chapter three conceivable positions on the Aristotelian theory of intellect based on a possible reconstruction of Averroes' own intellectual development are outlined.²²

The first position is the Alexandrian reading. This reading takes Aristotle's remarks on the divinity of the intellect seriously. If the intellect is a divine, immaterial, unaffected, separate substance as Aristotle claims, then it is not composed of form and matter as every corruptible, corporeal, sublunary substance is. Since only the sublunary material substances are generated and corrupted, intellect must be an ungenerated, eternal substance that is pure actuality and one of a kind. This strict identification of immateriality with unity is an important claim in terms of the Alexandrian reading. Given that in the Aristotelian framework it is matter that individuates different members of the same species, if intellect does not consist of matter, only one intellect can exist. As will be seen, as far as the Alexandrian reading is concerned this cannot apply to both the material and active intellects, therefore this reading interprets Aristotle's claims about the separate and unmixed intellect as exclusively about the active intellect.

By contrast, the material intellect perishes with the human body, just as Aristotle seems to have stated (DA III.5 430a23-25), so it is intellect only metaphorically. This claim is also supported by Aristotle's characterization of the material intellect as pure

²¹ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect*, 258.

²² In the rest of the chapter I depend heavily on Davidson's account of Averroes' development: Herbert A. Davidson, "Averroes on the Material Intellect," *Viator* 17 (January) (1986): 91-138; Cf. Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

potentiality before its acts (DA III.4 429a18-22): eternity entails immutability, so it is incompatible with potentiality. Therefore, since material intellect is potential it cannot be an eternal immaterial substance. This distinguishes it from the active intellect, which is such a substance. On this reading, material intellect is the embodied mental states' disposition to be intelligible – either of all of them, or exclusively of imagination. Furthermore, dispositions – being pure potentialities – are not corruptible, since only what is generated can be corrupted.

The active intellect is the eternal and unique light of God that falls on the particular and corruptible imaginations of particular and corruptible subjects, whereas the material intellect is the potentiality of these imaginations to be lit by this light. The Alexandrian reading was scorned for centuries as it denied personal immortality,²³ and also left some texts unexplained.²⁴

The Themistian reading focuses on places where Aristotle – referring to individual acts of cognition – claims that intellect unqualified is divine, unmixed and unaffected (DA I.4 408b20-30, III.4 429a18-20, 429b10-23). According to the Themistian reading, both the active and material intellects are faculties of the rational soul, which itself is an eternal, incorruptible, immaterial and unmixed substance. This reading does

²³ Cf. Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁴ The claim that the potentiality (of material intellect) is incorruptible is not necessarily well supported. Also, concerning the Alexandrian reading it seems that something incorruptible is perfected by something corruptible when the – incorruptible – material intellect is perfected by the – incorruptible – active intellect to a – corruptible – actual act of intellection. At one point Aristotle seems to say that the unmixed intellect is in the soul (DA III.4 429a22), which would rule out the Alexandrian identification of the unmixed intellect with God, since in the Aristotelian framework souls are localized in the sense that they are immaterial forms of sublunary chunks of matter. Therefore, God as the unmoved mover, who is outside of the universe – including the supralunary realm of eternal and immutable immaterial entities – could not be possibly located in the soul. For a differing position in a Platonic framework see: Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Penguin UK, 2003), para. 7.2.7).

not have to postulate incorruptible potentialities as the Alexandrian one does, it is able to offer personal immortality and does not have to reject Aristotle's remarks about the unqualified intellect being unmixed. Yet, the Themistian position struggles to explain how particular immaterial substances are individuated: given that every human rational soul belongs to the same species and there is no way of individuating them, their differences seem to be a brute fact.

This last point is alleviated by the Averroist reading, which solves this difficulty by denying the multiplicity of material intellects. Just as there is only one unique active intellect according to the Alexandrian reading, there is only one unique material intellect according to the Averroist reading. Yet, the two intellects have two different roles. The active intellect stores the body of knowledge available to humans in an actualized form. The material intellect is the organ of intellection. This organ is, however, not a bodily and particular organ like the organs for perceptions and imaginations. It is a unique, eternal and immaterial organ in the celestial spheres, which is shared by the whole of mankind. The operation of this organ depends both on the imagination of particular subjects and the activity of the active intellect.

