

Averroes on the Spirituality and Intentionality of Sensation

Deborah L. Black, University of Toronto

Aristotle's claim in *De anima* 2.12 that sensation (*aisthēsis*) is “what has the power of receiving into itself the sensible forms of things without the matter,”¹ is widely acknowledged as the source for the view, common to all the *falāsifah*, that all cognition, from sense perception through to intellectual conceptualization, consists in some form of abstraction (*tajrīd*).² The claim that all cognition depends upon abstraction in turn seems to be the source for understanding sensation as the “intentional” or “spiritual” existence of the perceived object in the soul of the perceiver. Yet unlike the abstraction thesis, the intentionality and spirituality theses, as I will label them, are not universally applied by all Islamic Aristotelians to the realm of sense perception—i.e., the perception of the proper and common sensibles by the five external senses and the common sense.³ Still, the idea that sense

¹ *De anima* 2.12, 424a18–19. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Aristotle are taken from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. J. Barnes, Princeton, 1984.

² The interpretation of all forms of cognition as involving abstraction seems to originate with Avicenna, who formulates the thesis at the outset of his treatment of sensation in Book 2, chapter 2 of the *Psychology* (*Al-Nafs*) of *The Healing* (*Al-Shifā'*). See *Avicenna's De anima, Being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā'*, ed. F. Rahman (London, 1959), p. 58: “It seems that all perception (*idrāk*) is simply the grasping (*akhdh*) of the form of the perceived thing in some way; so if the perception is of a material thing, it is the grasping of its form (*ṣūratī-hi*) abstracted from the matter in some way (*mujarrada 'an al-māddati tajrīdan mā*).” Avicenna goes on to outline four grades of abstraction within the soul's cognitive powers—sense perception, retentive imagination, estimation, and intellection. For a fuller discussion of these grades of abstraction in Avicenna and Averroes, see Michael Blaustein, “Averroes on the Imagination and the Intellect,” Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1985, pp. 82–85; and D. L. Black, “Memory, Time and Individuals in Averroes's Psychology,” *Medieval Theology and Philosophy* 5, 1996, pp. 161–187.

It is important to differentiate the abstraction thesis as providing a general theory of cognition from the distinct but related thesis that *intelligibles* are produced by a process of abstracting universals from sense images. In Avicenna's case in particular, abstraction from images is a preparatory operation which is not sufficient to explain the acquisition of intelligible concepts. Indeed, Avicenna insists that a concomitant emanation from the separate Agent Intellect provides the principal causal explanation for the acquisition of intelligibles. For an alternative interpretation of the role of abstraction in Avicenna's theory of intellection, see Dag Hasse, “Avicenna on Abstraction,” in *Aspects of Avicenna*, ed. Robert Wisnovsky, Princeton, 2001, pp. 39–82.

³ Avicenna is a notable exception in this regard. Despite his prominent role in formulating the abstraction thesis in its general form, Avicenna himself does not interpret sense perception as involving the intentional or spiritual existence of the perceived form. In the *Psychology*, the term *ma'nan* is used primarily to denote the proper objects of the estimative faculty (*wahm*) and memory, where it is contrasted with the “forms” (*ṣuwar*)—the proper and common sensibles—that are the objects of the senses and the imagination. Occasionally Avicenna also uses *ma'nan* in its literal sense of “meaning” or “idea,” i.e., as a synonym for “conceptualization” (*taṣawwur*), designating a purely *intelligible* content. For this latter usage see *Avicenna's De anima*, 5.1, pp. 206–7; 5.2, p. 215, 5.3, p. 221. This is also the usage that predominates in the *Ilāhīyāt*, for example, in the discussion of primary concepts in 1.5 and the discussion of universals in 5.1.

perception itself is intentional can also be traced directly to *De anima* 2.12, a point that clearly emerges from the lemmata of Michael Scot's Latin translation of Averroes's *Long Commentary on the De anima*.⁴ At 424a28, Aristotle describes the capacity of a sense organ to perceive as a *logos*. Here and throughout this chapter the Latin translation renders *logos* as *intentio*,⁵ an unmistakable indication that the underlying Arabic term is *maʿnan*. At its roots, then, the intentionality thesis is the Arabic counterpart to Aristotle's doctrine that sensation consists in a *logos*—however that is to be parsed.

Given its ultimate origins in the Aristotelian *logos* doctrine, then, it is no surprise that Averroes is one of those Islamic philosophers who does embrace the intentionality thesis as it applies to sense perception. Still, the transformation of *logos* into *maʿnan* inadvertently refocuses the philosophical discussion of sense perception on a cluster of issues that are quite distinct from those that worried Aristotle himself, a point which becomes manifest from Averroes's many efforts to tease out the ramifications of the intentionality thesis. For even though Averroes upholds the intentionality of perception in all of his psychological writings, his understanding of

By the same token, Avicenna's many uses of the terms *rūḥ* and *rūḥānīy* ("spirit"/ "spiritual") throughout the *Psychology*'s accounts of the external and internal senses shows no hint of the later Andalusian view of spirituality as a quasi-immaterial state. Rather, Avicenna's understanding of the "spiritual" restricts it more closely to its roots in the Greek notion of *pneuma*, a subtle but nonetheless completely material substance. Examples of this usage are *Psychology* 2.2, pp. 64–66, and numerous other places in the accounts of the individual senses; 4.1, p. 164; 4.2, pp. 179; 181–82; 5.8, pp. 263–64, 267–68. In general, this reflects Avicenna's emphasis on the *physiological* aspects of sensation and his insistence that a material substratum is needed to explain the ability of both the internal and external senses to perceive spatio-temporally qualified particulars. See *Psychology* 4.3, pp. 188–194. An English translation of the corresponding passage in chap. 8 of the *Psychology of Al-Najāh (Salvation)* can be found in F. Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology*, London, 1952, pp. 41–45.

