

Studi
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A Less Studied Averroistic Controversy

The Wide Rejection of Averroes' Agent Sense in the 13th Century

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Abstract: In his *Long Commentary on the De anima*, Averroes tentatively argues that, just as Aristotle suggests a so-called “agent intellect”, we should also posit an analogous “agent sense”. In this paper, I survey the surprisingly wide and varied rejection of this Averroist notion in the (mid to late) 13th century, prior to its infamous reception in the early 14th century by Jean of Jandun. This survey includes those who endorse a more passive theory of sensation, on seemingly Aristotelian grounds, such as the influential Dominican Albert the Great, but also those who, on more Augustinian grounds, endorse their own active theory of sensation, such as the radical Augustinian Franciscan Peter John Olivi and the more moderate Augustinian Giles of Rome. As I explain, each of these figures have their own peculiar points of overlap and contrast in how they object to an agent sense and how they even conceive of such a power. Albert considers two different interpretations: one tied to an early 13th century theory of light, which seemingly puts the agent sense outside of the soul; the other tied to Augustine, which puts the agent sense in the soul. Nevertheless, Albert objects to both views on philosophical grounds. Olivi, in contrast, champions his own Augustinian active account of sensation but objects to an account like that of Averroes, which he more clearly differentiates. Giles, with perhaps the most nuance, returns to Albert's two interpretations and partially defends both views philosophically but objects to calling either such external or

internal agent of sensation an (Averroist) “agent sense”; such an agent is either not a sense or at least not what Averroes intended. In contrast, in the early 14th century, Jandun explicitly defends Averroes’ agent sense and attempts to defend it on equally Augustinian grounds.

Keywords: Averroes, Latin Averroism, Augustinianism, Sensation, Active Cognition, Theories of Light.

1. Introduction

In *De anima* III.5, following his famous discussion of thought or intellect (*nous*) which passively “becomes” or “receives” all things, Aristotle raises the infamously cryptic discussion of thought or intellect which, in contrast, somehow “makes” or “produces” all things in thought¹. As he puts it, such a division between receptive and productive principles is found in “all of nature” and thus, so too with respect to the soul:

[...] there is one sort of intellect (*nous*) by coming to be all things, and another sort by producing them all, as a kind of positive state, like light. For in a certain way, light makes potential colours into colours in act (Aristotle, *De anima* [DA], III.5, 430a10-15; trans. Shields 2016, slightly modified).²

1. Strictly speaking, even this much is controversial among interpreters. E.g., one might claim DA III.4 proposes two intellects, one strictly potential, a mere potential principle of thought, the other habituated, which is more strictly the subject of thought and, in some sense, actively thinks; one might also claim DA III.5 proposes two intellects, one which is human and not always or fully active (i.e. the habituated intellect), the other which is divine and always active. For a recent and wide survey of these different interpretations of DA III.4-5, see, e.g., Roreitner (forthcoming, ch.5.5, pp. 156-164) and sources cited within. Thankfully, in the Latin medieval texts which we’ll focus on below, these more complicated divisions won’t come up when discussing an analogous “agent sense”.

2. Specifically, Shields translates “colours in act” as “active colours”, but I’ve gone with the more literal translation here. The sense of Shields’ translation, nevertheless, may be right, that Aristotle doesn’t mean to imply that colours are not actually sensible on their own, he just means that they aren’t actively sensed unless light provides some help.

In the following commentary tradition, Aristotle's remarks have suggested at least a corresponding two-fold division of "intellects": the former would be named the "material" or "potential" intellect, the latter, the "active" or "agent" intellect³. In the details, however, the exact nature and function of this agent intellect would become one of the most controversial topics of the Aristotelian commentary tradition. Is this agent intellect, e.g., some divine or heavenly intellect external to the human intellective soul or, rather, some active power internal to the human soul but nevertheless distinct from a corresponding passive intellective power? Does this intellect play any role in human cognition, even if it's external? What, precisely, does the agent intellect even do?

