

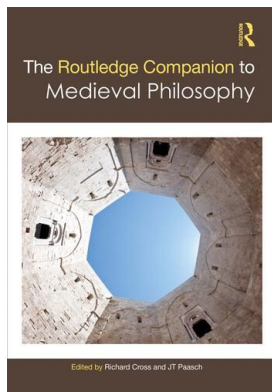
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INTELLECT

Jack Zupko

The Latin term “*intellectus*” has a three-fold meaning that is lost in its usual translation as the English substantive noun, “intellect.” First and foremost, any Latin speaker would realize that the term “*intellectus*” is the past, passive participle of the verb “*intelligere*,” meaning to understand, or grasp something with the mind. As such, the term in the first instance may have brought to mind the act or activity of understanding, as opposed to a static quality or state in some subject. As a past, passive participle, “*intellectus*” literally means “that which has been understood,” and so it could connote as well the object or termination of the act of understanding. Finally, “*intellectus*” also refers to the faculty or power of understanding, which is what we usually think of when we use the English term “intellect.” According to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, this is only the third most frequent use of the term in the literary remains of Roman antiquity; it is surpassed by the senses, which connote activity.

Of course, medieval thinkers from Augustine in the fourth century to Peter of Ailly in the fifteenth used “*intellectus*” in all of the senses outlined earlier, including to mean what we would now call the faculty of intellect. The key point to remember is that regardless of how it is translated, the ambiguity remains in the Latin use of the term; indeed, William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347) clearly plays on this ambiguity to offer a more parsimonious account of mental activity, in which the object of understanding is not some particular image or idea, but simply the intellectual act itself.

Two Paradigms

At the end of Greek and Roman antiquity, there were two competing paradigms or models on the nature of the intellect, both of which were transmitted to medieval posterity (though often indirectly, and in ways that departed from their authors’ original intent).

The first is the broadly Platonic notion that each of us is essentially an intellect, or in Plato’s philosophy, an immaterial soul that is always active and engaged with its objects: immaterial forms which are universal and unchangeable. Because of its “imprisonment” in the body (*Phaedo* 82b–85d), the soul is initially confused into thinking that the things we sense are its real and proper objects. But philosophical enlightenment reveals that sense objects are fleeting and false, a realization that frees the soul to return to its true home among the forms, which it “thinks” eternally. The intellectual activity of understanding or thinking is thus the end of a moral journey of self-realization, the fulfillment of our true nature. There is also the idea that our nature is unitary: all mental acts are intellectual acts, thoughts directed toward the same indivisible object.

The second is the broadly Aristotelian notion that the intellect is a proper part of something metaphysically more fundamental, i.e. a substance, which has other parts as well. According to Aristotle, “intellect” refers to “the part of the soul with which the soul knows” (*DA* III.4, 429a10), or, in the first Latin translations of this text, to the part of us that “thinks and understands [*cognoscit et intelligit*].” The thinking part of the soul is differentiated vis-à-vis two other parts: the vegetative part, which governs the nutrition and growth of an organism, and the sensitive part, with which the organism sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels, as well as imagines and remembers (Aristotle also mentions desire and movement as parts of the soul, though they do not receive the same systematic treatment as the other parts). Together, these parts constitute the soul, or “life principle” of a human being, i.e. the collection of activities that make it the kind of animal it is.

Aristotle arrives at this picture of intellect by studying its function. For him, the intellect’s characteristic activity of understanding or thinking calls for a further distinction between its active and passive moments. These correspond, on the one hand, to the intellect’s capacity to “make” or “illuminate” all things, and, on the other, to its capacity to “become” all things (*DA* III.5). These are metaphors, of course, and their precise meaning has always been controversial, but the basic idea is that in cognition, the form of something is received without its matter—unlike physical change, in which both form and matter are received (e.g. the wall becomes white when we apply white paint to it). When we think of an object, the intellect accesses the nature of that object, but without bringing on board any of the physical “stuff” that belongs to its constitution outside our soul or mind.

These two paradigms—one Platonic and the other Aristotelian—were transmitted, and transmuted, through a wide variety of medieval philosophical writings. But there was an element of happenstance in the way they influenced medieval authors because of the availability of source texts, or (rather) the lack thereof. Thus, all of Plato’s writings except for the first half of the *Timaeus* were lost until the Renaissance because they were not translated into Latin and no one in the West could read them. So the Platonic paradigm had to enter Western medieval philosophy indirectly, through a late antique author deeply influenced by Platonism, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), whom everybody read because his teachings were foundational for Christian doctrine. The situation with Aristotle was only slightly better. His treatise *On the Soul* (*De Anima*) was not known in the West until it was translated into Latin in the twelfth century. But soon everyone was reading it, and Aristotle’s way of understanding the soul in terms of what it does became the standard way of asking questions about the intellect. The Platonic paradigm, as mediated by Augustine, dominated discussions of the intellect until that time, virtually by default.