⁴ Unfortunately the relevant lemmata are not included in the brief citations of the Aristotelian text in Averroes's extant Arabic version of the *Middle Commentary*. See *Averroes's Middle Commentary on Aristotle's "De Anima"*, ed. and trans. A. L. Ivry, Provo, UT, 2002: §230, p. 87, includes a brief lemma quoting 424a15–19, but the subsequent reference to *maʿānīn* in the soul is Averroes's own gloss; the next lemma at §233, p. 88 picks up at 424a32.

⁵ Aristotle, *De anima* 2.12, 424a24–28: "The sense and its organ are the same in fact, but their essence is not the same. What perceives is, of course, a spatial magnitude (*megethos*), but we must not admit that either the having the power to perceive of the sense itself is a magnitude; what they are is a certain form (*logos tis*) or power in a magnitude." For Michael Scot's rendering of *logos* as *intentio*, see the *Long Commentary on De anima: Commentarium magnum in Aristotelis De anima libros*, ed. F. S. Crawford, Cambridge, MA, 1953, Bk. 2, t. 122, p. 318, lines 1–5: *Et in quo est ista potentia est primum sentiens. Sunt igitur idem, in esse autem diversa. Illud enim quod sentit est aliqua magnitudo, et non secundum quod sentit; neque sensus est magnitudo, sed intentio et virtus illius.* Averroes comments: "Illud enim quod sentit est aliquod corpus, sed non sentit quod est corpus; neque sensus est corpus, sed intentio et potentia illius corporis quod est primum sentiens." *Logos* is also rendered by *intentio* at t. 121, p. 317, line 10; t. 123, p. 318, line 5. On the terminology cf. Ivry, *Middle Commentary on De anima*, p. 187 n. 28. Ivry traces the *maʿnan-logos* equivalence to Themistius, but the Latin suggests it was in Aristotle's own text.

its foundations and implications changes over the course of his lifetime. In what follows I examine the significance of Averroes's adoption of the intentionality thesis, beginning with the early *Epitomes* of the *De anima* and the *Parva naturalia*. I will then turn my attention to Averroes's quite different presentations of the intentionality thesis in his later commentaries on the *De anima*.

The Intentionality Thesis in Averroes's Psychological Epitomes

Averroes's *Epitomes* of Aristotelian psychology share a common strategy for upholding the intentionality thesis. In both works Averroes argues for the spirituality not only of sensation, but also of the media of sensation, based on what I will call the "contraries principle," that is, the capacity to be affected simultaneously by contraries.⁶ Once he has established the intentionality thesis in this way, Averroes then proceeds to offer a rather surprising account of the role of media in the reception of sensible intentions, arguing that their presence is crucial to ensure the traditional correlation of the senses with the realm of particulars. As we shall see, these two points seem to pull Averroes in conflicting directions—the contraries principle establishes the immateriality and spirituality of sense perception, and indeed, it succeeds so well that Averroes is forced to provide an explicit account, via the media, of how sensation thus conceived can retain any *material* aspects at all.

The Contraries Principle

The capacity of the senses to perceive contraries simultaneously is marshalled by Averroes as proof that the impression of sensibles in the soul is a spiritual rather than a merely corporeal event.⁷ According to this argument, *only* something which is in some respect immaterial can be perfected simultaneously by contraries. It is for this reason that Averroes is able to deploy the contraries principle in the *Epitome of the*

⁶ In "Models of the Mind: Metaphysical Presuppositions of the Averroist and Thomistic Accounts of Intellection," *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 15, 2004, pp. 319–52, I discuss these features of Averroes's theory of perception and the role they play in Averroes's comparison of the material intellect to the medium of vision.

⁷ Similar arguments are also found in Ibn Bājjah's *Book on the Soul (Kitāb al-naḥs)* (see n. 8 below), and they appear to derive from the Greek commentators, especially Alexander. On this see Black, "Models of the Mind," pp. 346–47 n. 71. Richard Sorabji suggests that ultimately such arguments can be traced back to the problem that Aristotle raises in *De anima* 3.2, 427a5ff., regarding the capacity of the common sense to discriminate between contrary sensibles (a similar discussion is also found in chapter 7 of the *De sensu* c. 7 at 448a1ff.). See "From Aristotle to Brentano: The Development of the Concept of Intentionality," in *Aristotle and The Later Tradition*, ed. H. Blumenthal and H. Robinson, Oxford, 1991, pp.227–59, especially 228ff. I am sceptical of this suggestion, however, since, as I show below, the contraries principle as formulated by Averroes is diametrically opposed to the presuppositions which inform Aristotle's discussion of the common sense in *De anima* 3.2.

