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Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias on the Active Intellect

In De anima III 5 Aristotle introduces the influential doctrine of the so-called active intellect.1 The chapter has puzzled readers and scholars from the very beginning, and it still does. As W.D. Ross notes, it is “perhaps the most obscure and certainly the most discussed of all Aristotle’s doctrines.”2 It seems natural to connect what Aristotle says in De anima III 5 with his account of the divine intellectual being in Metaphysics XII, and it might seem that a divine intelligence has a crucial role in human psychology, too. However, the rest of the De anima gives no indication that Aristotle’s psychology would be essentially dependent on a divine intellect. Therefore, the question arises what the divine intellect’s role is in Aristotle’s psychology. Questions related to the active intellect are closely connected to two of Knuuttila’s central interests, namely the human mind and the nature of divinity. Jaakko Hintikka also discusses it in passing in the Festschrift for Knuuttila’s 50th birthday published in Finnish.3 Despite the enormous amount of literature on this topic, there is wide divergence of opinions concerning the basic outlines of the theory of active intellect. In the following, I shall attempt to clarify these outlines, first in Aristotle, then in Alexander. The main emphasis is on the question of whether or in what sense the active intellect intervenes in the acquisition of intelligible objects.

1. Aristotle

In the De anima Aristotle introduces the astonishing claim that we come to grasp intelligible objects through a kind of reception.4 These objects have the power to be grasped and this power is actualised when a sufficient amount of perceptual experience

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1 As is typically noted, the expression “active intellect” (πνευκύηνος νοῦς) does not even appear in the text, only “passive intellect” (παθητικός νοῦς). However, the step from the passive intellect to the active one—or, as Kosman (1992) translates “maker mind”—is strongly suggested by the text.
2 Ross (1924) cxliii.
3 Hintikka (1996) 34.
4 Aristotle, for instance, argues that, before it thinks, our intellect is nothing actual at all (De an. III 4, 429a24). He also says that our intellect is capable of receiving (δεκτικός) the form of the object and potentially like it (429a15–16). Further, he compares receiving the intelligible
has been stored in our non-rational memory (cf. *An. post.* II 19). This means that if we want to say that according to Aristotle intelligible objects are abstracted from perceptual experience, we should avoid saying that we abstract them. To say so would suggest that our intellect somehow works on the perceptual material to abstract intelligibility from it.

Aristotle gives no hint that our intellect should somehow interpret perceptual data to abstract intelligibility from objects. Rather, he emphasises the pure receptivity on our part. He also makes clear that before our intellect comes to grasp intelligible objects for the first time, it is nothing actual and does not have any nature of its own except for its potentiality (*De an.* III 4, 429a22–24). In the same chapter (III 4, 429a18–21), he argues that if the intellect had a nature, this nature would prevent it from grasping some objects. Because intellect can grasp anything, it cannot have a nature of its own.

There are basically two ways of understanding Aristotle’s argument here. To present the two readings we need to recollect that Aristotle analyses the intellectual apprehension of simple intelligible objects in the way that when we grasp such an object, our intellect becomes identical in form with the object (cf. III 4, 429b6). Now, the first reading of the argument would be the following. Given that we grasp intelligible objects so that our intellect becomes identical in form with them, our intellect could not grasp itself because it could never become what it already is. Another way to take the argument would be to say that the intellect cannot have a nature of its own, because this nature would prevent it from becoming completely identical in form with something else. On this second reading, the basic idea of the argument is to say that the intellect form to perceiving, which is elsewhere characterised as reception of the perceptible form without matter (see, e.g. *De an.* II 12, 424a18–19; cf. 424b2; III 2, 425b22–23, III 4, 429a13–18, III 12, 434a29).

In the Middle Ages the theory that our intellect is in this way perfected by lower cognitive capacities of perception and memory was taken to be problematic. Aquinas rejected the assumption that the active intellect should be a divine agent. By contrast, it must be taken as human. However, if we assume that the active intellect is there to perfect our intellect, we run into the assumption Aristotle opposes in *Posterior Analytics* II 19 that such a high cognitive function would remain unnoticed in us. If we assume that the active intellect is not there from the very beginning, we need to explain how it got there and when.

It has not been highlighted in the scholarly literature that Aristotle also refers in passing to the passivity or receptivity of the human intellect in *Posterior Analytics* II 19. After explaining briefly—with a somewhat obscure analogy of soldiers turning around and returning to their original order—how universals are got from perception, he says that our soul is such that all this can happen to it (οἷα δὲνασθαι πάσαχιν τοῖοτο, 100a14). So the universal contents in our reason Aristotle is talking about are not produced or laboriously abstracted by us; they simply come to our mind from the world and our soul receives them.

The two readings have been distinguished, e.g., by Calvin Normore (in a conference presentation at the WCPA meeting at the University of Victoria October 2004).