This twofold dependence is explained by the analogy of sight. In the case of sight there is a (1) sensible color. (2) This color is transformed by light from potentially sensible to actually sensible. (3) The eye accepts this actually sensible form of color. Finally, (4) the soul senses, with the help of the eye accepting the actually sensible form of color, the sensible color. In the case of intellection there is (1) an essence. (2) The active intellect turns the potentially intelligible essence in the imagination into an actually intelligible form. (3) The material intellect accepts the actually intelligible form of the essence abstracted from the imagination. Finally, (4) the embodied soul

intellects, with the help of the material intellect, accepting the actually intelligible form, the essence.

On this reading, the material intellect is not potential in the sense that it is not actual. Rather, potentiality is interpreted as a characterization of the metaphysical dependence relation between material and active intellects. Active intellect is actual in the sense that it is essentially actual: its actuality does not depend on anything else. Material intellect is potential in the sense that its actuality depends on external causes, namely the active intellect and the imaginations of the whole of mankind. It is also fully actual, but not essentially: it is only actual because the imaginations of the whole of mankind allow it to abstract every possible intelligible form, which the active intellect necessarily instantiates within it. Thus, the content of active and material intellects is always coextensive. Yet, whereas the active intellect essentially actualizes this content, the actualization of the content in the material intellect depends on the interplay of the active intellect and the sum of all imaginations of mankind.

The Averroist position has many theoretical advantages over the Alexandrian and Themistian positions,²⁵ yet, it has the unwelcome consequence of having to suppose that every possible thought is thought at any one moment by someone. Otherwise, a thought that has not been thought of would not be actualized in the material intellect which would destroy its immutability and actuality entailed by its eternity.

In this section the following characteristic claims were identified. The Alexandrian

²⁵ Therefore, the Averroist position does not have trouble explaining the perfection of cognitions from imagination to intellection, since this is a perfection from corruptibility (of the imagination) to incorruptibility (of the material intellect dependent for its incorruptibility on the active intellect). Also, it has the advantage over the Themistian reading that it does not have to introduce brute facts for individuating immaterial intellects.

reading claims that human intellections are produced in embodied mental states with the help of a unique immaterial substance. The Themistian reading states that human intellections are products in an immaterial substance, which is one of many and possesses all the necessary resources for this intellection. The Averroist reading claims that human intellections are produced in a unique, immaterial substance, which is accessible to the embodied subject based on its embodied mental states.

3. Does Spinoza embrace an Aristotelian theory of intellect?

In this section Spinoza's endorsement of all three characteristic doctrines for Aristotle's theory of intellect is presented. This does not mean that he was an Aristotelian philosopher, or that his theory of intellect was an Aristotelian one. The claim defended in this section is that because of this similarity, the taxonomy of ideal types constructed for Aristotelian theories of intellect is applicable to Spinoza and measuring the relative similarity of his theory as far as the Alexandrian, Averroist or Themistian interpretations of Aristotle are concerned can produce meaningful results.

The first characteristic doctrine is that the intellect is separate from the body and its operation does not depend on bodily organs. This doctrine is endorsed by Spinoza in Part 5 of *Ethics*, which states that "[t]he mind can neither imagine anything, nor recollect past things, except while the body endures"²⁶ (E5p21); yet, "[t]he human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which

²⁶ "Mens nihil imaginari potest neque rerum praeiteritarum recordari nisi durante corpore." (II/294/26-27)

is eternal”²⁷ (E5p23). In the demonstration of E5p23, Spinoza shows that there is an idea “in God”²⁸ which is necessarily part of the essence of the mind, which is an eternal idea.²⁹ In E5p40c Spinoza identifies this eternal part of the mind with the intellect, and the corruptible part of the mind with imagination. Furthermore, the way the eternal part of the mind conceives things is independent of the existing state of the human body (E5p29). Together these claims show that the existence of the intellect does not depend on the existence of the body – since it exists before and after the body’s existence – and is thus separate. Also, the operation of the intellect does not depend on the states of the body – since it is able to operate regardless of the actual state of the body – and does not use bodily organs.

²⁷ “Mens humana non potest cum corpore absolute destrui sed ejus aliquid remanet quod æternum est.” (II/295/14-15)

²⁸ This does not necessarily mean that God has that idea, see: Ursula Renz, *Die Erklärbarkeit von Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2010); Ursula Renz, “The Definition of the Human Mind and the Numerical Difference between Subjects (2P11-2P13S),” in *Spinoza’s Ethics. A Collective Commentary*, ed. Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz and Robert Schnepf (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 99-118.