Parva naturalia as part of his refutation of those natural philosophers who reduced sensation to a purely corporeal affection:

As for those who are of the opinion that the forms of sense-objects are imprinted upon the soul in a corporeal manner, the absurdity of their view can be shown by the fact that the soul can receive the forms of contraries (*ṣuwar al-mutaḍāddāt*) simultaneously (*maʿan*), whereas this is not possible for bodies. This will occur not only in the case of the soul, but also in the case of the media, for it is apparent that through a single part of air (*bi-juzʿin wāḥidin min al-hawāʾ*), the observer (*al-nāzīr*) can receive two contrary colours at the same time, [as] when it looks at two individual things (*shaskṣān*), one of which is white and the other black. Furthermore, the fact that large bodies can be perceived by vision (*li-l-baṣari*) through the pupil of the eye, despite its being small, so that it can perceive the hemisphere of the world, is proof (*dalīl*) that colours and whatever follows upon them are not conveyed to sight materially, but rather, spiritually (*halūlan jismānīyah bal halūlān rūḥānīyah*). We say, therefore, that these senses perceive only (*innamā*) the intentions of the sensibles (*maʿānī al-maḥsūsāt*) abstracted from the matter.⁸

In this passage, Averroes explicitly treats the spirituality and intentionality theses as complementary parts of a single theory. Sensation is a process whereby sensible forms are imprinted on the soul *spiritually*, and because the reception of such forms is spiritual, the object perceived can be characterized as an *intention*. “Spirituality,” then, describes the nature of the activity that produces sensation; “intentionality” describes the status of the perceived form inasmuch as it is abstracted from matter. As evidenced by the phenomenon of the simultaneous reception of contraries, the processes that constitute sensation show that the recipients—the five senses—are affected by their objects in a manner that transcends normal physical affection.

⁸ Averroes, *Talkhīṣ kitāb al-ḥiss wa-al-maḥsūs*, ed. H. Blumberg. Cambridge, MA, 1972, pp. 23–24; English translation by H. Blumberg, *Epitome of “Parva naturalia”* Cambridge, MA, 1961, pp. 15–16 (modified). The contraries principle is also deployed by Ibn Bājjah, though the articulation of it is not entirely lucid. See his *Kitāb al-naḥs*, ed. M. S. Maʿšūmī, Damascus, 1960, pp. 93.13–94.8; trans. idem, *Ibn Bajjah’s ‘Ilm al-Nafs*, Karachi, 1961, pp. 71–72. Ibn Bājjah also presages Averroes’s argument that the media must be quasi-spiritual if they are to transmit contraries simultaneously to the senses.

It is noteworthy that in this account, Averroes identifies the spiritual mode of reception as something that pertains to the soul on the one hand, and the media on the other. This extension of spirituality to the medium is a key part of Averroes's argument in this text, and it is significant for a number of reasons. Certainly the inclusion of media amongst the subjects which are capable of spiritual reception is a clear indication that spirituality is not put forward as an account of perception itself, that is, as an explanation of how the recipient comes to be *aware* of the intentions that she receives.⁹ What is uppermost in Averroes's mind in asserting both the spirituality and the intentionality theses is to explain how the objects of cognition come to be constituted by processes that render them perceptible by cognitive subjects, that is, how they come to take their respective places on the scale of abstraction. The presence of a perceiver or an observer is presupposed, not explained, by such an account.

While the contraries principle is obviously intended to establish the spirituality thesis, its further implications are not entirely clear. The appeal to the contraries principle certainly puts Averroes in the camp of those who deny that physical affection is *sufficient* for perception. But Averroes does not explicitly deny that a physical change takes place concomitantly in all acts of sensation, as a *necessary* condition for sensation to occur. And the extension of spirituality to the medium certainly indicates that spirituality is assumed to be compatible with some sort of physical and physiological change.¹⁰ Perhaps Averroes would not even wish to rule out the possibility that the medium and the sense organ themselves become physically coloured while transmitting the intention of colour to the soul of the percipient. Nonetheless, the thrust of the contraries principle, at least as it is presented here, makes it extremely difficult to see on what grounds Averroes could assign an explanatory role to any concomitant physical change that takes place in sensation. For the appeal to contraries in this text turns on the *impossibility* of two contrary colours being transmitted together through a single part of the intervening air. Even if the air

⁹ The fact that Averroes later criticizes Galen for erroneously concluding that "the air is sentient" (*al-hawā' ḥāssah*), indicates that Averroes is not totally unconcerned with the problem of differentiating the cognitive from the non-cognitive. For the criticisms of Galen (which Averroes traces to his extramission theory of vision), see *Epitome of Parva naturalia*, p. 29; Blumberg trans., p. 18.

¹⁰ The importance of the physiology for this account is clear in Averroes's discussion of the stages of abstraction towards the end of the *De sensu* chapter of the *Epitome of Parva naturalia*, in which Averroes emphasizes the physical makeup of the medium and organs (in this case of vision) as a mixture of water and air. See *Epitome of Parva naturalia*, pp. 29ff.

did become coloured during such a transmission, it would not be able to do so in any way that would contribute *essentially* to the explanation of the act of perception that results. Some sort of succession or spatial partitioning would have to befall the colour insofar as it is physically transmitted, and this would render the physical event useless for explaining the spiritual reception of the intention which *is* sensation. Because the contraries principle is formulated so as to *exclude* physical change, it makes it difficult to provide any justification for the physiological basis that sensation appears to require.¹¹

The Function of Media

Averroes's further remarks on the role of media in sense perception seem to lend credence to the impression that the contraries principle tends to undermine the physicality of sense perception. When he comes to argue against those who deny that the media play an essential role in sensation, Averroes offers as a counterargument the need to posit media in order to preserve the link between the senses and the material particulars in the external world:

Since it has been proved that this perception is spiritual, we can say to the one who denies that sense-perception is effected through a medium, that of the intentions which the soul perceives spiritually, some are universals, namely the intelligibles, and others are particulars, namely, the sensibles. And it is inevitable that these two types of intentions are perceived by the soul in either the same spiritual way, or in two different ways. If the objects were perceived in the same way, then universal and particular intentions would come about in the same way (*bi-jihah wāḥidah*), which is absurd. Since this is so, the soul must therefore perceive universal intentions in one manner and particulars in a different manner. As for universal intentions, it will perceive them completely dissociated from matter, and therefore, in their case, the

