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Averroës on the Immateriality of
the Intellect

The Chapter on the Rational Faculty
[Commentary on *De Anima* 3.4–8]

(276) [429^a10] He said: Concerning that part of the soul whereby we have apprehensions, which is called intellect and comprehension, [and] whether it is separate from the rest of the faculties of the soul in location and in intention or only in intention without being separate in place, we first ought to investigate the intention, [meaning that] whereby this part is separate from the rest of the soul's faculties: what and how is it? – that is, what is conceptualization and how is it accomplished?

(277) We say that, if conceptualization exists among the passive faculties comparable to sensation, as appears to be its nature, then either its being affected by an intelligible object resembles the passivity whereby the senses are affected by sensible objects, or it is more remote than that true passivity of the senses, such that nothing of the intention of passivity which is in the senses will be found in it. For the passivity of the senses, even if it does not have the intention of true passivity – which is a change of subject concomitant with the reception [of the object] – does contain a measure of change. We say that this faculty – that which receives intelligible objects – must be completely unaffected; that is, it must be unreceptive to the change that occurs to faculties which are affected by virtue of their commingling with the subject in which they are found. [This,] so that the rational faculty will have only the receptive aspect of the intention of passivity and will be potentially similar to the object which it thinks, while not being the object itself. This faculty may be described by way of comparison; for its relation to intelligible objects is like that of the sensory faculty toward sensible objects, except that the faculty which receives sensible objects is mixed, to a degree, with the subject in which it is found, whereas this faculty must be completely unmixed with any material form. For, this faculty, which is called the hylic intellect, if it is to think all things – that is, receive the forms of all things – cannot be mixed with any one form; that is, it cannot be mixed with the subject in which it is found, as the other material faculties are.

(278) If the rational faculty were mixed with any form, then one of two things would have to occur: either the form of the subject with which it was mixed would impede the forms

this faculty would receive, or it would change them – that is, it would change the form being received. Were this so, the forms of things would not exist in the intellect as they really are – that is, the forms existing in the intellect would be changed into forms different from the actual forms. If, therefore, the nature of the intellect is to receive the forms of things which have retained their natures, it is necessary that it be a faculty unmixed with any form whatsoever.

(279) This is what Anaxagoras wanted [to convey] in saying, reportedly, that the intellect has to be unmixed in order to have knowledge, for, if [a form] were to manifest itself in the intellect, it would prevent the appearance of a different form or change it. That is, if any form were to be manifested in this disposition, one of two things would have to occur: either that form would prevent us from knowing a different form which we want to know, since [the intellect's] knowledge of a form is reception of it; or the [first form] would change the [other form] when it received it.

(280) This being the case with this intellect, its nature is nothing other than disposition only – that is, the potential intellect is solely disposition, not something in which disposition exists. Although this disposition is in a subject, since it is not mixed with the subject, the subject does not serve as an intellect in potentiality. This is the opposite of what obtains with other material faculties in which the subject is a substance – either composite (that is, something composed of form and matter) or simple (the first matter).

(281) This is Aristotle's concept of the passive intellect, according to the interpretation of Alexander. The other commentators, however, take Aristotle's statement that the hylic intellect has to be unmixed to mean that it is a disposition which exists in a separate substance – this, since the hylic intellect ought to be a substance, and [since] disposition by itself is neither a substance nor part of something. It is, rather, one of the concomitants of matter, and material causes are part of something material. In general, disposition is a distinguishing characteristic of matter, and it is impossible for disposition to be found in one genus and its subject in another – that is, that which is disposed to receive something intelligible must be an intellect. According to Alexander's approach, however, the potential intellect is nothing other than disposition only, its subject being from another genus: either a part of the soul, or the soul in its entirety.

(282) However, this view [of the other commentators] also entails an absurd position: that there should be a separate substance, the existence of which occurs in disposition and potentiality. This [is absurd] because potentiality is one of the properties of material objects. Another absurd position is also entailed [in this view], for the first perfection of the intellect would be eternal and the last [would be] generated and corruptible. Moreover, if man is generated and corruptible in his first perfection, this [later] perfection would have to be so, too.

(283) Once I gave these statements their due measure of doubt, it became apparent that, in one sense, the intellect is a disposition free of material forms, as Alexander said; and, in another sense, it is a separate substance attired with this disposition – that is, this disposition found in man is attached to this separate substance by virtue of the latter's conjunction with man. It is not the case that this disposition is something existing in the nature of this separate substance, as the commentators think; nor is it a pure disposition, as Alexander thinks. Proof that it is not purely a disposition is had in that we find that the hylic intellect apprehends this disposition devoid of the forms and apprehends the forms, making it possible thereby to think of privations – that is, by virtue of apprehending its essence devoid of forms. This being the case, necessarily, that which apprehends this disposition and the forms which obtain in it is other than the disposition.