Countless studies have now been conducted on the special importance of the Islamic medieval philosopher Averroes, and his *Long Commentary on the De anima*, when it comes to the reception of Aristotle's *De anima* in the Latin West. Most infamously, Averroes' controversial interpretation of DA III.4-5, which puts both material and agent intellects outside of the human soul, has formed the basis for many studies concerning Latin medieval Aristotelianism(s); see, e.g., the many studies concerning Christian Theologians who insisted to put both intellective powers in the human soul, in opposition with so-called "Averroist" Arts Masters who were willing to defend the reasonability of Averroes' externalist position instead⁴. It's also well known that, controversial opinions aside, Averroes would also be a positive influence in shaping more detailed points of interpretation concerning Aristotle's *De*

3. In fact, the early Greek and Arabic commentaries adopt up to four different "intellects", with some finer divisions among the above two intellects of III.4 and III.5, but, as we'll see, only a two-fold division will be relevant to the discussion concerning Averroes' analogous "agent sense". Interestingly, even Averroes himself, who posits at least three different "intellects" in his commentary on DA III.5 (four if you count the "passible intellect", which turns out to be human imagination), only entertains a two-fold division for the senses in his commentary on DA II (c. 60).

4. It would be impossible to list all such works, but for a few foundational and recent studies, see, e.g., Mandonnet (1908-1911), Nardi (1945; 1947), MacClintock (1956), Kuksewicz (1968), Black (2004), De Libera (2004), Petagine (2004), Brenet (2003, 2012, 2013; 2018), and Taylor (1999; 2024), and the many sources cited within.

anima in the Latin West; e.g., Averroes would help spread a popular medieval interpretation concerning what the agent intellect is supposed to do in human cognition, such that it makes objects actually intelligible by “abstracting” universal forms from individuating matter⁵. However, far less studied, in his *Long Commentary on the De anima* (Bk. II, c. 60), Averroes provides a short argument that, following similar reasons for positing an agent intellect, we should also posit an analogous “extrinsic mover” in sensation: i.e. a sort of “agent sense”⁶. This idea of an agent sense, however, raises both new and analogous puzzles. For example, although the notion of an extrinsic intelligence, aiding in human thought, might sound extravagant to a modern reader, for the medieval Aristotelian there are at least a few divine or heavenly intelligences available to choose from, already a part of the standard worldview; however, it’s far less clear what an analogous extrinsic sense could be. Moreover, even if we put the agent sense in the human soul, what would it do that isn’t done by the sensible object or the more standard Aristotelian senses? Indeed, as we’ll examine in this paper, this would become its own niche topic of discussion in the Latin medieval world, worthy of its own study.

More specifically, in this paper I will survey the surprisingly wide rejection of this Averroist agent sense in the 13th century, from those coming from a variety of different perspectives. As we’ll see, this includes the influential Dominican Albert the Great (c. 1200–1280), perhaps the first to devote an explicit question to the topic, who ultimately rejects any agent sense in favour of a more passive theory of sensation; as I’ll briefly note, Albert’s opinion even seems to be shared by many of the so-called “Averroist” Arts Masters around his time, likely on more “orthodox” Aristotelian grounds⁷. In contrast, after Albert, there are also those who deny

5. For discussion, see, e.g., Black (2004).

6. To be clear, Averroes does not use the exact words “agent sense” (*sensus agens*), but he implies such a title and it would eventually become the common name, at least by the late 13th century.

7. All such labels (“Averroist”, “Aristotelian”, “Augustinian”, etc.), should of course

such an Averroist view but endorse their own active theory of sensation, tied to the authority of Augustine instead: as we'll cover, this includes the radical Augustinian Peter John Olivi (1248-1298) and the more moderate Augustinian Giles of Rome (1243-1316). Interestingly, each of these figures have their own peculiar points of overlap and contrast in how they object to an agent sense and how they even conceive of such a power. Albert considers two different interpretations: one puts the agent sense outside of the soul while the other, tied to Augustine, puts the agent sense in the soul. Nevertheless, Albert objects to both views on philosophical grounds. Olivi, in contrast, champions his own "Augustinian" active account of sensation but objects to an account like that of Averroes. Giles, with perhaps the most nuance, returns to Albert's two interpretations and partially defends both views philosophically but objects to calling either such external or internal agent of sensation an (Averroist) "agent sense"; such an agent is either not a sense at all or at least not what Averroes speaks of.