¹¹ Further confirmation of this point emerges from Averroes rejoinder to those who reject the need for media in perception on the grounds that a physical medium would entail that forms be transmitted with exactly the same magnitude that they possess in their extramental existence. Once again Averroes remarks that it is precisely the fact that this does not occur that indicates that both the senses and the media undergo spiritual receptions: "As those who say that if the soul perceived through a medium, it would only receive the object from the medium in proportion to the body of the medium, that is, if the body were small, it would receive it as small, and if it were big it would receive it big, this would follow only if perception were corporeal and not spiritual." See *Epitome of Parva naturalia*, p. 26; Blumberg trans., p. 17 (modified).

soul will not need a medium; but as for particular intentions, it will perceive them through objects that are associated with particulars, namely, the media. If this were not the case, the intentions that could be perceived would be only universals and not particulars. ... It is therefore clear from the above discussion that the fact that these forms in the soul are spiritual particulars must be the cause that requires such perceptions to be brought into effect through a medium (*bi-tawassut*).¹²

On one level, the claim made in the foregoing passage may not seem all that surprising, as most medieval Aristotelians accept that the possession of corporeal organs is what links the senses to material particulars. The senses, unlike the intellect, *are* bodies or powers in bodies. But Averroes's appeal to media here is not simply a reaffirmation of the corporeality of sensation. On the contrary, Averroes has necessitated this appeal to the media because the spirituality thesis has called into question the very possibility of a *material* mode of cognition. The spirituality and intentionality theses tilt Averroes towards accepting a single, unified account of cognition according to which the reception of any form in a *soul* will result in an intentional object which is *universal* by default. Only if such an intention is then particularized by some additional relation to material individuals will the soul be able to perform the cognitive operation of grasping the particular that is proper to sensation. And it is the media that provide this relation.¹³ Without media, Averroes suggests, the only cognitive objects human souls would have would be intelligible.¹⁴

¹² *Epitome of Parva naturalia*, pp. 24–26; Blumberg trans., pp. 16–17 (slightly modified).

¹³ There is an obvious problem with calling upon the media to perform this function if it is the *spirituality* of the senses themselves that impedes their capacity to perceive particulars rather than universals. Perhaps that is why Averroes later qualifies his claim that the media are spiritual to the claim that they are merely *quasi*-spiritually. Still, if this is the motivation for Averroes to assert the intermediate ontological status of media, he faces yet another hurdle, since we are then left with no account of how the contraries principle would justify assigning different *degrees* of abstractness to the senses and media respectively.

¹⁴ One presumes that Averroes would assign the same function to the sense organs in the case of contact senses. In this regard it is noteworthy that in Averroes treats the sense organs themselves as media for the common sense. See *Epitome of Parva naturalia*, p. 33; Blumberg trans., p. 20. Furthermore, in the *De memoria* chapter of this work, Averroes treats the common sense as the first grade of abstraction, ignoring the external senses entirely. See *Epitome of Parva naturalia*, 2.1, pp. 43–44; Blumberg trans., p. 26. This suggests that Averroes views the sense organs themselves as messengers to the actual percipient, the common sense, rather than as the primary percipients of sensibles themselves.

Intentionality in the Epitome of the De anima

Averroes presents essentially the same version of the intentionality thesis in the roughly contemporary *Epitome of the De anima*, where he again deploys the reception of contraries as evidence of this thesis:¹⁵

And as for the power of sensation, its nature is not the same, for the existence of colour in this power is not the same as its existence outside the soul. For its existence in its matter outside the soul is the existence of an individual subject, divided by the division of matter, whereas existence in the sensible power is not divided by any material division at all. And for this reason it is possible for it to be perfected by a very large and a very small body at one time and in one subject, like the vitreous humour, which, in its smallness, receives the [form of] the hemisphere, which arrives in this power, in the same way as it receives the form of a very small body. And if it were the case that this perfection were divided through some material division, this would not be possible for it. For we find this power is perfected through contraries simultaneously, and in the same subject, and we make judgments about them—for example, the visual power, which perceives black and white together.¹⁶

As he did in the *Epitome of the Parva naturalia*, Averroes again forges a direct link between the contraries principle and the psychological character of the substratum into which a form is received. Because the subject of the sensitive power is a *soul* and not a body, it is capable of receiving contraries simultaneously, since unlike bodies, souls are not “divided by a material division,” i.e., they do not possess magnitude and spatial extension. In this *Epitome*, however, there is some indication that Averroes may see the contraries principle as simply a consequence of his earlier observation that the soul’s cognitive powers, unlike the lower nutritive powers, undergo a *non-destructive* change when they receive forms, a characteristic that Averroes attributes

¹⁵ The *Epitome of De anima* also assigns the media an intermediate status on the scale of spiritual abstraction, on the basis of the principle that “nature only acts by degrees” See *Talkhīṣ kitāb al-naḥs*, ed. F. Al-Ahwani, Cairo, 1950, p. 29. All translations of this epitome are my own.

