

Conjunction and the Identity of Knower And Known in Averroes

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I.

*Introduction:*¹ Although there is no consensus regarding the exact nature of Averroes' understanding of the traditional doctrine of the *falāsifah* regarding the mode and possibility of "conjunction" (*ittiṣāl*) with the agent intellect, it is clear that Averroes' most mature and extensive—and also his most personal and difficult—treatment of the subject is that contained in comment 36 of his *Long Commentary on the "De anima,"* Book 3.² Throughout this comment two motifs recur as central to the Averroist version of conjunction: (1) the Aristotelian dictum that in any act of cognition the knower and the object known become in some way identified; and (2) the linking of the possibility of conjunction with the Averroist position that there is but a single, eternal material intellect for all human beings. The first theme provides the epistemological underpinnings of the

¹ A version of this paper was presented at a conference organized by Professor Alfred Ivry at New York University on April 26, 1998, commemorating the 800th anniversary of Averroes' death and devoted to the topic of "Averroes and Averroists on Knowledge and Happiness." I would like to thank both the audience and my fellow participants in the conference, especially Professor Richard Taylor of Marquette University, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

² *Averrois Cordubensis commentarium magnum in Aristotelis de anima libros*, ed. F. S. Crawford (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 479–502. Hereafter this text will be cited as *LC*. Other extended treatments of conjunction can be found in an appendix later added to the Madrid manuscript of Averroes' early *Epitome of the "De anima."* See *Talkhīṣ kitāb al-naḥs*, ed. F. Al-Ahwani (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahdah al-Misriyah, 1950), 90–94; and in an early work devoted specifically to the topic of conjunction, which survives only in Hebrew, and which has been edited and translated by Kalman Bland, *The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect by Ibn Rushd with the Commentary of Moses Narboni* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1982). There are also several shorter discussions of the topic of conjunction in other works. For an overview of all Averroes' treatments of conjunction, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 321–340. For other accounts of Averroes' various treatments of conjunction, see especially Alfred Ivry, "Averroes on Intellection and Conjunction," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 86 (1966): 76–85; and Michael Blaustein, *Averroes on the Imagination and the Intellect* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1985), Part III, 217–293.

doctrine of conjunction, and the second its metaphysical underpinnings. But the matter may not be that simple: in particular, the way that Averroes employs the principle of “cognitive identification” (which I shall use henceforth to refer to the identity of knower and known) in support of his case is problematic and by times it seems to turn upon a confusion of cognitive identification with real, ontological transformation, i.e., actually becoming something else. My aim is to examine whether Averroes does indeed fall into such an equivocation on the meaning of cognitive identification, and if so, whether such an apparent conflation of the cognitive and metaphysical orders of explanation might not be warranted by Averroes’ unique understanding of the nature of the material intellect as separate and one for all human beings, and of its relation to the agent intellect in the processes that comprise human knowledge.³

II.

Cognitive Identification in Aristotle and the Islamic Tradition: Cognitive

identification—the identity of knower and known—may safely be called the centerpiece of the Aristotelian theory of cognition, for it is used to explain the whole range of cognitive operations from sense perception to intellectual understanding. It is clearly viewed by Aristotle himself as a natural application and extension of his generic

³ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect*, 338–40, interprets all Averroes’ accounts of conjunction to imply that the agent intellect is the “direct object” of thought, but he distinguishes between texts in which Averroes holds that the agent intellect becomes identical with the human knower, those in which they remain distinct from one another, and those in which their relation is unclear. I presume that Davidson intends “direct object” to entail cognitive identification, and “become identical with” to entail ontological identity. Part of the purpose of this study, then, is to determine whether it is possible for the agent intellect to be a “direct object” for us in the sense intended by Averroes, without our also becoming identical with it.

hylomorphic principle (i.e., matter-form composition), particularly as it is used to account for physical change and motion.

The identity of knower and known is first introduced by Aristotle in the general account of sensation in *De anima* 2.5 as a means of explaining cognition as a type of motion (κίνησις) which requires actualization by an agent. Here, as in all cases of change, “in one way ... a thing is affected by like, and in another by unlike; for it is the unlike which is affected, although when it has been affected, it is like.”⁴ In his summary of the general features of sensation in *De anima* 2.12, Aristotle interprets this likeness or identity in formal terms, claiming that “the sense is that which can receive perceptible forms without their matter,” employing the image of a signet ring making an impression on wax.⁵ Merely formal identification is meant to capture the difference between being physically altered by a sensible object, which involves being “affected by the matter as well” (424b2–3), and being able to perceive that object, in most cases without undergoing any associated physical affection (for example, seeing red versus becoming reddened).⁶

When Aristotle turns to the activity of thinking in *De anima* 3.4 the principle of the identity of knower and known is again invoked. The most explicit formulation of

⁴ *De anima*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 2.5, 417a18–20; translated D. W. Hamlyn, *Aristotle's De anima Books II, III* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the *De anima* are from the Hamlyn version.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.12, 424a17–21.

⁶ The sense of touch, however, constitutes an exception to this principle, since it also involves a concomitant physical change. The interpretation of Aristotle's notion of formal identification as it applies to sensation has long been a matter of dispute amongst Aristotelian scholars. Recent discussions usually take as their point of departure the essay by Richard Sorabji, “Body and Soul in Aristotle,” *Philosophy* 49 (1974): 63–89; reprinted in *Articles on Aristotle*, vol. 4, *Psychology*, ed. J. Barnes et al. (London: Duckworth, 1975), 42–64, which offers a strongly physicalist reading of sensible change in Aristotle.

cognitive identification as it applies to intellectual knowledge occurs towards the end of this chapter, as part of Aristotle's comparison of the potential intellect to a wax tablet upon which nothing is yet actually written. Here Aristotle asserts that "the intellect is in a way potentially the objects of thought, although it is actually nothing until it thinks" (429b30–31). In intellection, moreover, the identity of the knower and known is even stronger than in sensation, owing to the greater immateriality of νοῦς: "For, in the case of those things which have no matter, that which thinks and that which is thought are the same; for contemplative knowledge and that which is known in that way are the same" (ἡ γὰρ ἐπιστήμη ἡ θεωρητικὴ καὶ τὸ οὕτως ἐπιστητὸν τὸ αὐτό ἐστίν, 430a3–5). The principle of cognitive identification is again given center stage in *De anima* 3.8 when Aristotle presents his concluding summary of the cognitive capacities of the soul. In this context Aristotle declares that the soul can be viewed as "in a way all existing things" (431b21) because sensation and intellection are identical with their objects in the act of knowing them, even though that identity is purely formal, "for it is not the stone which is in the soul, but its form" (431b29–432a1). Perhaps most importantly, however, the dictum that knower and known are one is repeated at the end of *De anima* 3.7, in the sentence that immediately precedes Aristotle's question regarding the human mind's capacity to know objects that are not in themselves material and extended—the precise question, that is, which gives rise to Averroes' excursus on the possibility of conjunction in the *Long Commentary*.⁷