One final textual note: although these two models appear to be in tension with one another, they were often presented as complementary, especially by later medieval authors who sought to harmonize the Christian philosophical anthropology of Augustine with the faculty psychology of Aristotle. This was a difficult task, to say the least, and it gave rise to some of the most sophisticated and original philosophical work that was done in the Middle Ages, some of which influenced thinkers in the early modern period.

Augustine

On the Platonic/Augustinian picture, “intellect” refers to the highest activity of the human soul, that is, to thinking or understanding the eternal, unchangeable truths that are not of this world. Augustine distinguishes intellectual vision from two other activities of the soul: corporeal vision, which concerns bodily sensations, and spiritual vision, which trades in particular signs, images, and likenesses of things. These three powers form a hierarchy, with intellect at the top: “corporeal vision cannot take place without spiritual, since at the very moment we encounter a body by means of bodily sensation, there appears in the soul something not identical with the

object perceived but resembling it,” and likewise, “spiritual vision needs intellectual vision if judgment is to be made upon its contents, but intellectual vision does not need spiritual, which is of a lower order” (*Literal Commentary on Genesis* 1982: 214, 12.24.51). Augustine’s idea is that in its highest state of active thinking, intellect is free to roam among the intelligible forms that are its proper objects, without needing bodily prompts in the form of sensations or spiritual prompts in the form of images or likenesses.

But, unlike the Platonists, Augustine believes that the intellect cannot achieve this state on its own, an inability he connects with our moral journey in this life from sin to a state of grace. The intellect cannot fully grasp the truth, or hold it for very long if it does, unless the soul is purified of its wicked desire for temporal things. Quoting scripture, Augustine tells us that when we reach this state, we shall know the truth, and the truth will make us free (*On the Trinity* 2002, 4.18.24; cf. John 8:31–32). Furthermore, in an unprecedented “christianizing” addendum to what would otherwise be a straightforwardly Platonic theory of intellect, Augustine argues that the intellect’s characteristic act of understanding is assisted, and tempered, by faith—a view emblematically expressed in his famous remark, “faith seeks, understanding finds [*fides quaerit, intellectus invenit*]” (*Trin.* 2002, 15.2.2). For Augustine, faith is an affective disposition of the soul that works in tandem with intellectual inquiry, pushing it forward when what we are seeking seems incomprehensible or when the search seems unending. He is again inspired by scripture to think of the created, material world as a ladder we can climb to reach the highest truth, citing the book of Romans: “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made” (Romans 1:20). The relation between these traces and our intellectual understanding is dialectical: we “see” more the more we seek, and the more we seek the more we understand. Our own minds are understood by a similar procedure, emerging from the conviction that God is triune, which we hold on faith. “I first sought traces of [the highest Trinity] in the creature,” Augustine tells us, “and proceeded, as it were, step by step through certain trinities of its own kind until I arrived at the mind of man” (*Trin.* 2002, 15.2.3), which Augustine also takes to have a triune structure, composed of memory, understanding, and will.

As in so many other areas of philosophy, the impact of Augustine’s way of thinking about the intellect is difficult to underestimate. In the Latin West, his successors all took for granted his picture of the intellect as our ultimate perfection, a God-given power that determines not only our place in creation, but also our individual natures—the latter thanks to its prominent role in Augustine’s personal narrative of salvation and redemption. Explicit references to Augustine abound in later thinkers. But the implicit references are even more numerous and impressive. Thus, with regard to our “rational nature,” Anselm of Canterbury (1018–1109) is struck by our ability to sit in judgment of other things: “to be rational is simply to be able to tell the difference between the just and the unjust, the true and the untrue, the good and the not good, and the greater and the lesser good” (*Monologion* 1998: 73, c. 68). And, like Augustine, Anselm also thinks that the intellect needs faith in order to exercise its proper agency: “the understanding which we gain in this life stands midway between faith and revelation” (*Why God Became Man* 1998: 260). Augustine’s theory was never fully displaced with the advent of Aristotelian psychology in the twelfth century; more typically, Aristotle’s Western readers sought to understand what he was saying about the intellect in terms of what they knew already, which was the Augustinian paradigm.