¹⁶ *Epitome of De anima*, p. 24.

to the fact that sensation and the powers above it have a soul—specifically the nutritive soul itself—as their subject, rather than a compound body:

And when the power has a form, either it is the case that the form which is in the subject is opposed to the form that is arriving, so that the form of the subject is destroyed upon its arrival; ... or, if there is nothing opposed or contrary between them, but rather, a perfect relation, then at the time of the perfection the subject remains in the same state that it was in before the perfection. Indeed, the existence of the perfection is not possible unless the subject remains in the state it was in before the perfection, like the state of the potency which is in the pupil for learning. ... And it is clear from this that this potency, that is the first potency of sensation, is different in rank from those potencies that precede it, since its subject is not a mixed form, but rather, *some soul*. And for this reason this power's reception of its final perfection from its mover is not of the same kind as the reception of material potencies which we enumerated, whose perfections come from their movers.¹⁷

In normal physical changes the forms of black and white cannot be received simultaneously because if a part of matter is white, and then receives the form of black, that reception by its very nature destroys the form of whiteness. By contrast, since cognitive changes are non-destructive, they permit the simultaneous reception of contraries. Yet while such an interpretation may help to clarify the roots of the contraries principle, the same difficulties seem to beset both justifications for the intentionality of sensation. For Averroes links both non-destructive change and the contraries principle to the *psychological* status of cognitive powers, and in the above passages he makes it clear that both these receptive capacities are *precluded* by the divisibility of matter. So we are still left without a clear understanding of how the physical conduits of intentions—organs and media—can contribute to this process.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 23–24.

¹⁸ Averroes is much more careful in this *Epitome* to emphasize that the medium is not, strictly speaking, spiritual, but rather, possesses “some sort of middle state between the material and the spiritual” (*Epitome of De anima*, pp. 29–30). Nor does Averroes apply the principle of contraries to the *medium* in this text—although he does appear to suggest that the alteration of the medium is atemporal

Overall, then, the *Epitome of the De anima* appears to endorse the reading of the intentionality thesis that makes intentional existence simply a function of having a psychological faculty as a subject. Thus Averroes affirms that, all other things being equal, all intentions will be universals, and all operations of the human soul will be rational ones:¹⁹

For the notion of this perfection [i.e., actual sensation] is nothing but the existence of the intention of the sensibles abstracted from their matter, but in a mode in which [the intention] possesses an individual relation to the matter by which it has become an individual intention; *otherwise it would be an intellect*, as we shall explain later in our discussion of the rational faculty (my emphasis).²⁰

Here, however, Averroes does not specifically assign such an individuating or particularizing function to the media, although he continues to accord the media an intermediate, quasi-spiritual status as he did in the *Epitome of the Parva naturalia*.²¹ Thus, while the exact mechanisms by which the senses retain their individual relation to matter are left vague here, the underlying theory that requires an additional explanation of the materiality of sensation remains the same.

Intentionality, Contraries, and the Common Sense

The identification of sensation as involving the spiritual reception of intentions has some interesting ramifications for Averroes's account of the discriminative role assigned to the faculty of common sense in *De anima* 3.2, and Averroes changes his interpretation of this part of the *De anima* markedly between the early *Epitome* and the later *Middle* and *Long* commentaries on the *De anima*. The particular issue around which this evolution in his thinking revolves is, moreover, the contraries

and to that extent, immaterial as well: "And I mean here by "movement" alteration in general, be it temporal or not, as is the case in this alteration" (Ibid., p. 29).

¹⁹ Averroes alludes to the need for sense organs a few lines later, but in this text he does not assign them any role in ensuring the particularity of the objects perceived by the senses. Here the rationale that he provides is the counterpart of his earlier account of the substratum of sensation. While the sense faculty has another psychological faculty as its underlying subject, i.e., the nutritive faculty, the nutritive soul is itself a "material form" and thus the sense power which perfects it is such that "its actuality is only completed through determinate organs" (*Epitome of De anima*, p. 25).

²⁰ *Epitome of De anima*, 24

²¹ Perhaps this is because the *Epitome of the De anima* draws a clearer distinction between contact and media senses, so that the media alone cannot be assigned this function. Rather, the point would have to be that where there is no physical contact between the sensed object and the sensing faculty, media must be posited to preserve individuation.

principle that is the cornerstone for his support of the spirituality and intentionality theses in his earlier works.

The relevant section of the Aristotelian text here pertains to Aristotle's efforts to explain the operations of the common sense by likening it to a point at the centre of a circle at which many lines—representing the external senses—converge. Aristotle himself invokes this image to help untie the aporia raised by the need for the common sense to discriminate between contrary sensibles while being itself a single, indivisible power: “For while it is true that what is self-identical and undivided may be both contraries at once *potentially*, it cannot be self-identical in its being—it must lose its unity by being put into activity. It is not possible to be at once white and black, and therefore it must also be impossible for a thing to be affected at one and the same moment by the forms of both, assuming it to be the case that sensation and thinking (*hē aisthēsis kai hē noēsis*) are properly so described.”²²

When Averroes takes up this aporia in the *Epitome of the De anima*, he displays an unusually impatient attitude towards it, suggesting that Aristotle is indulging in a poetic mode of instruction more appropriate to the *mutakallimūn*. While he nonetheless takes great pains to exonerate Aristotle's momentary lapse of philosophical protocol, there is little doubt that Averroes is disappointed at Aristotle's behaviour:²³

And by using this simile (*al-mithāl*), Aristotle is following the custom of the dialectical theologians (*'ādah al-mutakallimūn*) with regard to the soul ... in order to aid in comprehending the existence of this power. And even though this is one of the types of instruction in which a substitute for the thing is used to make the substance of the thing understood—whether it be a likeness, as is the case here, or something else (and this is poetic instruction)—there is no harm in this, if it is preliminary and makes the substance of this power known, and if the respect in which the imitation between the two things occurs is known. And this method of instruction is only introduced into demonstrative

²² Aristotle, *De anima* 3.2 427a6–9. See n. 7 above for Sorabji's claim that this passage is the source of the contraries principle, and the reason why I find that claim implausible.