⁷ See *LC* 3.7, comm. 36, 479.1–5, on *De anima* 3.7, 431b17: "In general, the intellect in activity is its objects (ὅλως δὲ ὁ νοῦς ἐστίν ὁ κατ' ἐνέργειαν τὰ πράγματα). Whether or not it is possible for

There can be no doubt from the foregoing survey of texts that cognitive identification is at the core of Aristotle's account of knowledge, and that it represents Aristotle's attempt to unify his physical and psychological explanatory principles while at the same time accounting for the uniqueness of cognitive processes. Still, the doctrine of cognitive identification, central as it seems, is hardly obvious or transparent, nor is its philosophical significance or utility easy to determine.⁸ In the Islamic tradition prior to Averroes cognitive identification was controversial for reasons that impinge directly upon the problem of conjunction. In particular Averroes' predecessor Avicenna heaps scorn upon the very idea of cognitive identification and refuses even to acknowledge it as an Aristotelian doctrine, declaring it instead to be a Porphyrian aberration.⁹ His principal objection to the doctrine is precisely that it seems to imply that one being can be transformed into another while also remaining itself. On Avicenna's very literal

the intellect to think of any objects which are separate from spatial magnitude when it is itself not so separate must be considered later."

⁸ Some contemporary Aristotelian interpreters have argued that cognitive identification allows Aristotle and those who accept his principles to circumvent the skeptical challenges that have plagued post-Cartesian epistemology, since cognitive identification involves a form of direct realism that leaves no gap at all between the cognitive faculty and its object. See, for example, Joseph Owens, "Aristotle—Cognition a Way of Being," in *Aristotle: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, ed. J. R. Catan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981), 74–80; Charles Kahn, "Aristotle on Thinking," in *Essays on Aristotle's De anima*, ed. M. Nussbaum and A. Rorty (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 359–379, esp. 372–75; and Michael Wedin, *Mind and Imagination in Aristotle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 171: "If the mind not only creates but also is the same as its objects, then there simply is no logical space for the error-enabling wedge." For a critical overview of such claims amongst interpreters of Aquinas, see Appendix A in Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 295–305.

⁹ For the principal texts see *Al-Ishārāt wa-al-tanbīhāt (Remarks and Admonitions)*, ed. J. Forget (Leiden: Brill, 1892), 178.17–181.2; French translation by A.-M. Goichon, *Livre des directives et remarques* (Paris: Vrin, 1951), 442–450; and *Al-Shifā: Al-Nafs (The Healing: Psychology)*, ed. F. Rahman, *Avicenna's De anima, Being the Psychological Part of "Kitāb al-Shifā"* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), Book 5, chap. 6, 239.1–241.4; medieval Latin translation, ed. S. Van Riet, *Avicenna Latinus: Liber De anima, seu sextus de naturalibus*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill; Louvain: Peeters, 1968–72), 2:134.40–138.89.

understanding of it, cognitive identification both violates the individual identity of the knower and impedes her subsequent capacity to know other objects.¹⁰ It is quite acceptable for us to say that the intellectual soul understands by receiving the form of the intelligible abstracted from matter, but the only circumstances that allow us to speak of the identity of knower and known are when the soul knows itself, for only then are intellect, understanding, and intelligible (*'aql*; *'āqil*; *ma'qūl*) the same. And this degree of self-knowledge is fully realized only in the mode of thinking that properly belongs to separate intellects.¹¹

For Avicenna, then, the doctrine of cognitive identification must be rejected because it involves confusing the mode of knowing proper to separate intellects with the mode of knowing proper to humans. In this way, Avicenna raises a problem that becomes central to the Averroist account of the possibility of conjunction, namely, whether the doctrine of cognitive identification is to be understood primarily in terms of human knowers, as its development in Aristotle's *De anima* seems to suggest, or whether it is instead a doctrine that applies primarily to the divine thought—the νόησις νοήσεως—described in *Metaphysics* Lambda, and therefore can only be understood in a derivative fashion in reference to human modes of cognition. If the latter is the case, then Averroes is uniquely

¹⁰ Avicenna, *De anima* 5.6, 239.10–15; Van Riet, 134.50–135.56: “But what some say, that the soul itself becomes the intelligibles, is entirely impossible in my view, for I do not comprehend their saying that one thing can become another thing, nor do I understand how this could occur. For if it were by removing one form and then putting on another form, it being one thing with the first form and another thing with the second form, then in reality the first thing would not become the second thing, but instead, the first thing would cease to exist, and only its subject or a part of it would remain.” (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of medieval texts are my own.)

¹¹ Ibid., 5.6, 240.6–241.1; Van Riet, 137.70–138.85.

poised—as he himself insists—to accommodate the “divine” aspects of the identity of knower and known into an account of human knowledge, since on his account of the human mind both the material and the agent intellects are separate substances, even while operating within us as our principles of knowing.¹²

III.

The Traditional Problem of Conjunction: Before I turn to the details of Averroes’ account of conjunction, however, it will be helpful to sketch briefly just what is at stake in the traditional problem of the possibility of conjunction with the agent intellect, since Averroes frames much of his discussion against the backdrop of the views held by both his Greek and Islamic predecessors.¹³

Traditionally in Islamic philosophy, the term “conjunction” (*ittiṣāl*) was used to describe a cognitive union between the human potential or material intellect and its extrinsic cause, the agent intellect, at the culmination of human intellectual development which occurs upon the perfect acquisition and mastery of all the theoretical or philosophical sciences. Through this conjunction, however it was explained, the human knower was said to gain direct knowledge by acquaintance of the order of divine, immaterial substances.¹⁴ In most of Averroes’ predecessors, moreover, the term

¹² For Averroes’ assertion that only his mature view of the intellect as separate and one for all humans can solve the puzzles presented by traditional accounts of conjunction, see *LC* 3.7, comm. 36, 486.199–208; 499.559–571; 502.650–654.

¹³ For conjunction in Averroes’ predecessors, see the works cited in n. 2 above, as well as Alexander Altmann, “Ibn Bājjah on Man’s Ultimate Felicity,” in idem, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 73–107.

¹⁴ I do not, of course, intend “knowledge by acquaintance” to be taken here in its technical sense as coined by Bertrand Russell in chap. 5 of *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912). I wish only to indicate that conjunction standardly requires direct epistemic contact with the agent

“conjunction” was almost exclusively applied to this special act of knowledge, an act which the *falāsifah* distinguished sharply from traditional forms of mystical union on the grounds that conjunction, unlike mystical union, requires the prior understanding of the philosophical sciences of physics, mathematics, and especially metaphysics.