In the last section of this paper, I will conclude by looking slightly ahead to see how this medieval debate changes in the 14th century. As I'll explain, the existing secondary literature on this topic has tended to move fairly quickly past the 13th century; instead, it has put the most emphasis on the 14th century "chief of the Averroists", Jean of Jandun (1285-1328), who appears to be the first clear proponent of Averroes' agent sense (see, e.g., MacClin-tock 1956, Pattin 1988, Biard 2002, Brenet 2014, and Silva 2020)⁸.

be taken with a grain of salt. I do not mean to imply that such labels imply some monolithic, static, or exhaustive groupings of medieval thought. Nonetheless, these labels have many reasons behind their historical use, and thankfully contemporary scholarship can provide us with the necessary context to see how these labels can be applied with respect to various specific matters, to highlight different ways in which medieval thinkers can be related to these authorities to varying degrees. I take it that this research into the wide rejection of Averroes' agent sense, even by those often labelled as "Averroists", is one such way we can challenge a naïve view of such labels. For some of my other work which challenges a naïve division between "Augustinianism" and "Aristotelianism" in medieval thought, see, e.g., Martin (2022; 2023; 2025).

8. Exceptionally, Bernardini (2014) focuses on the 13th century, but we'll return to her contribution below. To be clear, Pattin (1988) deserves credit for collecting several

However, by looking further at the 13th century context behind Jandun, where Averroes' agent sense is widely rejected, the boldness of Jandun's stance can be more fully appreciated. At the same time, by seeing how messy these 13th century discussions were, we can get some sense of how Jandun might have nevertheless felt licensed to do what he does and reshape the debate, which might otherwise seem preposterously puzzling. On this note, Jandun appears to take advantage of Albert's wider considerations of what an "agent sense" could be, despite disagreeing with Albert's negative assessment in content. In contrast, Jandun goes against Olivi and Giles in methodology, despite coming closer in content, and explicitly attempts to defend an Averroist agent sense on equally Augustinian grounds.

2. Averroes himself on an agent sense

Before we get to the Latin West, let's start with a brief overview of Averroes' own argument for an agent sense, which is equally brief:

One can say that sensibles do not move the senses in the way that they exist outside the soul, for they move the senses insofar as they are intentions, since in matter they are not intentions in act, but in potency. And one cannot say that this difference occurs by virtue

relevant 13th century texts, including those of Albert and Giles, but he does not offer much commentary, and he saves his full textual editions for the questions of Jandun and those in his 14th century orbit (viz. Bartholomew of Bruges and Jean Buridan). As I'll return to, Silva (2020) summarizes Giles' view in a few lines, but misleadingly calls him an "Averroist". To its credit, the existing secondary literature has made better progress finding positive medieval discussions of Averroes' agent sense after Jandun (in addition to Jandun himself); e.g., Biard (2002) and Silva (2020) examine the early 15th century figure, Pseudo-Blasius of Parma, who seems to endorse an agent sense, and Mahoney (1971) and South (2002) examine Agostino Nifo's endorsement of an agent sense in the 16th century. Nevertheless, I think the secondary literature would readily agree that this topic has not been fully explored, especially in its very foundations. In the most recent of these articles, Silva (2020, pp. 100-101) even explicitly refers to the need for more research on this topic and modestly admits that what has been offered so far is only a sketch.

of a difference of subject such that the intentions come to be on account of a spiritual matter, which is the sense, rather than on account of an extrinsic mover. For it is better to think that the cause of a difference of matter is a difference of forms, rather than that a difference of matter would be the cause of a difference of forms. Since this is so, it is necessary to posit an extrinsic mover in [the case of] the senses, different from the sensibles, as was necessary in [the case of] the intellect. [...] But Aristotle was silent about this because it is unclear in sensation and apparent in the intellect. And you ought to consider this, since it requires investigation (Averroes, *Long Commentary on De anima*, II, c. 60; Crawford ed., p. 221).⁹

As one can see, Averroes' core argument can be summarized as follows:

1. Sensible objects can move the senses only if they exist in an appropriate mode of being, "intentionally" or "spiritually".
2. In their normal matter, sensible objects do not have such an existence in act.
3. Therefore, sensible objects require an "extrinsic mover" to give them "intentional" or "spiritual" existence in act, so that they can move the senses.