²³ Given the difficulty that many commentators have found in interpreting Aristotle's analogy, we might have some sympathy with Averroes's impatience here!

instruction in the case of things which are difficult for the mind (*al-dhihn*) to conceive *per se* in the beginning.²⁴

However amusing it may be to see Averroes forced to make excuses for the usually infallible First Teacher, a serious rift between Averroes's philosophical principles and those of his master is at the root of his complaint. For Aristotle, as we've noted, this analogy is invoked to break a real impasse created by the need for the common sense to take on contrary qualities in order to perform discriminative judgments. Since whatever discriminates between *x* and *y* must grasp both *x* and *y* simultaneously, the common sense must, according to Aristotle, be indivisible in some respect. But it is impossible that a single indivisible thing should admit of contraries simultaneously. For Aristotle, then, the *unity* and *indivisibility* of the common sense are the problem, and the point-analogy adumbrates a solution precisely because it *divides* the point, thereby allowing it to function as the terminus of multiple lines.

It should be obvious, however, that Averroes's own account of the nature of sensible change neutralizes the Aristotelian aporia before it even arises. Simultaneous actualization by contraries is not a *problem* for Averroes, unless we are talking about purely material subjects and simply physical change:

As for the substance of this power, what it is, and what sort of existence it has, this is clear from what we have said concerning sense in general (*bi-iṭlāq*). And this is because we made known there the rank of this [sense] power among the other material powers, and we made known that its reception of the sensibles is not a material reception. *And from this it holds true of it that it perceives contraries simultaneously, and by means of a power that is undivided (ghayr munqasimatin)* (my emphasis).²⁵

For Averroes the simultaneous actualization by contraries is the *mark* of spiritual change and intentionality. What is an anomaly and an aporia for Aristotle is the very condition that permits cognition to take place in Averroes. Having adopted the intentionality and spirituality theses as his interpretation of "receiving the form

²⁴ Averroes, *Epitome of De anima*, pp. 55–56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

without the matter,” the point analogy in Averroes’s eyes no longer offers a tentative solution to a difficult problem, but instead it can only be viewed as pedagogical tool to help weak minds conceptualize an already *demonstrated* scientific conclusion.

Given that Averroes links his interpretation of the point-analogy directly to the principle of the simultaneous perception of contraries, it is somewhat surprising that he appears to abandon this perspective in both the *Middle* and *Long Commentaries*, where he gives a standard, straightforward exposition of the Aristotelian text. In the *Middle Commentary*, for example, Averroes acknowledges, in sharp contrast to the *Epitome*, that “it is not possible for the very same thing to receive and be moved by contrary things in a single moment, due to the circumstance that the moment is one and indivisible”; he even declares that when “the sense is one indivisible faculty, then, as such it has been affected simultaneously by contrary sensations, which is absurd.”²⁶ A bit later Averroes reiterates that “only in potentiality, and not in actuality and being, can one thing, numerically indivisible, receive contraries simultaneously.”²⁷

In the *Long Commentary* too Averroes again accepts without any apparent qualms the principle that “it is not possible for the same thing to be indivisible in subject and receptive of contraries simultaneously, unless in potency, but not in act and in being.”²⁸ Averroes betrays none of his earlier impatience with the point-analogy in the *Long Commentary*, noting that since this is something difficult to explain, “it is easier to make this clear through example.”²⁹ The contraries principle, it seems, has effectively vanished from the Averroist repertoire.

Repercussions of Intentionality in the Long Commentary

One plausible inference that might be drawn from the differences between his *Epitomes* and the *Middle* and *Long Commentaries* on Aristotle’s psychological writings is that the intentionality thesis became less important to the mature Averroes. But such an inference is not born out by Averroes’s accounts of sensation in his later

²⁶ *Middle Commentary on De anima*, Bk. 2, §259, p. 99: “But again, it is not possible for the very same thing to receive and be moved by contrary things in a single moment, due to the circumstance that the moment is one and indivisible. . . . When, then, the sense judges that this is different from that, this being sweet and that being bitter, and the sense is one indivisible faculty, then, as such it has been affected simultaneously by contrary sensations, which is absurd.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, §260, p. 100: “We say, however, that this is impossible—that is, that this faculty [can] be one in number and multiple in forms and existents—for only in potentiality, and not in actuality and being, can one thing, numerically indivisible, receive contraries simultaneously.”

²⁸ *Long Commentary on De anima*, Bk. 2, c. 148, p. 354, lines 12–14: “Non enim possibile ut idem sit indivisibile subiecto et recipiens contraria in simul nisi in potentia, non in actu et esse. . . .”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, c. 149, p. 356, lines 13–15: “Et quia hoc difficile est ad dicendum, et est magis leve ad declarandum per exemplum, induxit sermonem in via exempli.”

works. On the contrary, the intentionality thesis is present in both of these later works,³⁰ and it is especially prominent in Averroes's *Long Commentary on the De anima*, as in the following gloss on Aristotle's claim that sensation involves the reception of form without matter:

That is, one should hold that the reception of the forms of the sensibles by each sense is a reception abstracted from matter. For if it were to receive them with matter, then they would have the same being in the soul and outside the soul. And therefore in the soul they are intentions and cognitions (*comprehensiones*), and outside the soul they are neither intentions nor cognitions, but material things not understood in any way (*non comprehense omnino*).³¹

Now while the *Long Commentary* thus fully embraces the intentionality and spirituality theses, in this work Averroes also discovers a new and possibly insoluble aporia that is a direct consequence of the intentionality of sensation.³² This aporia

³⁰ For the intentionality thesis in the *Middle Commentary*, see Bk. 2, §228, p. 86, and especially §230, p. 87: "Now you ought to learn that the sensation of each sense is that which receives the sensible forms without the matter. Accordingly, [the sensible forms] are intentions in the soul and corporeal things outside it, not perceived at all nor discerned" (*ghayr mudrakah ašlan wa lā mumayyaz*); and §231, p. 87: "It cannot be affected in the sense that it becomes a sound or color, but, rather, in the sense that it becomes the intention of a designated sound, or of a designated color—that is, an individual, and not a universal [intention]."