The traditional doctrine of conjunction thus presupposes a conception of the agent intellect as separate from the individual, but it is generally neutral both with respect to any other functions that might be assigned to the agent intellect in the philosophy of its supporters (e.g., emanation or creation), and with respect to their views on the nature of the potential or material intellect (i.e., whether it is one or many, and whether it is separate from matter or in some fashion corporeal). Moreover, the doctrine is generally charged with enormous ethical significance in the philosophical tradition because of its association with human perfection, so that to hold that conjunction is not possible is tantamount to holding that humans cannot fulfill their proper end as rational beings, an end upon which their attainment of happiness depends.

Averroes’ own set up of the traditional problem of conjunction in his *Long Commentary on the “De anima”* is framed by a lengthy and painstaking investigation of the solutions offered by his predecessors, Alexander, Themistius, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Bājjah (Avempace), and as it is well-known, Averroes himself addressed the question of the possibility of conjunction at least as often as he addressed the question of the nature of the material intellect itself, dedicating parts of his psychological commentaries as well

intellect, and that knowledge of the existence of the agent intellect from its effects or by analogy is not sufficient.

as independent treatises to the topic.¹⁵ In Averroes' earlier writings, however, the arguments for conjunction follow the broad outlines of the arguments of those philosophers who had tackled the question previously, especially his fellow Andalusian Ibn Bājjah.¹⁶ The *Long Commentary* is unique in that it offers an entirely new argument for the possibility of conjunction, constructed on the foundation of Averroes' mature account of the material intellect as separate and one for all humans, and further justified by an elaborate analysis of the processes by which human beings naturally acquire the knowledge of the philosophical sciences that conjunction traditionally presupposes.

IV.

Framing the Problem of Conjunction in the "Long Commentary on 'De anima'" 3.7: In many respects Averroes' discussion of conjunction fits within the traditional pattern of themes that I have just sketched: conjunction is treated by Averroes as a special cognitive act in which the separate substance closest to us, the agent intellect, is known by us as the culmination of philosophical learning, and through that conjunction we are able to know separate substances "face-to-face" rather than through the analogical reasoning that is

¹⁵ For these earlier accounts, see the references in n. 2 above. Averroes devotes more than half of *LC* 3.7, comm. 36, to a survey of the views of his predecessors. A general overview of the issues and the problems faced by all the commentators runs from 481–487 of the Crawford edition; the peripatetic commentators Alexander and Themistius are then discussed from 487–491; and Ibn Bājjah's views are discussed from 490–495. Averroes' own solution then follows from 495–502.

¹⁶ This is true even of the Madrid appendix to Averroes' *Epitome of the "De anima,"* which appears to be part of Averroes' revision of the *Epitome* to bring it in line with his mature views on the material intellect in the *LC*. Averroes begins that appendix by noting that he has changed his views on the material intellect, and he chides Ibn Bājjah for having "misled" him earlier (*Talkhīṣ kitāb al-naḥs*, ed. Ahwani, 90.5–16); nonetheless, Averroes proceeds immediately to praise Ibn Bājjah's method (*tarīqah*) for proving the possibility of conjunction with the agent intellect, a method which Averroes declares to be "upon my life, legitimate (*haqq*)" (90.18) and later, "upon my life demonstrative" (*burhānīyah*) (91.20). Even in the *LC*, in which Averroes rejects Ibn Bājjah's solution in favor of his own, Averroes continues to declare, "Avempace's discussion in this matter is more solid than the others" (3.7, comm. 36, 487.230–231).

characteristic of philosophical metaphysics.¹⁷ Yet there are a number of peculiar features to Averroes' framing of the problem of conjunction in the *Long Commentary*. One such peculiarity, which is of considerable significance for the general role that conjunction plays in Averroes' epistemology and psychology, is that Averroes does not confine the terminology of "conjunction" to the traditional issue of the possibility of knowing the agent intellect. Rather, Averroes uses "conjunction" to describe a whole range of relations that hold amongst the various cognitive faculties within the human soul, all of which display as their common denominator some form of hylomorphic composition. Indeed, the usual Latin equivalents for *ittiṣāl*—*continuatio*, *copulatio*, and their cognates—occur frequently throughout the *Long Commentary on "De anima"* 3.4 and 3.5. For example, the relation of the sensible faculty and the perceived sensible object to the individual is described in the commentary on *De anima* 3.4 as a *continuatio*, as is the relation of the material intellect to the individual, and even that of sense images to both the individual and the material intellect.¹⁸ The same associations recur in the discussion of the agent intellect in *De anima* 3.5, where Averroes applies the label *continuatio* to the individual's relation to both the material and the agent intellects. That Averroes is consciously

¹⁷ Averroes' formulation of the problem of conjunction is complicated by textual considerations stemming from variants in the manuscripts available to him, which he summarizes in *LC* 3.7, comm. 36, 480.6–481.47. But Averroes is clear that the question he is considering is "whether it is possible that the material intellect understand separate things or not; and if it understands them, whether it is possible for it to understand them insofar as it is conjoined to us or not" (480.34–481.37). A few lines later, Averroes adds this qualification: "in such a way that we understand that intellect [i.e., the agent intellect] which it [the material intellect] understands" (481.43–45). Averroes is also clear that this understanding must be direct, not by analogy: "we should consider finally whether it is possible that the intellect which is in us understands things separate from matter inasmuch as they are separate from magnitude, not in comparison to something else" (480.16–20).

¹⁸ *LC* 3.5, comm. 5, 404.501–512.

employing the traditional vocabulary of conjunction in an uncustomary way is clear, for he refers to the material intellect's natural status (*per Naturam*) as our intellectual principle as a *prima continuatio*, explicitly contrasting this conjunction with the traditional problem of conjunction with the agent intellect. A bit later in this same comment, *continuatio* is applied as well to the relation between the material intellect and our imagined intentions, as it was in the commentary on *De anima* 3.4.¹⁹ Indeed, it can almost be said that Averroes transforms the traditional notion of “conjunction” into a generic principle that embraces all possible relations that obtain between the intellect and any individual knower, and even more generally, between any knowing subject and the intentional object at all levels of cognition.²⁰

Now this broader usage of *ittiṣāl* is significant because it reminds us that *any* union between two distinct ontological principles, be they form and matter, knowing subject and cognitive object, intellect and individual, is in Averroes' eyes legitimately denominated a “conjunction.” This is not to deny that Averroes intends something rather special and unusual when he addresses the traditional topic of conjunction with the agent

¹⁹ Ibid., comm. 20, 450.202–451.222; 452.265–272.