Aristotelianism

The late twelfth-century appearance of Aristotle’s writings on metaphysics, natural philosophy, and ethics changed the course of philosophy in the West. But Aristotle’s first readers found his works difficult and obscure, so naturally they turned to the commentary tradition (also newly

translated) for help in understanding them. In psychology, the commentaries of the Muslim philosophers Ibn Sina (or “Avicenna,” as he was known to the Latins, c. 980–1037) and Ibn Rushd (“Averroes,” c. 1126–1198) were by far the most influential. Both authors offered interpretations of Aristotle’s theory that appeared to clash with the Augustinian paradigm of the intellect as the immanent power and seat of the self. Avicenna made Aristotle’s agent intellect into a transcendent agent, a single substance in which all humans participate when they think, and which also serves as the storehouse of universal concepts; thus, when someone is thinking, e.g., of the Pythagorean theorem, the agent intellect sends the appropriate universal concept to his/her “possible” intellect, which is immanent and which plays the receptive or passive role in the intellectual act. Likewise, Averroes believed that both the active and passive aspects of the intellect are transcendent, so that when multiple people are thinking of the Pythagorean theorem, they literally have the same concept in mind—though the “mind” in question does not belong to each of them severally. The only thing connecting this transcendent intellect to an individual human is a particular sensory image in his/her soul, which occasions the higher activity.

Averroes’s clarity of style, convincing argumentation, and introduction of commentary sources from late antiquity such as Themistius and Alexander of Aphrodisias quickly gained him adherents among teachers in the new universities in Europe, and especially at the University of Paris. This group later came to be known as “Latin Averroists.” Foremost among them was Siger of Brabant (c. 1240–1284), an Arts Master whose teachings on the intellect soon alarmed University and Church authorities because they seemed to undermine Catholic teaching on the human soul. The controversy gradually turned into a jurisdictional squabble between the Faculty of Arts, which was charged with teaching Aristotle’s writings to undergraduates, and the Faculty of Theology, a graduate faculty concerned with sacred doctrine and the interpretation of scripture and the authoritative writings of Church Fathers such as Augustine. Things came to a head in 1277 with the Condemnation of 219 Propositions by Bishop Stephen Tempier of Paris (trans. Fortin and O’Neill 1963). The Condemnation document explicitly rejects Averroistic teachings on the human soul, including the ideas “that the intellect is numerically one for all” (Article #117), “that the intellect, which is man’s ultimate perfection, is completely separated” (#126), and “that the agent intellect is not united to our possible intellect, and that the possible intellect is not united to us substantially” (#140). Two things should be noted about the Condemnation, however. First, although its aim is to identify clearly the views that must not be held, it also, and rather transparently, pushes the focus of philosophical and theological inquiry back in an Augustinian direction. Thus, where the human intellect is concerned, the Condemnation is not just about the erroneous views of Averroes (and Aristotle, as radically interpreted by Arts Masters such as Siger); it is also about the true teachings of Augustine. This much can be seen in the reference to the intellect as “man’s ultimate perfection” in Article #126. Second, if the aim of the Condemnation was to dampen the influence of Averroes and Aristotle on the Arts Faculty at Paris, it was not successful. Averroes continued to be the most popular commentary source on Aristotle’s *De Anima* well into the fifteenth century, even among non-Averroists, who were interested in his arguments and wanted to reply to them. What is more, Latin Averroism still found advocates in philosophers such as John of Jandun (c. 1285–1328) and Matthew of Gubbio (fl. mid-fourteenth century), who were apparently able to teach and work without institutional censure.

One of the reasons Averroes continued to be read was that a powerful philosophical response to his theory of the intellect emerged just prior to the Condemnation of 1277. This was the moderate Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who developed an interpretation of the Aristotelian paradigm much more in keeping with Church teaching on the human intellectual soul as the seat of the self. Aquinas finesses Aristotle’s theory in an Augustinian direction by arguing that the intellect is not the essence of the human soul, but a power it possesses by participation in a superior intellect, which is “immovable and perfect” (*Summa Theologiae* 1948: 344, Ia,