The conclusion is bolstered by Averroes' repeated consideration that the agent behind any formal change ("diversity in form")

9. «Et potest aliquis dicere quod sensibilia non movent sensus illo modo quo existunt extra animam; movent enim sensus secundum quod sunt intentiones, cum in materia non sint intentiones in actu, sed in potentia. Et non potest aliquis dicere quod ista diversitas accidit per diversitatem subiecti, ita quod fiant intentiones propter materiam spiritualemente que est sensus, non propter motorem extrinsecum. Melius est enim existimare quod causa in diversitate materie est diversitas formarum, non quod diversitas materie sit causa in diversitate formarum. Et cum ita sit, necesse est ponere motorem extrinsecum in sensibus alium a sensibilibus, sicut fuit necesse in intellectu. Visum est igitur quod, si concesserimus quod diversitas formarum est causa diversitatis materie, quod necesse erit motorem extrinsecum esse. Sed Aristoteles tacuit hoc in sensu, quia latet, et apparet in intellectu. Et tu debes hoc considerare, quoniam indiget perscrutatione» (Averroes, *Long Commentary on De anima*, II, c. 60; Crawford ed., p. 221).

must be a formal/productive principle rather than a material/receptive principle; so, e.g., one cannot alternatively explain the change of the sensible into “intentional” or “spiritual” form merely by way of some special “spiritual” matter of the senses. That is, it is a common Aristotelian principle that matter does not produce, so it cannot produce sensible “intentions”; rather, this is the job of form, being an actual, and thus active, principle.

As one can also see above, Averroes further hints at what he might mean by such an extrinsic mover in sensation with an explicit analogy with intellection; i.e., intellection also requires a distinct mover, the so-called “agent intellect”. As mentioned above, by the time of Averroes, it would at least become loosely and commonly agreed upon that the role of the agent intellect is to “make” all things potentially intelligible actually intelligible by way of a process of “abstraction” of form from matter; e.g., the agent intellect “abstracts” the intelligible universal form of dogs from the individuating matter of dogs¹⁰. Presumably, Averroes has some analogous process in mind for the agent sense to “abstract” sensible forms from their normal external matter¹¹. Although sensible forms are not rendered universal by this “abstraction”, they are nonetheless able to be loosened from their normal material existence (e.g., as colour in the wall) to a more purely formal existence (e.g., as colour in the air or eye). Indeed, elsewhere, Averroes has more to say about why sensible forms must exist in this special “intentional” or “spiritual” mode of existence as well¹².

10. This interpretation of Aristotle ties back at least to Alexander of Aphrodisias (if not earlier); see, e.g., Alexander’s *De anima* 3.22, 87.24–88.5. To be clear, although this interpretation would become widespread in the medieval reception of Aristotle, it would not go unchallenged; see, e.g., Durand of Saint-Pourçain (I Sent. [C], D.3, Q.5). For more current skepticism concerning this interpretation, see, e.g., Caston (1999) and Menn (2020).

11. The idea that the agent intellect makes its objects actually/actively intelligible is supposed to make sense of Aristotle’s analogy with the role of light (in DA III.5), where it seems that Aristotle’s point is that light makes potentially sensible colours actually/actively sensible. However, Averroes doesn’t bring up the light example in his discussion of the agent sense, which leaves many questions hanging, as we will return to.

12. For further discussion and sources, see, e.g., Brenet (2014), Black (2011), and Wood (2019). As Black (2011, fn. 31) notes, it’s ambiguous in this passage whether Aver-