²⁰ That this is not an aberration of the Latin translation of the *LC* is apparent from the fact that the *Middle Commentary* on “*De anima*” displays a parallel generic use of *ittiṣāl* and its cognates. The relation of the separate material intellect to individual humans is described as a “conjunction” in several places in the commentary on *De anima* 3.4, 429a10–31, and the same usage occurs in the discussion of the agent intellect in the commentary on *De anima* 3.5, 430a20–25. See *Talkhīṣ kitāb al-naḥs*, ed. Alfred Ivry (Cairo: Al-Maktabah al-‘Arabīyah, 1994), 124.2–125.10; 130.7–14. Similar passages can be found even in the *Epitome* of “*De anima*”: in the opening chapter on the general nature of the soul *ittiṣāl* is applied to all types of hylomorphic composition (*Talkhīṣ kitāb al-naḥs*, ed. Ahwani, 8.16–9.3); and in the chapter devoted to the rational soul, conjunction is employed in the same sentence to describe the relation between the human soul and both the speculative intelligibles and the agent intellect (ibid., 72.12–73.2; cf. also 73.10–13; 81.12–16).

intellect, since he himself specifies the parameters of the discussion quite clearly in the *Long Commentary*. But the linguistic point should serve as a warning to us that Averroes may quite legitimately claim to have accounted for a meaningful version of “conjunction” in which we may participate while embodied and individual, even while the account that he ultimately gives seems to have little direct bearing upon the conscious experiences of our individual lives. Conjunction, that is, may be a theoretical construct that has little if any experiential implications, while still forming an essential part of a consistent and thoroughgoing account of what it means to be a human knower.

Furthermore, the pervasiveness of conjunction as a foundational principle explaining the connection between knower and known forges a special link for Averroes between the traditional problem of conjunction with the agent intellect and the Aristotelian concept of cognitive identification. If conjunction as traditionally understood is indeed possible, it will be necessary to show that conjunction with the agent intellect is just another instance of the general conjunction that defines cognition for Averroes. And that can only be accomplished if the possibility for direct knowledge of the agent intellect can be understood according to the standard Aristotelian paradigm of knowledge as a form of cognitive identification.

From the very beginning of his commentary on *De anima* 3.7, Averroes himself notes the connection between the themes of cognitive identification and conjunction.

Comments 27 and 28, the first on *De anima* 3.7, address themselves to the meaning of Aristotle’s dictum that “actual knowledge is the thing itself” (*scientia que est in actu est*

ipsa res).²¹ Averroes displays some puzzlement at the introduction of this dictum in the present context, a puzzlement that appears to stem from the belief that cognitive identification applies, in its strictest sense, only to the knowledge possessed by purely separate intellects.²² This, as Averroes sees it, is because only separate substances have a mode of knowing which is purely conceptual (i.e., an act of *taṣawwur* or *formatio*). Separate intellects have no need of assent (*taṣdīq* or *fides/verificatio*), for there is neither discursion, composition, nor the possibility of error in their thinking; this alone allows one to assert that “their knowledge is the thing known itself in all ways, in contrast with the disposition in what is known by the material intellect.”²³

Averroes’

own strictures on cognitive identification as pertaining primarily to separate intellects are complicated further by the need to face the challenge to the possibility of conjunction posed by the position reportedly taken by al-Fārābī in his lost commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁴ As Averroes reports the Fārābīan position, Fārābī based his repudiation of conjunction upon the requirement that “the intellect should in all ways be the thing

²¹ LC 3.7, text 27, 464.41.

²² This point is already present in the *Middle Commentary on “De anima,”* 3.4, 429b22–430a10, ed. Ivry, 127.9–128.2.

²³ LC 3.7, comm. 27, 465.14–19: “Et forte intendebat hic per hunc sermonem innuere causam propter quam comprehensio intellectuum separatorum est formatio, et veritas in eis nunquam admiscetur cum falsitate; et est quod scientia illorum est ipsum scitum omnibus modis, econtrario dispositioni in scitis intellectus materialis.”

²⁴ Nonetheless, Averroes’ strictures on cognitive identification as involving no moment of assent at all are not consistently maintained throughout the discussion of conjunction, and at the beginning of comment 36, in framing the problem, Averroes reverts to the more familiar view that cognitive identification is a fundamental principle underlying all intellectual knowledge. See LC 3.7, comm. 36, 480.6–11.

understood, especially in things free from matter.”²⁵ If we accept this requirement—which is nothing but the principle of cognitive identification—then it also follows that if the object which we are seeking is itself completely immaterial, knowledge of it will only be possible for a knower who is likewise immaterial. Thus cognitive identification not only stipulates the state of the knower after she has understood an object, it also determines what kinds of beings are capable of knowing what kinds of objects. If the subject and object are incommensurable in some way, knowledge—at least direct, conceptual knowledge—is impossible. In the case of conjunction, then, where the intelligible object is itself a separate intellect, an equally separate knower must be posited. For if a material, corruptible knower were to attain conjunction, the principle of the identity of knower and known would entail the absurd consequence that this knower would become eternal through its very act of knowing—which is, of course, the hope that conjunction traditionally holds out to the philosopher.²⁶ Averroes fully endorses the legitimacy of Fārābī’s point, declaring it “necessary according to the principles of philosophy.”²⁷ Thus it establishes a stricture upon any possible solution Averroes can accept. In no case can Averroes allow conjunction to effect a *de novo* ontological transformation from possible to necessary being in the status of the material intellect.

²⁵ LC 3.7, comm. 36, 481.51–52.

²⁶ Ibid., 481.48–57; Averroes presents Fārābī’s position in modal terms, i.e., that if conjunction were possible, a *natura possibilis* could become *necessaria*. For Fārābī’s changing views on conjunction and the lost *Nicomachean Ethics* commentary, see Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect*, pp. 53–58, 69–73; and Shlomo Pines, “La philosophie dans l’économie du genre humain selon Averroès: Une réponse à al-Fārabi?” in *Actes du Colloque internationale organisé à l’occasion du 850^e anniversaire de la naissance d’Averroès* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1978), 189–207.

²⁷ LC 3.7, comm. 36, 481.56–57. The text reads literally, “principles of the wise” (*fundamenta sapientium*).

V.

Averroes' Solution Part I—Conjunction and the Voluntary Intelligibles: Averroes' own solution to the problem of conjunction seems deliberately framed to parallel his explanation, in the commentary on *De anima* 3.4, of relation of the material intellect to the individual knower. In both cases, Averroes speaks of the relation that he is describing as a "conjunction," which he treats as an attenuated type of hylomorphic composition. But whereas conjunction in the exposition of *De anima* 3.4 obtains between the imaginative forms of the individual human soul and the separate *material* intellect, here the relation of conjunction at issue holds between the *agent* intellect and the speculative intelligibles already acquired by the individual's habitual or dispositional intellect (*intellectus in habitu/al-aql bi-al-malakah*). Thus the focal point of Averroes' account of conjunction in the *Long Commentary on the "De anima"* is a detailed analysis of the mechanics which drive the more complex acts of human understanding that occur after the intellect has acquired single intelligibles through the initial abstractive activity of the agent intellect and the reception of the abstracted intelligibles by the material intellect.