³¹ *Long Commentary on De anima*, Bk. 2, c. 121, p. 317, lines 13–20. The intentionality thesis is then reiterated in comment 123. It is not clear what the underlying Arabic for *comprehensio* is here—it might be *idrāk* or perhaps *fahm*. From the *Middle Commentary* (see the text cited in n. 30, §230, p. 87), it appears that the couplet is most likely *mudra/ikah* and *mumayya/iz*. The ambiguity is heightened in the *Middle Commentary* by the inherent difficulty of determining, in unvocalized Arabic, whether the participles in question are active or passive. The Latin translation clearly reads the equivalent passages in the *Long Commentary* as passive, and thus it takes Averroes to be referring to the *objects cognized*, not to the act of cognition itself.

Martin Tweedale interprets comment 121 in the *Long Commentary* as holding that intentional existence is both necessary and sufficient for cognition, though he admits that the passage could be read as making intentionality merely necessary but not sufficient. See Martin Tweedale, "Origins of the Medieval Theory that Sensation is an Immaterial Reception of a Form," *Philosophical Topics* 20.2, 1992, pp. 215–31, esp. pp. 220–21. Tweedale's reading cannot be correct, however, since he takes it to be incompatible with the claim that "intentional existence is possible in the body," a thesis he ascribes to Albert the Great. But since Averroes himself attributes intentional existence to the strings of an instrument in comment 123, pp. 318–19, lines 8–17, he too accepts the compatibility between corporeality and intentionality. It should be noted that comment 123 refers to dissolving "that intention through which the sensing thing is sentient" (*illa intentio per quam sentiens est sentiens*, p. 318, line 12), giving the impression that cognition is what's at stake. It is, of course, possible that a similar ambiguity regarding the active/passive participles in Arabic underlies the Latin of this passage as well. Or Averroes may mean that since intentional existence is a necessary condition for an object to be perceptible, it is also a necessary condition for the perceiver to perceive it.

³² The intentionality thesis is also evident in the comment following the aporia, where intentional being is again linked with cognition. See *Long Commentary on De anima*, Bk. 2, c. 62, p. 223, lines 21–28: "Idest, manifestum est igitur ex hoc quod diximus quod sentiens simpliciter est illud quod est in

became quite famous amongst Averroes's followers in the Latin West, but little attention has been paid to the place that it has in Averroes's own psychology.³³ The aporia in question is, of course, that of the need for a so-called *sensus agens*, or agent sense.

The problem of the agent sense occurs at the end of Averroes's exposition of a passage in *De anima* 2.5 where Aristotle is comparing sensation and knowledge (*aisthēsis* and *epistēmē*).³⁴ Aristotle argues that because sensation is of particulars, whereas knowledge is of universals, knowledge has an element of voluntariness that sensation is lacking. We can understand whenever we wish (presumably something we've already learned), but we cannot turn our senses on and off at will, because they need a sensible object to be activated. The reason that Aristotle gives for this difference is that sensibles, unlike universals, exist *outside* the soul, not within it.

One might expect that Averroes's concern in explaining this passage would focus on Aristotle's location of universals *within* the soul, a claim that might seem to jeopardize the realist conviction that the universal concepts which we employ are real features of the world outside the soul. Instead, Averroes is worried about the accuracy of Aristotle's claim that *sensibles* themselves are not *in* the soul, but outside it. And he explicitly cites the intentionality thesis, and the identification of the senses as *spiritual*, as the grounds for his unease. Actual sensation is effected by the intentions of the sensibles, and *intentions* only exist *in* souls. Moreover, since the *intention* of *x* is ontologically distinct from *x*,³⁵ strictly speaking the extramental sensible object is not an intention and thus cannot be the mover of sensation in its own right. From this perspective, then, the intentionality thesis closes the gap between sensation and knowledge on which Aristotle's original contrast between the two modes of cognition rests. As a result, Averroes surmises that just as the intentionality of universals requires us to posit an extrinsic mover to actualize intelligibles—the Agent Intellect—

potentia ad intentionem quam determinavimus de potentia per intentionem rei sensibilis in perfectione, idest, illud quod innatum est perfici per intentiones rerum sensibilium, non per ipsas res sensibiles. Et si non, tunc esse coloris in visu et in corpore esset idem; et si ita esset, tunc esse eius in visu non esset comprehensio." Cf. *Middle Commentary on De anima*, Bk. 2, §169, p. 64: "Accordingly, the senses are potentially the intentions of the perceived objects, not the sensibles themselves...."

³³ For a comprehensive study of the legacy of this aporia in the Latin West, see A. Pattin, *Pour l'histoire du sens agent: La controverse entre Barthélemy de Bruges et Jean de Jandun. ses antécédents et sa évolution*, Leuven, 1988.

