

Averroes, Aquinas and the Interpersonal Mind

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Abstract

Averroes was the boldest supporter of the idea of an Interpersonal Mind.

He maintains that there is a "material intellect", which is one and the same for all human beings. It uses faculties (e.g. the brain) of individual humans as a basis for its thinking process. The process that happens in the human brain is called *fikr* by Averroes (known as *cogitatio* in Latin), a process which contains not universal knowledge but "active consideration of particular things" that the person has encountered. This use of human faculty explains why thinking can be an individual experience: if at one point the universal intellect is using one's brain to think about an object of thought, then that person is also experiencing the thinking.

Against Averroes Aquinas wrote an entire (most difficult) book, *De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averroistas* (1269).

Averroes, held that the principle of understanding, the intellect is not a soul or a part of the soul, except equivocally; rather, it is a separated substance. He said that the separate substance's understanding is mine or yours insofar as possible intellect is joined to me or you through the phantasms which are in me and in you. Against him, Aquinas maintains that, if then intellect is not something of this man such that it is truly one with him, but is united to him only through phantasms or as a mover, will would not be in man, but in the separated intellect. And thus a man would not have dominion over his acts, nor could anyone be praised or blamed for his acts, which is to destroy the principles of moral philosophy.

Keywords: Averroes; Aquinas; interpersonal mind; intellect; separateness; form of the body; organ; moral responsibility

1. Introduction: An Outstanding Theme

10 years ago I was deeply impressed while reading *On Aquinas* by Herbert McCabe. Herbert McCabe ingeniously says that the brain is not the organ (instrument) of thought. The organ of thought is the system of language. While, on the one hand, the brain is a part of our body, that is, as private and incommunicable as the other parts of our body (and so are its products such as sensations and feelings), on the other hand, language is something public and inter-personal. Who thinks? Who is the author/subject of the act of thinking? This man, that is, either Caius or Sempronius? Or, instead, is the subject of thought Humanity itself, present and alive within Caius and Sempronius?

2. Two Premises

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I want to state two premises: 1) Should I support Aquinas because I am Christian? No! In fact, I do criticise him; 2) I do not pretend to have covered all the topics and solved all the puzzles. Not at all. This one – if any - is a very difficult topic in itself.

Moreover the texts the tradition handed down to us are very difficult, because they belong to a tradition that finished five centuries ago and therefore there is not any continuity throughout the modern and contemporary philosophy that could transform words, concepts, frames of reasoning into other we are more familiar with. It's true that some few great thinkers such as Hegel, Mazzini, Sigmund Freud, Benedetto Croce, Ferdinand De Saussure, Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Popper supported the absurdity of the thesis of Descartes, and represented by Rodin, that is, the thesis of thought as a private product of the individual. They argued, in various forms (Absolute Spirit, Duties of Humanity, Langue vs. Parole, Noosphere, Super-Ego, World Three) supporting the thesis of an Interpersonal Mind, but they did so unaware of the tradition of 18 centuries of Aristotelian commentators that had preceded them. They did not know this ancient -medieval discussion, did not studied the discussion itself, they did not know Medieval philosophy, because of their secular atheistic biases drawn from XIX and XX century idealism and positivism, and therefore they did not revive this discussion explicitly and entirely.

To my knowledge, the first scholar to consciously and explicitly connect this discussion of the ancient and medieval past with the conceptual findings of modern and contemporary philosophy was Herbert McCabe. He was a "pioneer", even if, because of the particular events of his life, he had no way to explore these pioneering reflections in depth.

Aristotle's conception

Aristotle gives his most substantial account of the intellect and thinking in *De Anima (On the Soul)*, Book III, chapters 4-5, which is the most commented passage of the entire History of Philosophy. According to Aristotle the passive intellect "is what it is by becoming all things." By this Aristotle means that the passive intellect can potentially become anything by receiving that thing's intelligible form. The active intellect is then required to illuminate the passive intellect to make the potential knowledge into knowledge in actuality, in the same way that light makes potential colors into actual colors.

Controversy surrounds almost every aspect of *De Anima* iii 5, not least because in it Aristotle characterizes the active mind—a topic mentioned nowhere else in his entire corpus—as ‘separate and unaffected and unmixed, being in its essence actuality’

3. A Long-lasting Debate

Teofrastus (IV BC), Alexander of Aphrodisias (III AD), Themistius (IV AD), Simplicius (VI AD), then Avicenna (XI), Averroes and Maimonides (XII), Aquinas (XIII), Nifo, Cremonini, Achillini, Zimara, De Vio, Pomponazzi (XVI) commented this passage by different interpretations, sometimes strikingly different from each other.