²⁹ It is not immediately clear whether this – seemingly sempiternalist – description is compatible with Spinoza’s – seemingly atemporalist – definition of eternity; for differing views see: Steven Parchment, “The Mind’s Eternity in Spinoza’s Ethics,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (2000): 349–382; Diane Steinberg, “Spinoza’s Theory of the Eternity of the Mind,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (1981): 35–68; Barbara Stock, “Spinoza on the Immortality of the Mind,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (2000): 381–403; Wallace Matson, “Body Existence and Mind Eternity in Spinoza,” in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley (Leiden–New York–Kobenhavn–Koln: Brill, 1990), 82–95; Henry A. Allison, “The Eternity of Mind: Comments on Matson on Spinoza,” in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. Edwin Curley (Leiden–New York–Kobenhavn–Koln: Brill, 1990), 96–101; Tad M. Schmaltz, “Spinoza on Eternity and Duration – The 1663 Connection,” in *The Young Spinoza: A Metaphysician in the Making*, ed. Yitzhak Melamed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 205–20; Julie R. Klein, “‘By Eternity I Understand’: Eternity According to Spinoza,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly / עיון פילוסופי רבעון* 51 (2002): 295–324; Chantal Jaquet, “Eternity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Michael LeBuffe, “Change and the Eternal Part of the Mind in Spinoza,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2010): 369–384; Frank Lucash, “Spinoza on the Eternity of the Human Mind,” *Philosophy and Theology* 5, no. 2 (1990): 103–113; Julie R. Klein, “‘Something of It Remains’: Spinoza and Gersonides on Intellectual Eternity,” in *Spinoza and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 177–203.

The second characteristic doctrine is that the intellect is identical to its acts and therefore knows itself by knowing its own acts. Acceptance of this doctrine follows from Spinoza’s rejection of the Cartesian substance view of the mind: since the mind is just the bundle of its ideas, every idea – including intellectual ideas – provides knowledge of the external object and the mind itself.³⁰

The third characteristic doctrine is that the intellect produces infallible knowledge of essences. That knowledge of essences is produced by the intellect is stated by Spinoza in E1p15s and E5p25d.³¹ It is clear that the intellect only produces adequate ideas according to E5p29s where Spinoza states that things are really and truly as they are conceived under a species of eternity. Also, in E5p31d it is stated that insofar as the mind is eternal, it conceives things only adequately, and this eternal part of the mind is the intellect (E5p40c). Therefore, the intellect only produces adequate ideas, and essences are known adequately by the intellect.

4. Is Spinoza’s theory of intellect Averroistic?

In the last section, Spinoza’s acceptance of all three characteristic doctrines of Aristotle’s theory of intellect was presented. As a result, it is argued that the three conceivable positions on Aristotle’s theory of intellect can be meaningfully applied to

³⁰ Renz, *Die Erklärbarkeit von Erfahrung*, 188–94.

³¹ If we accept the claim that knowledge of the third kind belongs to the intellect. Whether every idea of the intellect concerns essences depends on our view on the relationship between the second and third kinds of knowledge, but there is some evidence that they are about the same objects: E2p40s2, E5p36cs. Cf. Edwin Curley, “Experience in Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge,” in *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor Press, 1973), 28.

Spinoza's position. In this section, some crucial differences between the Themistian position and Spinoza's theory are stated. It is also argued that the degree of similarity between Spinoza's theory and the Alexandrian and Averroist positions depends on the particular interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy of mind that one adopts.

The characteristic claim concerning the Themistian position is that human intellects are products in an immaterial substance, which is one of many, and which has all the necessary resources for this intellection. This position is similar to Descartes' position, in which individual souls are particular thinking substances that possess all the necessary resources in the form of innate ideas in order to gain knowledge.³² Yet, this position is radically different from Spinoza's substance monism concerning mental phenomena (E2p11c, E2p43s, E5p36, E5p40cs).³³

By contrast to the Themistian reading, both the Alexandrian and Averroist readings share the – very anti-Cartesian – assumption that the mind is not a self-sufficient substance, but rather the product of the interaction of the individual's imagination with the universal intellect. They differ in one albeit very important detail concerning the particularities of this interaction.³⁴ According to the Alexandrian reading the individual acts of intellection occur in the embodied individual mind, whereas according to the Averroist reading they occur on an impersonal level which is

³² See how he describes intellection in the example of wax: Rene Descartes, "Meditations on the First Philosophy," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20. Due to limitations on space, I cannot argue for this claim in detail.