Averroes begins his account of conjunction by reminding the reader of the reasons why it is necessary on Aristotelian grounds to posit two intellectual principles for human knowers, that is, an agent and a material intellect: "The intellect existing in us has two actions according to which it is attributed to us, one of which is in the genus of passivity, namely, understanding, and the other of which is in the genus of activity, namely, to abstract the forms and to strip them of matter, which is nothing other than to make them

intelligibles in act after they were in potency.”²⁸ Averroes emphasizes that both of these activities pertain to the intellect as existing in us, as is manifested in the simple fact that both are subject to our voluntary control. This voluntary control is, in turn, the underlying reason why our intellect, once actualized to this extent, is called a habitual or dispositional intellect—for to possess a habit for ϕ -ing just means to be able to ϕ at will.²⁹ Moreover, Averroes takes great care to assert that the active capacity for abstraction as much as the passive reception of intelligibles is equally ours and subject to our will. If we truly are intelligent beings, the agent intellect as much as the material intellect must be our principle and operate within us. And thus it is legitimate from this perspective to declare our dispositional intellect to be nothing but the composite of the material and agent intellects in their joint relation to us. Indeed, it is our ability to interact with these two principles that Averroes terms the “principle and foundation” of his position on conjunction, since it alone will enable Averroes to explain “how something eternal can be composed with something corruptible in such a way that one action (*una actio*) comes about from them.”³⁰

Still, human knowledge as manifested in the development of the dispositional intellect involves much more than the mere abstraction and comprehension of intelligibles. Thus Averroes distinguishes two ways in which intelligibles are produced in

²⁸ LC 3.7, comm. 36, 495.463–68.

²⁹ Ibid., 495.462–471. Averroes is here reiterating a point he had made in the discussion of the agent intellect in 3.5, comm. 18, 438.25–26: “Et oportet addere in sermone: secundum quod facit ipsum intelligere omne ex se et quando voluerit. Hec enim est diffinitio habitus, scilicet ut habens habitum intelligat per ipsum illud quod est sibi proprium ex se et quando voluerit, absque eo quod indigeat in hoc aliquo extrinseco.”

³⁰ LC 3.7, comm. 36, 490, 311–314.

us—either naturally and necessarily, as is the case with the primary propositions, “which we do not know when, whence, and how they have come about”;³¹ or voluntarily, as is the case with secondary, derivative intelligibles, which, once we are in possession of the primary propositions, may be acquired by our own deliberate action—presumably of ratiocination—on the primary propositions.

Now it is significant, though puzzling, that Averroes moves directly here from the discussion of the basic actions of abstraction and understanding to the distinction between natural and voluntary intelligibles, since the latter distinction, unlike the former, is cast in propositional terms. For it is unclear just how these primary *propositions* map on to the simple intelligibles which, according to the account of *De anima* 3.4, are composites produced by the conjunction of the material intellect with the images of the individual knower. And it is also unclear where the compositive activities of the material intellect, which distinguish assent from the conceptual knowledge to which cognitive identification properly pertains, fit into the discursive process whereby the voluntary intelligibles are generated from the primary propositions. For despite their being primary, as propositional these intelligibles would not seem to be the direct products of the abstractive and

³¹ Ibid., 496.491–492. This is the standard description of primary propositions in the Islamic tradition and it need not imply that they are innate in any way; rather, it is merely meant to indicate that our acquisition of them is pre-conscious, and that no discursive ratiocination is required for us to grasp them. Indeed, as Arthur Hyman has pointed out, Averroes includes under the primary propositions not only self-evident, analytic truths like “the whole is greater than its part” (*quod totum sit maius sua parte*) but also empirical propositions (*adueniens per experientiam*) like “scammony purges bile” (*ut quod scamonea sit, quae purgat choleram solus*). See “Aristotle’s Theory of the Intellect and its Interpretation by Averroes,” in *Studies in Aristotle*, ed. D. J. O’Meara (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 161–191, at 189 n. 115; and Averroes, *Epitome in libros logice: De demonstratione*, in *Aristotelis opera cum Averrois commentariis* (Venice: Apud Iuntas, 1562–74; reprint Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1962), vol. 1, pt. 2b: 53rb, DE8–25.

comprehending activities of the agent and material intellects that have just been described, and while necessary for the production of the voluntary intelligibles, they would hardly seem sufficient in the way that Averroes' account implies.

In other words, then, Averroes seems to leave out a crucial step here in laying the cognitive foundations for conjunction, an omission which makes the account seem at odds with the standard Aristotelian picture of knowledge-acquisition that Averroes has presented thus far in the *Long Commentary*. According to that picture, the agent intellect illuminates the images of the individual, thereby producing the simple speculative intelligibles which have those images as their subject of truth and the single material intellect as their subject of existence. This is the process detailed in the commentary on *De anima* 3.4, and one assumes that it culminates in the cognitive act of simple conceptualization.³² On the basis of these single intelligibles, the individual knower forms propositions and syllogisms through the compositive activities which, according to the process outlined in Averroes' exegesis of *De anima* 3.5 and 3.6, are the exclusive province of the material intellect, and involve neither the agent intellect nor any internal sense faculty.³³ Such a picture would seem to require that, as propositions, both natural and voluntary intelligibles presuppose some prior compositive activity in which any role for the agent intellect has thus far been mysteriously absent.

Although a complete picture of this process is never fully worked out by Averroes as

³² The principal passages are *LC* 3.4, comm. 5, 399.375–400.394; 404.501–405.527. At 400.379, Averroes refers explicitly to the process of conceptualization (*formare per intellectum=al-taṣawwur bi-al-'aql*).

³³ *LC* 3.5, comm. 19, 442.46–52; 3.6, comm. 21, 455.24–37 and comm. 22, 457.37–46.

far as I can tell, it is possible to piece together a plausible solution to this problem.

Averroes is not attempting to deny the role of judgment and composition in the formation of new intelligibles, nor is he reneging on his assertion that the material intellect performs this crucial cognitive operation on its own steam. But from the start of his discussion, Averroes has focused on the voluntary control of thought as the property distinctive of the dispositional intellect. It is our development of a dispositional intellect in general that allows us, as individuals, to understand and to abstract any intelligible whenever we wish. Because the agent and material intellects are both equally and naturally conjoined to us we can, when armed with sufficient intelligibles (simple concepts and the most basic propositions), acquire more concepts through ratiocination. Such reasoning, though propositional and thus dependent on some prior composition and division, prepares the way for the acquisition of secondary intelligibles that requires, in its own right, a new act of abstraction and hence of conceptualization. In other words, Averroes is not denying here that judgement, composition, and division are integral steps in the development of voluntary intelligibles, but rather, he is asserting that whenever these discursive activities come to fruition, a new unifying conceptualization, and hence a new illumination by the agent intellect, must also be presupposed. Thus although the agent intellect does not compose and divide single intelligibles, it must nonetheless illumine all intelligibles prior to their reception by the material intellect, even when those new intelligibles are drawn from other actual intelligibles rather than directly from images. Such an interpretation finds some corroboration from the epistemological front in the *Posterior Analytics*

section of Averroes' *Epitome of Logic*, where he argues that perfect conceptualization is the goal even of the syllogistic art of demonstration, on the grounds that "the most noble types of assent are those that make us acquire a perfect conceptualization."³⁴ On such an understanding, then, all knowledge-acquisition terminates in an act of conceptualization, even when the knowledge is reached by way of derivative acts requiring judgement, reasoning, and assent.³⁵