A scholar called this discussion a “karaoke that lasted two millennia”.

However, in the seventeenth century with Descartes and modern philosophy (follower of him) this long discussion was interrupted and prevailed - undisputed! - the idea of thought as a private product of the individual. It is not by chance that the icon of this idea is the statue of "The Thinker"

by Auguste Rodin, where the bodily representation of the act of thinking resembles the bodily representation of the act of defecating.

It was only with the rise of Romanticism in early XIX century and in particular philosophical idealism, that community, tradition and history started being appreciated.

Three important and influential thinkers Hegel in his doctrine of the absolute spirit, by Marx about ideology and the superstructure, and by Giuseppe Mazzini speaking of the four levels of integration of human thought and action.

In the XX century, on the same line, we have the philosophy of Ferdinand De Saussure in his 1916 *Cours de linguistique* general, the concept of "Noosphere" by Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, the concept of "structuralism" by Claude Levi-Strauss, the concept of Super-Ego by Sigmund Freud, and the collective unconscious by Carl Gustav Jung. Later in that century we have Karl Popper's *The Self and its Brain* and the very interesting and deep anthropology of Herbert McCabe.

Here I discuss this topic of the Interpersonal Mind through the texts of Averroes and Aquinas . It is like a beginning, a first step of a desirable development that should be made to get to the authors of contemporary philosophy and the particular sciences set by it: Structural Anthropology, Linguistics, Historiography, Psychosomatic Medicine, Theology.

4. The Position of Averroes

Averroes was the boldest supporter of the idea of an Interpersonal Mind.

He maintains that there is a "material intellect", which is one and the same for all human beings. It uses faculties (e.g. the brain) of individual humans as a basis for its thinking process. The process that happens in the human brain is called *fikr* by Averroes (known as *cogitatio* in Latin) , a process which contains not universal knowledge but "active consideration of particular things" that the person has encountered. This use of human faculty explains why thinking can be an individual experience: if at one point the universal intellect is using one's brain to think about an object of thought, then that person is also experiencing the thinking.

The reason of the Islamic and Jewish Aristotelians for positing a single external Intellect is that all (rational) human beings are considered by those Aristotelians to possess or have access to a fixed and stable set of concepts, a unified correct knowledge of the universe.

According to Averroes the only way that all human minds could possess the same correct knowledge is if they all had access to some central knowledge store, as terminals might have access to a mainframe computer.

5. Critiques by Aquinas

Against Averroes and his Latin Western followers Aquinas wrote an entire (most difficult) book, *De Unitate Intellectus Contra Averroistas* (1269). Speaking of Averroes , Aquinas writes

He wants to show that not only Latin writers, whose language some do not savor, but also Greeks and Arabs, thought that intellect is a part or power or faculty of the soul which is the form of body. So I wonder from what Peripatetics they boast to have derived this error, unless perhaps they have

less desire to think correctly with other Peripatetics than to err with Averroes, who was not a Peripatetic but the perverter of Peripatetic philosophy. (59)

One of them, Averroes, held that the principle of understanding, the intellect is not a soul or a part of the soul, except equivocally; rather, it is a separated substance. He said that the separate substance's understanding is mine or yours insofar as possible intellect is joined to me or you through the phantasms which are in me and in you (that is, IMAGES ...this the image of my face, drawn from the material external reality by the sense of sight). He says that comes about in this way: the intelligible species which becomes one with the possible intellect as its form and act has two subjects, one those phantasms, the other the possible intellect. Therefore the possible intellect is continuous with us through its form by way of phantasms, and thus when the possible intellect understands, this man understands.

I agree with Averroes. I would say: yes, Averroes is right because it is the interpersonal intellect who understands, even though we must explain its separateness (but on this, later on).

Aquinas writes:

If then intellect is not something of this man such that it is truly one with him, but is united to him only through phantasms or as a mover, will would not be in man, but in the separated intellect. And thus a man would not have dominion over his acts, nor could anyone be praised or blamed for his acts, which is to destroy the principles of moral philosophy. *And since that is absurd and out of keeping with human life—it would be unnecessary to take counsel or to pass laws—it follows that intellect is united to us in such a way that we are truly one with it, which can only be in the way suggested, namely, that it be a power of the soul which is united to us as our form.* It follows then that this must be held without any doubt, not because of the revelation of faith, as our opponents say, but because to deny it is go against things manifestly obvious. (82)

As for me, I would say no. I rather follow Freud who says that there is no “responsibility” in a deep and true sense... I am this way because of unbeatable determinant forces from my early childhood, from the imprinting I received, willingly unwillingly, from my parents. The responsibility is necessary only for external social purposes, social, legal, external. That is the only good and useful rationale of wards and punishments.