q.79, a.4). “In God alone is his intellect his essence,” says Aquinas, whereas “in other intellectual creatures, the intellect is a power” (*Summa Theologiae* 1948: 337, Ia, q.79, a.1). In humans, the intellect is a power belonging to the substantial composite of body and soul. Accordingly, only God manifests perfect understanding; human understanding is imperfect, as is evident from its discursive nature, although it remains true that “among sublunary things, nothing is more perfect than the human soul” (*Summa Theologiae* 1948: 344–345, Ia, q.79, a.4). This allows Aquinas to locate the intellect’s agent and patient functions in the human soul itself, in a way that makes sense of Aristotle’s notion that all cognition involves receiving form without matter:

nothing prevents one and the same soul, inasmuch as it is actually immaterial, from having a power by which it makes things actually immaterial, by abstraction from the conditions of individual matter (this power is called the *agent intellect*), and another power, receptive of such species, which is called the *possible intellect* by reason of its being in potentiality to such species.
(*Summa Theologiae* 1948: 346, Ia, q.79, a.4, ad 4)

Perhaps an Averroist might counter that it does not befit a power as sublime as the intellect to be immersed in the human body. Aquinas responds to this concern in the polemical treatise, *On the Unity of the Intellect against the Averroists*, c. 84 (1993: 99):

The human soul exists in its own right and is to a degree united with a matter that does not wholly capture it—this form is greater in dignity than the capacity of matter. Nothing prevents it having some operation or power <i.e., intellectual understanding> to which matter does not attain.

One can easily imagine Augustine agreeing with this way of characterizing the activity of the intellect.

The Later Middle Ages

The Condemnation of 1277 paved the way for an Augustinian backlash against the Aristotelian account of the intellect, especially in its Averroist manifestations. There was also a movement, by John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308) and others, to rework the theory of the agent intellect along more spiritual as opposed to “this-worldly” lines, the idea being that our psychological theories should speak to the human soul in its natural state, which was determined when God created us, prior to the Fall and the impoverished epistemic circumstances in which we find ourselves in this life. The great nominalist thinker, William of Ockham, took a slightly different approach. Although he did not write a treatise on psychology, he was interested in the nature of intellectual acts. Thus, in his early writings, he argues that when we think of universals, the object of our thought is nothing more than a *fictum*, or mental image, because (he maintains, being a good nominalist) there are no universals outside the mind. But later he rejects this on the grounds of parsimony: universal cognition is just the act of thinking many things at once; there is no special image needed: “an act of understanding is sufficient for this,” he says, “since a fictive entity [*fictum*] is just as singular in its existence and in its representing as an act of understanding is” (*Quodl.* 1991: 390, 4, q.35; for the influence of Ockham’s account, see Zupko 2013).

But Thomas Aquinas’s efforts to redeem the Aristotelian paradigm as a theologically orthodox way of modeling the human soul were successful insofar as *De Anima* remained the canonical text of later medieval philosophical psychology. His position even came to be identified with that orthodoxy. In his influential commentary on *De Anima*, John Buridan (c. 1300–1361) describes three “famous” positions on the nature of the intellect: the materialism of the late antique commentator,

Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. second to third century), the monopsychism of Averroes, and “the truth of our faith,” which he elsewhere identifies with the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. Buridan depicts the orthodox position as splitting the difference on six key properties that divide the more extreme positions of earlier commentators. Thus, Alexander thought that the intellect is mortal (or not everlasting), generated and corruptible, derived from matter, inherent in matter, extended, and numerically many. Averroes denies these six. The position of the faith is reached by taking the first three from Averroes and the second three from Alexander (*Questions on Aristotle’s De Anima* III.6; texts in Zupko 2004). Ultimately, though, Buridan concedes that there are no decisive arguments favoring the orthodox position on the intellect, and that it is likely that “a pagan philosopher would maintain the opinion of Alexander” (ibid.: III.4).

The controversy surrounding the Condemnation of 1277 had another, more lasting effect, however, which was to drive a wedge between philosophical and theological treatments of the human intellect, so that the intellect would be discussed in one way by philosophers commenting on *De Anima* and in another by theologians commenting on the *Sentences* of Peter the Lombard (c. 1096–1164), the Augustinian textbook which was the primary genre of later medieval theological writing. Sometimes, we get two different accounts written by the same author, as in the case of the arts master turned theologian Peter of Ailly (c. 1351–1420; see Pluta (1987) for more on Peter of Ailly). This point is sometimes missed by scholars of early modern philosophy who are looking for medieval antecedents of the modern theory of the mind. It would make a difference whether Descartes was reading *De Anima* commentaries or *Sentences* commentaries, for example, because he would have been getting different accounts of the intellect in each case.

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