(284) It has thus been explained that the hylic intellect is something composed of the disposition found in us and of an intellect conjoined to this disposition. As conjoined to the disposition, it is a disposed intellect, not an intellect in act; though, as not conjoined to this disposition, it is an intellect in act; while, in itself, this intellect is the Agent Intellect, the existence of which will be shown later. As conjoined to this disposition, it is necessarily an intellect in potentiality which cannot think itself but which can think other than itself (that is, material things), while, as not conjoined to the disposition, it is necessarily an intellect in act which thinks itself and not that which is here (that is, it does not think material things). We shall clarify this more fully later, once it is clear that two functions exist in our soul, one of which is the producing of intelligibles and the other is the receiving of them. By virtue of producing intelligibles, it is called agent, while, by virtue of receiving them, it is called passive, though in itself it is one thing.

(285) Both approaches to the hylic intellect have thus been explained to you – that of Alexander and that of the others – and it will have become clear to you that the truth, which is the approach of Aristotle, is a combination of both views, in the manner we have mentioned. For, by our position as stated, we are saved from positing something substantively separate as a certain disposition, positing [instead] that the disposition found in it is not due to its [own] nature but due to its conjunction with a substance which has this disposition essentially – namely, man – while, in positing that something here is associated incidentally with this disposition, we are saved from [considering] the intellect in potentiality as a disposition only. Having clarified this, we may now return to commenting in detail on everything which Aristotle says on these issues.

(286) [429^a24] Aristotle said: As this is the nature of the intellect, that it is only a disposition, it is unmixed with the body – that is, unmixed with any form. Were it mixed with the body, it would be either a tempered form, whether hot or cold, or it would have a corporeal organ, like the sense. However, it has nothing of this sort, and it is therefore not mixed with the body. This being the case, they spoke well who said that soul is the place of forms – except that this is not true for all the soul, but for the intellect only. Nor is the thinking faculty [in question] equivalent to the forms as perfected, but as in potentiality.

(287) Proof that the impassivity found in the intellect is not the same as that found in the sense – that is, that impassivity in the intellect is greater than in the sense – lies in the fact that, once the senses experience a strong object of sensation, they are not able to sense something inferior to it after having disengaged from it. For example, whoever has looked at the sun is not able to look at what is below it, the reason being that the eye is affected and influenced by a strong object of sensation whereas the opposite occurs to the intellect – that is, when it disengages from considering a strong intelligible, its consideration of an inferior one is [rendered] easier and better. The reason for this is that the sensory faculty is mixed with its subject to a certain degree, while the rational faculty is entirely unmixed.

(288) The intellect is said to be potential in two ways. One is like that which is said of habitual notions and forms – namely, that they have the potentiality to act by themselves, as a sage is said to be able to learn, speculate, and deduce things by himself; while the second way [in which the intellect is said to be potential] is like that which is said of passive faculties – for example, the student who is said to be potentially wise, though being unable to realize this by himself but, rather, through [the assistance] of others. This, then, is the difference between active and passive potentialities.

(289) [429^b10] He said: As a particular individual is one thing and its essence another – for example, a particular [quantity of] water is [one] thing and its essence is something else, and

similarly with many things (though not with all, for the existence and essence of simple things are one and the same) – it is necessary that these two intentions be apprehended [either] by two different faculties, each one being apprehended separately, or by one faculty, though one which has two different aspects. This, once it is realized that the essence and form of an object are other than the thing which has the form; for we apprehend the essence and form of an object by means of the intellect, whereas we apprehend an individual instance of this essence by means of the sense. Moreover, it is by means of the intellect that we apprehend that a particular essence is in a given individual – that is, in the matter of that form. Thus, if that matter has an essence which exists in the object, it is the intellect which appreciates this.

(290) Aristotle has compared this state of the intellect to a bent line. That is, he has compared the intellect's grasp of form to a straight line and its grasp that the form is in a substrate to a bent line. The substrate is either in physical entities, the intellect perceiving it by means of the sense, or in mathematical entities, three things being perceived by the intellect: form, the substrate of the form, and the being of the form in a substrate. The reason for this is that the substrates of the forms of mathematical entities are objects of the intellect, not of the sense, contrary to the situation which obtains with a physical object.