The fundamental point that Averroes wishes to establish on the basis of this analysis, then, is simply that the voluntary intelligibles, in contrast to the natural or primary ones, require not only the illumination of the agent intellect, but also the prior acquisition of the primary intelligibles (and any other prior voluntary intelligibles upon which they likewise depend). When viewed from this perspective, the voluntary intelligibles can then be seen as aggregate entities composed of the intelligibles prior to them plus the agent intellect upon which all intelligibles depend: "For we cannot say that propositions do not enter into the being of the acquired intelligibles, nor can we even say that they are the sole agents for them (for it has already been shown that the agent is one and eternal). . . ."³⁶

³⁴ "Notitia enim quae a nobis desideratur primo et naturaliter, certe est rei formation per id, quod ipsam appropriat et nos exquirere verificationem est ob hanc formationem. Quod ergo est dignissimum generum verificationum, quod facit nos acquirere perfectam formationem, conuenientius est, quod appeletur demonstratio" (*Epitome in libros logice: De demonstratione*, 53ra, BC27–36).


³⁵ This view is analogous to Aquinas' use of the Boethian/Ps-Dionysian distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*. On this model, every act of *ratio* both begins and terminates in an act of *intellectus*, in which all of the intelligible connections represented in the reasoning process are united into a single whole. See *ST* 1.79.8.

³⁶ *LC* 3.7, comm. 36, 496.498–501. Averroes' last remark is directed principally at *quidam Antiquorum* who are said to have identified the agent intellect with the primary propositions.

Averroes' argument at this point assumes a structure that seems deliberately parallel to the structure of his account of the "dual subject" (*duo subiecta*) of speculative intelligibles (*intellecta speculativa*) presented in the commentary on *De anima* 3.4.³⁷ In the earlier account, Averroes uses the basic principles of hylomorphic analysis to explain how the simple speculative intelligibles can be viewed as aggregate entities arising from the conjoining of the material intellect with the images of the individual. In this first conjunction of intelligibles to the individual, the images constitute the formal element of the speculative intelligibles—the subject through which they are true—and the material intellect their matter—their subject of existence "through which they are one of the beings in the world."³⁸ In the present account, Averroes views each voluntary, speculative intelligible as "something generated from the agent intellect and the primary propositions" whose composition can likewise be viewed in hylomorphic terms. In this case, however, it is the agent intellect which acts as the formal principle, and the dispositional intellect as the matter, since "for every action composed from an aggregate

³⁷ *LC* 3.4, comm. 5, 400.379–401.423; the hylomorphic analysis is provided at 404.501–405.527.

³⁸ LC 3.4, comm. 5, 400.388–89. The Latin *illud per quod intellecta sunt unum entium in mundo* evokes a phrase from Fārābī's account of the acquired intellect (*al- 'aql al- mustafād/ intellectus adeptus*) in his *Risālah fī al- 'aql* (*Letter on the Intellect*), ed. M. Bouyges (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1948), 17.9–18.1;


 (Fa-idhā ḥaṣalat al-ma'qūlātu bi-al-f'i'li šārat ḥīna'idhin aḥadu mawjūdāti al-'ālamī). The medieval Latin translation of this work by Gerard of Cremona (*De intellectu et intellecto*) is edited and translated into French by E. Gilson in "Les sources gréco-arabes de l'augustinisme avicennisant," *AHDLMA* 4 (1929): 5–149; there is a partial English translation, which includes the sections discussed by Averroes in the *LC*, in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. James J. Walsh and Arthur Hyman, 2d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1973), 215–221.

of two diverse things, it is necessary that one of them be like the matter and the instrument and the other be like the form or the agent.”³⁹

On the basis of the foregoing account of the dispositional intellect, Averroes claims to have laid the necessary foundations for explaining how the material intellect is able to be a subject of both the material forms represented by the speculative intelligibles and the separate form that is the agent intellect itself. By recognizing that the agent intellect is the formal component of the complex intelligibles by whose acquisition the speculative sciences are realized in the developing dispositional intellect, Averroes believes he can show us how conjunction with the agent intellect is the natural culmination of our philosophical development.

VI.

Averroes’ Solution Part II—The Agent Intellect as Light: But at this stage Averroes has yet to explain the exact nature of the cognitive act by which these preliminaries lead us to actual knowledge of and conjunction with the agent intellect. To illustrate the mechanics of all this, Averroes now draws upon the well-known comparison between the agent intellect and light from Aristotle’s *De anima* 3.5. A significant feature of Averroes’ understanding of this light-analogy, both here and in his comments on *De anima* 3.4 and 3.5, is the comparison of the material intellect’s function in understanding to the function of the transparent medium in vision, rather than to that of the eye or the visual power. For in the Aristotelian theory of vision, light is understood as the actuality or perfection of the

³⁹ LC 3.7, comm. 36, 497.509–517.

transparent medium, whose role is simultaneously to actualize potential colors and to illuminate the medium so as to permit it to receive and transmit colors so that they can be seen.⁴⁰ In the case of conjunction, the light-analogy serves to establish the crucial point that it is a standard feature of visual perception that the medium simultaneously receives both the actualized color—the object of vision—and the agent cause that renders that object perceptible—light: “It is clear that the subject of the speculative intelligibles and of the agent intellect in this mode is one and the same, namely, the material intellect. And this is like the transparent, which receives color and light simultaneously, for light is the efficient cause of color.”⁴¹ Averroes’ point seems simple and compelling: our ability to know the agent intellect as a result of knowing speculative intelligibles is exactly parallel to our ability to see the light simultaneously with the colors that it illumines for us. In this way, too, the point of the entire discussion of the voluntary intelligibles becomes clear: the agent intellect is constitutive of those intelligibles in precisely the same way that light is constitutive of colors, and as such a constitutive efficient cause of the speculative intellect, it must also in some way be an object of intellection itself.

All that remains for Averroes is to explain precisely what he calls the mode of the form-matter relation that holds between the agent intellect and the dispositional intellect, since it is clear that hylomorphic principles do not apply here in their literal, physical sense.

The first determination that must be made is which component in this relation is the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3.4, comm. 5, 410.688–411.702; and 3.5, comm. 18, 438.34–439.71.