³³ This claim does not imply that God is an epistemic subject in the same sense as human minds.

³⁴ I would like to emphasize that the distinction between the Alexandrian and Averroist readings need not be formulated as a distinction between different interpretations of the metaphysical status of the material intellect, and therefore one can be an Averroist even if one rejects the existence of the potential intellect: more on this at the end of this section.

only accessible through the embodied individual cognitions.³⁵

Whether Spinoza's theory shares more similarities with the Alexandrian or Averroist position depends on how Spinoza's definition of adequacy is interpreted.³⁶ Spinoza identifies epistemic adequacy with causal adequacy: adequate ideas are such that they are adequately caused by the essence of the mind alone (E3d1-2). However, every finite mode is caused by an infinitely long causal chain (E1p28), and knowing anything entails knowing all its causes (E1a4). The problem is that if adequate ideas are finite modes, they cannot be caused by the mind's essence alone, since they are caused by an infinite number of other finite modes.³⁷ Also, knowing any finite mode would require knowing infinitely long causal chains which seems to be impossible as far as finite minds are concerned. Therefore, there are two ways of interpreting Spinoza: first, there are those who believe that no finite mind can have adequate ideas; second, there are those who believe that adequate ideas are not finite modes.

If one accepts the claim that according to Spinoza no finite mode can be an adequate cause, and therefore finite minds can have more or less adequate ideas, but only the one substance is fully adequate and self-causing,³⁸ then one may interpret Spinoza as an Alexandrian. On this reading, God is the only fully actual, fully

³⁵ Contrary to what is generally assumed, a phenomenological difference between these two positions need not exist, see: Deborah L. Black, "Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Aquinas's Critique of Averroes's Psychology," 349-385.

³⁶ Cf. Diane Steinberg, "Knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 140-166.

³⁷ Noa Shein, "Causation and Determinate Existence of Finite Modes in Spinoza," *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 97, no. 3 (2015): 334-357.

³⁸ Cf. Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Ursula Renz, *Die Erklärbarkeit von Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2010); Matthew J. Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

intelligible substance who is pure activity, and a degree of intelligibility is conferred to finite beings by God when they participate in the activity of God's actuality by actualizing a disposition that they have. That is, when a finite mode approximates to a greater extent the perfect knowledge of itself as it is in God, it is – or would be – actualizing to some degree its disposition to become like God and thereby receives a greater share of God's activity and intelligibility. In this regard, Spinoza is an Alexandrian, since individual acts of intellection occur in the embodied human mind with the help of the universal activity of God's intellect. This reading implies that Spinoza's claim that the human mind's intellections are identical to God's intellections should be understood as the claim that the human mind's operations are identical to God's intellections as far as that they are active and intelligible, but never numerically the same.

By contrast, if one accepts the claim that according to Spinoza finite minds are constituted by both finite and infinite modes,³⁹ and therefore the finite human mind can consist of fully adequate ideas when it is constituted by eternal ideas,⁴⁰ then one is

³⁹ Alternatively, by durational corruptible and eternal incorruptible finite modes, in which case we are not faced with the difficulty of how a finite mind can be constituted by both finite and infinite modes (cf. Syliane Malinowski-Charles, "Rationalism Versus Subjective Experience: The Problem of the Two Minds in Spinoza," in *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti and Justin E. H. Smith (Dordrecht: Springer/Synthese, 2010), 123-43). According to this reading, adequate ideas being eternal still belong to the unique infinite intellect and not to the particular embodied mind, and thus the reading qualifies as Averroist. I would like to thank Michael Della Rocca for this suggestion.