³⁴ Aristotle, *De anima* 2.5, 417b21–28.

³⁵ Cf. *Long Commentary on De anima*, Bk. 2, c. 121, p. 317, lines 31–32: "for the intention of color is other than color" (*intentio enim coloris alia est a colore*).

so too the intentionality of sensation may require the positing of a *sensus agens*, as it was to be dubbed in the Latin West, whose function is likewise to render potential sensible intentions into actual intentions:

And someone could say that the sensibles do not move the senses in the way that they exist outside the soul. For they move the sense inasmuch as they are *intentions*, whereas in matter they are not actually, but only potentially, intentions. And it's not possible for someone to say that this diversity happens because of a diversity of subject, in such a way that they become intentions on account of the *spiritual matter* which is the sense, not because of an extrinsic mover. For it would be better to think (*existimare*) that the cause of the diversity of matters is the cause of the diversity of forms. and since this is the case, it is necessary to posit an extrinsic mover in the senses, other than the sensibles, as it was necessary in the intellect. Therefore we've seen that if we concede that the diversity of forms is the cause of the diversity of matter, it will be necessary for there to be an extrinsic mover. But Aristotle was silent on this in the case of sensation, because it is obscure, whereas it is clear in the case of the intellect. And you should consider this [question], because it merits scrutiny (my emphasis).³⁶

It is interesting to compare the account of the intentionality thesis implicit in this passage to the one that Averroes espouses in the early *Epitomes*. As we have seen, Averroes's earlier commentaries treat the reception of a sensible form into a psychological faculty as *sufficient* to explain the production of an intention of that sensible. Such an account, however, appears to wipe out any essential distinction between sensation and intellection, a consequence that Averroes attempted to avoid by asserting that it is the function of the media to preserve the *particularity* of sensation. Whatever its intrinsic difficulties, this picture is no longer available to Averroes in the *Long Commentary*, since the material intellect is no longer understood to exist *within* the individual soul. The obvious and most economical alternative in that case would be to uphold a version of the original principle that a difference in

³⁶ Ibid., Bk. 2, c. 60, p. 221, lines 40–57.

subject—what Averroes here calls “spiritual matter”—produces in its own right a difference in intention. When *souls* receive forms without matter, the resultant intentions become sensibles; when pure separate *intellects* receive such forms, they become intelligibles.

But this is *not* the path that Averroes actually takes—indeed, it is a path that would have avoided the thorny question of an agent sense. Instead, Averroes explicitly rejects his earlier assumption that we can explain intentional being simply by appealing to the special nature of the patient receiving the intention. That account of intentionality was based on the principle that a mere difference in the nature of the recipient is sufficient to account for a difference in the nature of the reception itself. Averroes, then, is effectively rejecting the maxim that “whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.”³⁷ To attribute the uniqueness of intentional change to the peculiar nature of the *recipient*—whether the recipient is viewed as soul-in-general (as in the *Epitome*), spiritual matter, or some particular type of soul (sense versus intellect)—is to reverse the order of priority between *form* and *matter*. Matter is for the sake of form, and form has explanatory and causal priority within an Aristotelian framework. This does not, of course, preclude one from holding that only certain *types of matter* are capable of being affected by certain forms (that too is axiomatic for an Aristotelian). But it does mean that the intentionality thesis has now left a huge explanatory gap in the standard Aristotelian account of sensation in its Averroist incarnation.

Conclusion

Averroes’s support for the intentionality and spirituality theses as applied to the realm of sensation is a hallmark of his cognitive psychology throughout his career. While Averroes appears to change his assessment of the underpinnings and consequences of intentionality from one work to the next, certain basic features remain constant. Perhaps most significant is the fact that Averroes invokes the spirituality and intentionality of sensation in order to explain the production and nature of the *cognitive objects* of the senses. This is apparent from the early

³⁷ This claim became virtually axiomatic for Aquinas, who often employs it in the context of cognitive psychology. For an overview of Aquinas’s appeals to this maxim, see John F. Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas and the Axiom, ‘What is Received is Received According to the Mode of the Receiver,’” in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, ed. R. Link-Salinger et al., Washington, D.C., 1988.

Epitomes, with their emphasis on the quasi-spirituality of the medium, through to the provocative hint in the *Long Commentary* that we might need to posit a special mover in the realm of sensation in order to explain the production of the sensibles as intentional *objects*. Averroes nowhere offers intentionality as an explanation for how subjective *awareness* of sensible qualities is possible. Such awareness, as I've argued before, is simply not the principal concern or intended *explanandum* of Averroist psychology, be it the psychology of perception or the psychology of the mind.

Despite this underlying unity to his approach to the intentionality of sensation, however, we have also seen that Averroes seems to have vacillated considerably in his assessment of both the grounds and implications of the intentionality thesis. If arguments *ex silencio* have any merit, we might be justified in concluding that the mature Averroes became suspicious of the basic principle of the simultaneity of contraries that he relied upon so heavily to support this thesis in his earlier writings. All in all such a development is a welcome one, since the simultaneity principle is deeply problematic, especially given the difficulties it poses for squaring the intentionality thesis with the physiological aspects of sensation. Still, the simultaneity of contraries represents one of few *empirical* arguments offered by Averroes for the claim that sensation is a process whereby intentions are received through a non-standard, non-physical type of change. Without it the intentionality thesis seems to lose some of its force as a systematizing principle for cognitive psychology; what we are left with, as the youthful Averroes perhaps feared, is a collection of elusive images—signet rings on wax and lines converging at a point—images whose demonstrative force is difficult to pin down.