(291) [429^b22] He said: One might be puzzled by the previous statement that the hylic intellect is simple and unaffected, whereas conceptualization is said to be subsumed in the category of affected faculties. This [is a problem] because it is thought that active and passive things are those which share the same matter; but, if the intellect is immaterial, how can it be acted upon?

(292) Another problem is whether or not the intellect itself is intelligible when in act. It is considered that one of two things should occur if the intellect were to think itself in thinking other things: Either all things would be actual intellects and intelligibles, or the intellect itself or something in it would be in potentiality – that is, it would have an intention which would become an actual intelligible once the intellect abstracted it, being potentially intelligible before that.

(293) Both statements are absurd, however; and we say in answer to the first problem that the intention of affection used above vis-à-vis the intellect is more general than that predicated of other things. The only intention of affection in the intellect is receptivity, without there occurring any change whatsoever, either in that which receives or in that which is received. Moreover, one should not believe that the subject of this receptivity is anything other than a disposition to receive the intelligible, and it is not anything in actuality before it is perfected by the intelligible. As Aristotle has said, [the intellect] resembles the disposition for receiving writing which is found in a tablet – that is, just as that disposition found on the surface of the tablet is not mixed with the tablet, so that the tablet's reception of writing can be [pure] passivity, such is the situation of the intellect with the intelligible.

(294) The second problem is resolved in saying that the intellect thinks itself in the same manner that it thinks all intelligibles, except that, in the latter case, that which thinks them is other than that which is thought, whereas it thinks itself insofar as that which thinks it and that which is thought are one and the same thing, both being intellect. It is in this way that speculative knowledge can be said to be the same as its object – that is, both that which apprehends and that which is apprehended are knowledge. One ought, however, to believe that Aristotle's statement concerning the identity in every respect of intellect and intelligible obtains fully [only] with respect to separate objects, whereas this identity is incidental,

as it were, in our intellect. That is, since the essence of man's intellect is nothing other than thinking objects which are external to itself, it happens to think itself when it thinks the objects external to it. However, its essence is nothing more than thinking things external to it, unlike [the intellects of] separate entities which do not think things external to themselves.

(295) [430^a10] He said: That which concerns the intellect has to correspond to physical entities. In every genus of generated physical entities, we find one thing which corresponds to the recipient and another to the agent. The former is that which is potentially all the things found in that genus, the latter that which actualizes them, its relation in nature being like that of art to matter. Accordingly, these two differentia – namely, an agent and a passive intellect – have to exist in the intellect, and thus there will be an intellect in us which is intellect with respect to [its ability to] receive every intelligible, and an intellect in us with respect to [its ability to] actualize every intelligible.

(296) The relation of this intellect to intelligibles is in one respect like that of light to colors. As it is light which renders colors actual after their having been potential, and which gives the pupil of the eye that through which it can receive colors – namely, transparency – so this intellect is that which actualizes intelligibles and brings them forth, and it is that which gives the hylic intellect that through which it receives intelligibles (that is, something which resembles the transparency of sight, as has previously been explained).

(297) It is clear that, in one respect, this intellect is an agent and, in another, it is a form for us, since the generation of intelligibles is a product of our will. When we want to think something, we do so, our thinking it being nothing other than, first, bringing the intelligible forth and, second, receiving it. The individual intentions in the imaginative faculty are they that stand in relation to the intellect as potential colors do to light. That is, this intellect renders them actual intelligibles after their having been intelligible in potentiality. It is clear, from the nature of this intellect – which, in one respect, is form for us and, in another, is the agent for the intelligibles – that it is separable and neither generable nor corruptible, for that which acts is always superior to that which is acted upon, and the principle is superior to the matter. The intelligent and intelligible aspects of this intellect are essentially the same thing, since it does not think anything external to its essence. There must be an Agent Intellect here, since that which actualizes the intellect has to be an intellect, the agent endowing only that which resembles what is in its substance.

(298) [430^a20] He said: In the individual, the potential intellect is prior in time, whereas, in absolute terms, the intellect in actuality is prior to that which is in potentiality in two senses of priority simultaneously: in time and in causation. This Agent Intellect, our final form, does not think at one time and not at another, nor does it exist at one time and not at another; it is, rather, unceasing, and will not cease. Thus, when separated from the body, it is immortal, necessarily. While it is this very intellect which thinks the intelligibles here when it is joined to the hylic intellect, it is not able to think anything here when it is separated from the hylic intellect. Therefore, we do not remember after death all that we knew when the intellect was conjoined with the body. Thus, when conjoined to us, the intellect thinks the intelligibles which are here, while when separated from us, it thinks itself. Whether it thinks itself while conjoined to us is a question which we will investigate later.