⁴⁰ Eugene Marshall, "Adequacy and Innateness in Spinoza," in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy IV*, ed. Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 51-88; Eugene Marshall, "Man Is A God to Man: How Human Beings Can Be Adequate Causes," in *Essays on Spinoza's Ethical Theory*, ed. Matthew Kisner and Andrew Youpa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 160-77; Don Garrett, "Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind That Is Eternal," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 284-302; Tad M. Schmaltz, "Spinoza on Eternity and Duration – The 1663 Connection," in *The Young Spinoza: A Metaphysician in the Making*, ed. Yitzhak Melamed (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

more inclined to regard Spinoza as an Averroist. According to this reading, God's infinite intellect is eternal and immutable knowledge that the human mind can access in virtue of possessing the right kind of imaginations. By cognizing the ever-changing and unreliable modifications of one's body, the mind is inadequately and unreliably aware of external objects, whereas by cognizing the immutable and reliable modifications of God's infinite intellect, the mind is adequately and reliably aware of external bodies. The individual acts of intellection occur on the non-individual level of the infinite intellect. These acts of intellections can constitute the human mind if this mind consists of appropriate finite ideas. This reading implies that Spinoza's claims about the human subject should be understood equivocally, since they can refer either to the human epistemic subject, or to the subject of intellection composed of the embodied mind and of the eternal organ of cognition, God's infinite intellect.

Finally, two possible objections should be addressed. First, one could object to the comparison with Aristotle's theory of intellect, namely that Spinoza rejected any notion of potentiality and therefore comparisons with Aristotle's theory are not applicable. On the one hand, it is unclear whether Spinoza completely rejected the notions of potentiality and disposition⁴¹; on the other hand, even if he did, this might not render the whole comparison meaningless. This question is related to the second possible objection, namely to the claim that Spinoza in E1p31s rejected the notion of

2015), 205-20; Eric Schliesser, "Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science," in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴¹ Ursula Renz, "Explicable Explainers: The Problem of Mental Dispositions in Spinoza's Ethics," in *Debating Dispositions: Issues in Metaphysics, Epistemology and Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Gregor Damschen, Robert Schnepf and Karsten Stüber (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 79-98; Ursula Renz, "Finite Subjects in the Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

potential intellect and thereby refuted the Aristotelian framework as a possible way of interpreting his theory.⁴²

In E1p31s Spinoza rejects the notion of the potential intellect because “[he] wanted to speak only of what we perceive as clearly as possible, that is, of the intellection itself. We perceive nothing more clearly than that. For we can intellect nothing that does not lead to more perfect knowledge of the intellection”.⁴³ First of all, it should be noted that just as Spinoza rejected the notion of possible intellect, he made the very Aristotelian claim that intellection is simultaneously intellection of the external object and the intellect itself.

Second, it should not be forgotten that Aristotle introduced the distinction between active and material or potential intellects because of his hylomorphic doctrine, and it has caused considerable difficulties for his interpreters. If Spinoza rejected the hylomorphic doctrine, he did not need to postulate a distinction between active and potential intellects and could have saved himself a lot of trouble. However, rejecting the potential intellect does not amount to the rejection of the Aristotelian framework, since none of the three characteristic Aristotelian claims concerning the intellect depend on the distinction between active and material intellects, just as the formulation of the Alexandrian and Averroist positions are independent of this distinction.

⁴² This concern was raised in correspondence with Mogens Lærke and concerning a specific Aristotelian reading by (Ursula Renz, “Spinoza’s Epistemology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett, 2nd revised edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming)). My argument calls for the refinement of these views.

⁴³ “nolui loqui nisi de re nobis quam clarissime percepta, de ipsa scilicet intellectione qua nihil nobis clarius percipitur. Nihil enim intelligere possumus quod ad perfectiorem intellectionis cognitionem non conducat.” (II/72/14-17); translation modified.

Furthermore, depending on whether the Alexandrian or Averroist reading of Spinoza is accepted, rejection of the possible intellect can come very naturally. According to the Alexandrian reading of Spinoza, there is no potential intellect because intellect is God, pure actuality in which finite beings can participate and by which alone they are active and intelligible. Particular finite ideas are never solely ideas of the intellect, but rather ideas of the intellect to a certain extent. To that extent the idea is purely active, there is nothing potential about it. What is potential about the idea is its particularity and inadequacy, namely what is yet to become intelligible, which is precisely the opposite of what belongs to the intellect.

According to the Averroist reading of Spinoza, there is no potential intellect because intellect is a fully actualized organ of cognition like an eternal and perfect eye that sees everything simultaneously and therefore actualizes all possible shapes and colors at once. Potentiality is found within the particular imaginations which can become of the appropriate sort in order to access the knowledge of this eternal organ and thereby actualize an individual’s intellection. Again, potentiality belongs to the opposite of what the intellect does.

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