Another objection made by Aquinas regards Christian faith. He says: a moment's reflection makes this clear to anyone. Take away from men diversity of intellect, which alone among the soul's parts seems incorruptible and immortal, and it follows that nothing of the souls of men would remain after death except a unique intellectual substance, with the result that reward and punishment and their difference disappear. We intend to show that the foregoing position is opposed to the principles of philosophy every bit as much as it is to the teaching of faith.

I would say no: it seems to me that Aquinas here is confusing two distinct points of view: one Divine and one human and just the latter is on topic. We do not know God's thoughts, plans, ways, judgments, not about stars and galaxies, even so less on such an intimate matter like free will an inner conscience of human beings. Throughout two millennia never the Christian church proclaimed that one single person has been damned to hell. Never. Because the Christian church knows that she does not know the thoughts of God.

The Latin Scholastics' criticisms of Averroes are: 1) he cannot explain how an individual person can think individual thoughts; 2) how an individual human body can be associated with an individual soul comprising rational faculties; 3) the impossibility of philosophically explaining individual immortality in the Beyond.

6. Key Concepts at Stake

6.1 Separateness

Averroes in fact stresses this concept: the Intellect is separated from the individual human beings.

Aquinas says: sense and intellect are not impassable in the same way” (429a29-b5) because sense is destroyed by an excessive sensible but intellect is not destroyed by the excessively intelligible.

Aristotle gives as reason for this what was proved above: “the reason is that while the faculty of sensation is dependent upon the body, thought is separable from it.”

Thus the intellect is separate because it isn't a power in the body but in the soul, and soul is the act of the body.

I agree with part of Aquinas's book: that intellect is “separable” insofar as it does not rely on any bodily organ for its specific activity, which is to think, that is, to form universals (sets, groups). As for the concept of “organ”, I will treat it in a short while.

If the interpretation of “separateness” by Averroes was that the intellect was out and independent from the individual human beings, I disagree with him. To be separate does not mean to be OUT or not in touch with the individual human soul...

It means, as Freud maintains, that the interpersonal dialogue is 1) “internal”, that is “domestic”, “acquainted”, “at hands” with the human individual person, and 2) is made of other people together with that individual person.

In fact, the inter-personal dialogue is “inter” (between) the individual person and other individual people. The inter-personal entity (the intellect) is a composed entity, one of the elements are the “others” and the other one is the individual person.

“to understand” means to convene, to agree with, to be in dialogue with, to communicate: THAT is the act of understanding. The “abstraction” of the universals from then individual *phantasmata* does exist insofar as two individual humans want to share something that is not a bodily reaction of pro and contra (‘*potentia cogitativa*’) but is a description of the world in itself.

6.2 Form of the Body

Aquinas writes:

Manifestly therefore he applies here what he said above, that the soul is the act of a physical body, not only to the sensitive, vegetative and motive but also to the intellective. It was Aristotle's judgment, therefore, that that entity whereby we understand is the form of the physical body (11). /.../ But it is true that later he says and proves that the human soul, because of that which is proper to it, that is, according to its intellective power, “is not related to body as form nor require that an organ be supplied it (57).

6.3 Organ

“Organ” is a Greek word that means “tool”, “instrument”: the organ of walking is the leg, the organ of calculating is the computer, the organ of pumping blood is the heart.

Aquinas says: “And that the soul's intellect has no organ Aristotle manifests through the saying of many passages in his works” (24). Therefore, according to Aquinas, the soul's intellect has no bodily organ unlike what the other powers of the soul certainly have.

On this point Averroes and Aquinas and McCabe (and me) agree with one another.

The brain is just the organ of sensations (through the five external senses, sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell) and images (the echoes of sensations impressed and stored into this “hardware”, the brain, which works as a storage, as a memory). Example; you see my face (sensation from the sense of sight) e if you close your eyes you realise that its echo , the respective image, is stored within your brain, it is physical and individual and non-shareable as you pains and sufferings and angers and fears and nails and fingers are not shareable.