⁴¹ Ibid., 3.7, comm. 36, 499.563–566.

form-analogue, and which the matter-analogue. Averroes invokes the fundamental principle that any hylomorphic relation is a relation of the more perfect to the less perfect, such that the perfecting element constitutes the formal principle and the imperfect element functions as the subject or matter. In the present case, then, the agent intellect functions as the formal component and the dispositional intellect or the speculative intelligibles function as the material component. And it is in virtue of its status as the formal element within the dispositional intellect—the intellect in relation to us as individuals—that the agent intellect is subject to our will in the production of the voluntary intelligibles: “Since that through which something performs its proper action is its form, and we perform our proper action through the agent intellect, it is necessary that the agent intellect be a form in us.”⁴²

The process that Averroes has just outlined thus completes the explanation of how the dispositional intellect of the individual gradually develops and moves towards its final perfection, for, as Averroes notes, “there is no other way according to which form is produced in us.”⁴³ When taken together with the account of the material intellect in Averroes’ interpretation of *De anima* 3.4, Averroes concludes that the agent intellect must be conjoined with individual human knowers in virtue of the fact that the same speculative intelligibles to which it is conjoined as a form are themselves conjoined with the individual “through the imagined forms.” The common denominator in all this is the material intellect, which through these complex relations is able to function as the

⁴² Ibid., 499.585–500.590.

⁴³ Ibid., 500.591–592.

unifying subject for our knowledge of both material and separate forms, “for that which understands them [i.e., the speculative intelligibles and the agent intellect] is the same, namely, the material intellect.”⁴⁴

Now according to the foregoing account, the possibility of conjunction with the agent intellect is rooted in the natural links that bind the material intellect to both the individual human soul and the separate agent intellect in the normal processes which constitute human knowledge. This conjunction remains partial so long as we are still learning. But if and when any one of us actually acquires all the speculative intelligibles potentially present in us, the agent intellect will then be conjoined with us completely, so that it becomes our form in every sense, that is, the sole operational principle within us, replacing the dispositional intellect itself:

And it is clear that when this motion has been completed, immediately that intellect will be conjoined with us in every way. And then it is clear that its relation (*proportio*) to us in that state is like the relation of the dispositional intellect to us. And since this is the case, it is necessary that a human being will understand all beings through the intellect proper to him, and that he will perform his proper action on all beings, just as he understands all beings by a proper understanding through the dispositional intellect when it is conjoined with the imagined forms.⁴⁵

VII.

A Critical Appraisal of Averroes' Account: These, then, represent the essentials of Averroes' most personal treatment of conjunction in his *Long Commentary on the "De*

⁴⁴ Ibid., 500.592–596.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 500.607–501.616.

anima.” But just what sort of knowledge does conjunction thus described imply? And does Averroes’ explanation of how the agent intellect becomes our form really fit with his account of the foundations of human intellectual knowledge as elaborated throughout the *Long Commentary*?

Compelling and naturalistic as it at first appears, Averroes’ unusual exploitation of the standard comparison between the agent intellect and light has some troubling aspects when scrutinized closely. The most obvious anomaly here is the corresponding comparison that this entails between the material intellect and the transparent medium. On one level, the oddity of such a comparison fits in well with the peculiar features of Averroes’ doctrine of unicity. For on Averroist principles the material intellect should not be analogous to the visual power within the eye itself, precisely because the material intellect is not properly the conscious subject of knowledge even in standard acts of knowing material forms. Rather, on Averroist principles the conscious subject must consist in the individual internal sense faculties of cogitation, imagination, and memory, or at least the composite of those faculties with the material intellect. According to such an understanding of the light-metaphor, then, Averroes seems to be moving further in the direction of treating the material intellect itself as an instrument of knowing, and not as a conscious agent in its own right.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, as the basis for the claim that the agent intellect is gradually conjoined

⁴⁶ Elsewhere I have argued that such an account of individual consciousness makes Averroes immune to some of the more pointed criticisms leveled at the doctrine of unicity by Aquinas. See “Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Aquinas’s Critique of Averroes’s Psychology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31.3 (July 1993): 23–59.

with us in stages through the normal development of our speculative knowledge, the light analogy still leaves the agent intellect's role in the constitution of our voluntary intelligibles murky. I have already noted the superficial difficulties of squaring the propositional character of the voluntary intelligibles with Averroes' remarks on composition and division and the conceptualization-assent distinction. That problem seems resolvable on the assumption that any new acquisition of an intelligible, whether by simple abstraction or as the result of judgment and ratiocination, requires some further input by the agent intellect. Serious problems remain, however, as soon as we try to combine Averroes' two hylomorphic analyses with one another to form some unified picture of the agent intellect's role in the acquisition of knowledge.

The problem is not simply that in the commentary on *De anima* 3.4 the simple intelligibles are declared to be composites of the material intellect and the images (the latter of which are the formal element), whereas in the account of conjunction the complex intelligibles have the agent intellect as their formal component and the prior speculative intelligibles in the dispositional intellect as their matter. Matter and form are standardly viewed as relative terms in the Aristotelian tradition, so one would expect a lower matter-form composite to function as the material component in a higher hylomorphic composition. The problem is rather that Averroes has given us no reason for including the agent intellect in the composition of complex, voluntary propositions while excluding it from the composition of simple intelligibles. For in both cases the sole function that has been ascribed to the agent intellect is that of abstraction. And for this

reason it remains unclear why conjunction with the agent intellect must be explained by Averroes as a function of complex, voluntary intelligibles. Why is the agent intellect not already a constituent in the simple intelligibles through which the material intellect itself is linked to us, since the agent intellect is equally if not more necessary in that initial actualization of our intellects? And since this appears to be the case, why is it not at least theoretically possible for conjunction to occur even if the connections between discrete intelligibles that are so crucial to the speculative sciences have not yet been made?

Averroes' reliance upon the light-metaphor is in this respect also more confusing than illuminating. For it is not clear whether or not the agent intellect's role as the formal constituent in voluntary, speculative intelligibles is the same for all intelligibles, or unique to each one. The light-analogy suggests that the function of the agent intellect is univocal for all intelligibles, and that the content of the dispositional intellect changes because of the difference in the prior intelligibles from which new knowledge is deduced. Light, after all, does not actualize the medium any differently when the color being conveyed is purple rather than orange. The same illumination of the medium is a prerequisite, in the same way, for the transmission of all colors.

By the same token, it is difficult to see how we can quantify the agent intellect's reception in such a way as to uphold Averroes' claim that with each increase in our store of intelligibles in the dispositional intellect, the agent intellect's conjunction with us becomes more and more complete. For it hardly seems to be the case that the visual medium becomes more illumined the more colors it receives. Light actualizes the

transparency as a precondition for the reception of colors, not as the result of that reception. On what grounds, then, can Averroes support his claim that conjunction with the agent intellect depends upon the complete perfection of the dispositional intellect? If the agent intellect is best understood as a sort of intellectual light, its reception would seem to be complete and instantaneous with the reception of any simple intelligible, and thus episodic rather than progressive.