Aquinas also says : “It is thus then that Aristotle’s phrase, ‘is not mixed with body’ should be understood: intellect does not have an organ as sense does” (23).

McCabe hypothesis is : the intellect is an artificial organ like a club a hammer etc . The subject of the act of thinking is the individual person (unique and unrepeatable *sinolon* of soul and body) just like the subject of the act of walking and fearing and seeing is the individual person. But, while the organ of the act of walking is the leg, and the organ of the act of seeing is the eye and the organ of the act of fearing is the brain, the organ (instrument) of the act of thinking is the Language , the Intellect, the Interpersonal Mind.

Aquinas continues:

the intellective power, according to Aristotle’s teaching, is not the act of any organ. (429a27-28)
The soul, with respect to the intellective power, is immaterial and receives immaterially and understands itself. Hence Aristotle significantly says that soul is the place of forms ‘not the whole soul, but the intellect (429a28-29)(83).

It is not material because its object is not bodily , it is *meaning*. The meaning of the 'meaning' that concerns only the human beings, is the meaning of words. To ask for the meaning of a word is to ask about its relationship to other words, to ask for a definition: just as you do not describe seeing as what goes in the eye itself (the light, that is some kind of electro-magnetic waves) but with the products , that is colours and shapes, so you do not get a linguistic meaning just from the single word itself, as a mere bunch of sounds; “sensations have to do with the complex behaviour of animals; meanings have to do with complex uses of language” And since meaning is language , it is necessarily interpersonal.

Aquinas says: “if many men use numerically one instrument we say there are many agents, for example, when many use one machine for the throwing of stones or for elevation” (88).
To me this hypothesis seems realistic. We can apply this to “language” as a shared tool or machine used by many subjects.

6.4 Unicity (and Inter-Personality) of the Intellect

Aquinas says:

Because if the possible intellect is that whereby we understand, of an individual man who understands it must be said either that he is intellect itself or that intellect formally inheres in him, not indeed in such a way that it be the form of the body but rather a power of the soul which is the form of the body. Should anyone say that the singular man is intellect itself, it would follow that this singular man would not differ from another singular man and that all men are one man (87).

and this is not true, because the different individuals do differ! Here I do agree with Aquinas , the Intellects should “inhere” to the single person, and the single person is not the intellect itself.

But then Aquinas wants to say that the “intellects” are numerically many , as many as the numerous respective brains. In fact he says:

The power and irrefutability of this demonstration that there is not only one intellect is clear. That this singular man understands is manifest, for we would never ask about intellect unless we as single individual persons understood, and when we ask about intellect we are asking about that whereby we understand. Thus Aristotle says, 'I mean the intellect whereby the soul understands' (429a23) (62).

And, in my opinion, this is precisely here the error of Aquinas, the souls (in modern words "the persons" is the subject of the verb "to understand", by means of, via, through, using as its organ the Intellect, that is the language). We must distinguish 'subject' (the author of an act) from 'organ' (the instrument of that act). The "soul" (the person with all its panoply of body, bodily organs, senses, stored sense-images, and, also, habits and (this is paramount!) human relationships, is the subject of the act of understanding, and the subjects (the souls/people) are many. But the organ is not a group of people and, instead, is only One, like Averroes maintained. Just one: the language.

7. Contemporary Interpretations and Provisional Conclusions

Herbert McCabe (1926-2001) maintains that passive intellect is the humankind capacity to learn a language (to think). Active intellect is the human act of learning an actual language

On this point, McCabe explicitly relies on Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), but Wittgenstein himself (and the majority of Western thought till the 80s of XX century) was relying on Ferdinand De Saussure (1857-1913), who, in his 1916 *Cours de Linguistique Generale* maintained that every word has two faces: on the one hand, depending on the language that is social and not individual, it is exclusively mental; on the other hand - that which concerns the individual act of speaking - it is psychophysical. Of course, the two aspects are strictly connected: language is necessary for speaking to be intelligible and communicative, but speaking is necessary to build language and chronologically it always comes first. In fact, we learn language by listening to other people; moreover, it is speaking that makes language evolve. But the interdependence of these two aspects does not prevent them from being absolutely distinct.

Language (*Langue*) exists as a sum ('One' sum Averroes would say!) of impressions deposited in the mind of each member of a community as a dictionary distributed in totality of copies for each of totality of individuals. Speech (*Parole*) instead exists as individual combinations of words due to the will of the speaker. It is therefore not a collective instrument, its manifestations are individual and momentary.

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