The difficulties of Averroes' use of the light-metaphor seem exacerbated by the further claim that conjunction allows the agent intellect to become formally united with us in such a way that it functions as our sole operative principle, thereby allowing us to know separate substances directly, in precisely the way that it knows them.⁴⁷ All the complex epistemological reasoning that supports Averroes' version of conjunction seems unable to allay the fear that Averroes' theory of conjunction rests at bottom on the assumption that cognitive identification can in its own right yield an ontological transformation whereby the knower is actually able to exercise activities that are proper to the object known. So if this problem is to have any hope of resolution, we need to understand exactly why Averroes thinks that the agent intellect, in becoming our form

⁴⁷ Averroes explicitly likens the state of conjunction to the divine self-knowing at the end of comment 36 of *LC* 3.7, 501.617–622. It is thus important to note that Averroes upholds a strictly Aristotelian view of God and the other separate intellects, which identifies their knowledge as a pure act of self-contemplation, so that the knowledge possessed by each separate intellect is unique to it alone. Thus if conjunction allows us to know separate substances as the agent intellect knows them, this must ultimately reduce to the agent intellect's unique act of self-thinking thought. For some recent discussions of Averroes' views on God's knowledge and the knowledge of the other separate intellects, see Barry Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 229–255; Phillip Rosemann, “Νόησις νοήσεως und *Ta' aqqul at-ta' aqqul*. Das Aristotelische Probleme der Selbstbezüglichkeit des Unbewegten Bewegers in der Kommentierung Ibn Rušds,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* (1986): 543–61; and Th.-A. Druart, “Averroes on God's Knowledge of Being *qua* Being,” in *Studies in Thomistic Theology*, ed. Paul. Lockett (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1995), 175–205.

upon the completion of the dispositional intellect, allows us “to understand all the beings which we understand through it,” and to “act through the action proper to it.”⁴⁸

The final paragraph of comment 36 points in the direction of at least a general resolution of the foregoing issues. In it Averroes is insistent that what makes upholding the possibility of conjunction especially urgent is that conjunction is the only state in which the agent intellect functions as a form in us as well as an agent, thereby setting its relation to us off from its relation to all other beings. This remark seems odd at first glance, to the extent that the agent intellect is already uniquely related to humanity simply as an agent, inasmuch as humans are the only beings in whom abstraction takes place, and thus to whose will the agent intellect is subject. Yet Averroes has been insistent throughout his entire discussion of conjunction that even in its abstractive activity the agent intellect is not simply or even primarily an agent producing intelligibles for us. The whole thrust of Averroes’ account in comment 36 is that the agent intellect is not merely an extrinsic, efficient cause of our knowing, but also a truly formal constituent that enters into the speculative intelligibles themselves. If we take this point at face value, then, the agent intellect is a form for us, at least partially, even in our most fundamental acts of knowing other things. Conjunction, as Averroes has been insisting, is thus not a new act whereby we become cognitively identified with the agent intellect and then it mysteriously becomes our form ontologically as well. The agent intellect is always in the process of becoming our form precisely insofar as it enters into our cognitive

⁴⁸ *LC* 3.7, comm. 36, 500.611–616.

identification with other things. Conjunction, then, cannot be a search for cognitive identification with the agent intellect, for the agent intellect is never an object of our knowledge in itself, but rather, it is part of the very fabric of all our intelligibles. Conjunction is in this sense *supervenient*—when all the intelligibles are present in their actuality, so too is the agent intellect itself.

But this means in turn that conjunction must be understood primarily in terms of the agent intellect's function in our everyday knowledge of the material world. And that implies viewing the agent intellect itself not so much as an extrinsic, abstractive power, but as the source for the very intelligibility of the material world. On such a reading, the *Long Commentary*'s theory of conjunction entails no confusion of cognitive and ontological identification at all. Rather, conjunction with the agent intellect becomes the very basis for all cognitive identification; or more accurately, conjunction replaces identification as the dominant Averroist principle of cognition. The agent and material intellects are not other than us for Averroes; both are essential parts of the speculative sciences themselves, just as much as are our images. And they are both knowable, as are material forms, precisely insofar as all are related to us by some mode of "conjunction."

VIII.

Conclusion: Still, there is a price to be paid for such a naturalistic understanding of the theory of conjunction, and that is the loss of the traditional ethical function assigned to the possibility of our entering into a special cognitive union with the agent intellect. For on Averroes' own principles, conjunction can have no new or special effect on the mode

of conscious awareness that is proper to us as individual humans. The reason for this is simple: to accept the unicity of the material intellect, one must accept that the conditions that render purely abstract, immaterial, intellectual cognition possible must be severed from the individual; to accept this and to save the phenomenon of individual knowing, one must in turn accept that individual consciousness is a function of the higher-level aspects of sensible cognition, that is, of imagination and the other internal senses. But if personal consciousness rests ultimately in the individual's corporeal cognitive powers, conjunction cannot be of any personal relevance at all. For on the naturalistic interpretation of conjunction that I have just given, it follows that the perfection of the dispositional intellect upon which conjunction is supposed to supervene cannot be, as it was traditionally understood, an event in the life of the individual. Rather, its possibility and its implications are primarily theoretical, not personal and experiential. To say that the agent intellect becomes in every way the form of the rare individual who attains intellectual perfection is really to state a tautology: for the completed dispositional intellect, if it should ever exist, would be no different in its intelligible structure from the intelligible principles of human knowledge, that is, it would be none other than the agent and material intellects themselves.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Such a view would, incidentally, bring Averroes' account of the agent intellect very close to that of some recent Aristotelian interpreters. See especially Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 140: "Active Mind can be distinguished from our minds by its causal relations to our minds: because form exists antecedently as Active Mind we are able to understand the forms we encounter in the world. Yet if we abstract from the causal dependencies and routes of learning and concentrate solely on the active thinkings of a certain form by your mind, my mind and Active Mind, there would seem to be no difference between them. When I actively contemplate an essence, my contemplating has no particularity at all. I leave behind the concrete circumstances in which my body is located; I even leave behind the causal history that enabled me to think this form. The active thinking would seem to be occurring at no location at all." See also Kahn, "Aristotle on Thinking," 374–79, and 374 n. 30.

But if this is all that Averroist conjunction amounts to in the end, if conjunction cannot and should not, on Averroist principles, offer its traditional promise of individual immortality, we might well wonder why Averroes continues to devote so much attention to the topic in his *Long Commentary*, far more attention and detailed analysis than would be required by any need to pay lip service to either the philosophical or the religious traditions. The reason, I believe, is precisely because conjunction is central to the theoretical completeness of the Aristotelian account of intellectual cognition as understood by Averroes, since it alone guarantees a direct, conceptual knowledge of separate substances, one which is not available through metaphysical reasoning. The fact that we as individual knowers need have no conscious awareness of this act of conjunction which takes place in us is no more relevant to the philosophical importance of conjunction for Averroes than is our lack of conscious awareness of the separate material intellect. Conjunction, like the existence of both the agent and material intellects themselves, is not something given by the data of experience, but rather, something posited to fill in the epistemological picture sketched out in Aristotle's *De anima*. That it should remain below (or more accurately, above) the threshold of consciousness is thus neither unusual nor surprising when its place within Averroes' philosophical system as a whole is taken into account.

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