# Intellect in Alexander of Aphrodisias and John Philoponus: divine, human or both?

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# INTELLECT IN ALEXANDER OF APHRODISIAS AND JOHN PHILOPONUS

## Divine, human or both?

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By his philosophy of mind, soul and body Aristotle bequeathed to his heirs an intellectual challenge, rather than a lucid theory of intellect. The challenge is highlighted by the fact that a crucial text in the dossier, *De anima* III.5, has been transmitted to us in a more or less corrupt state. Why? The question whether our soul is divine, or entirely human, or perhaps part divine and part human, touches an open nerve that has produced intriguing philosophy of mind, and a long-standing and wide-ranging academic discussion parts of which have been recorded in other chapters in this volume. Since each ancient commentator on *De anima* III.5 takes his own pick from the tradition, and serves his own aims, an ancient commentary is best read as an attempt to align Aristotle with concerns contemporary to the commentator. I shall here compare the interpretation of Aristotle's theory of intellect by Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 200 AD) with that by John Philoponus (c. 490–570 AD). In this chapter I shall merely touch upon the problems of interpreting *De anima* III.5 and its Aristotelian context in so far as a proper understanding of Alexander and Philoponus requires.[1]

The tradition has provided us with two different accounts of intellect for each of these philosophers. For Alexander we have his *De anima*, including a section devoted to intellect,[2] alongside a part of the so-called *Mantissa* that had an independent history of transmission.[3] The relationship between these two texts is an issue of scholarly debate. Since I believe that the *De anima* is not contradicted by the *Mantissa*, I shall focus on the *De anima* account as the more elaborate version.

For Philoponus we have a commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* that was handed down under his name. Unlike the commentary on *De anima* I–II, the commentary on *De anima* III is not authentic, although it is now generally believed to have been written in the same century.[4] On the other hand we have an independent commentary on *De anima* III.4–8 that goes under the title *De intellectu*. It is lost

in Greek, and only survives in the Latin translation of William of Moerbeke.[5] There is consensus among scholars that the Greek commentary on *De anima* III and *De intellectu* cannot be of the same author. Therefore I shall focus on Philoponus' *De intellectu* instead, which shows agreement with the Greek commentary on *De anima* I–II. Since *De intellectu* is highly critical of Alexander's interpretation of *De anima* III.4–8, it constitutes an interesting witness to the history of the reception of Alexander's theory of mind and his interpretation of relevant passages from Aristotle's *De anima*.

In this chapter I shall first present two important Aristotelian texts that play a role in each commentator since Theophrastus. Then I proceed to outline Alexander's theory of intellect, followed by Philoponus' theory. In a final section I shall show how the fact that each of them tried to get maximum support for his own view from the text of Aristotle's *De anima* led to a strong disagreement of Philoponus with Alexander.

## 1. Intellect in Aristotle beyond *De anima*

Both Alexander and Philoponus include in their discussions of *De anima* III.4–8 references to two important Aristotelian texts in the intellect dossier:

(1) In *Generation of Animals* II.3, 736b27–29 Aristotle claims that the intellect (*nous*) enters the human embryo 'from outside' (*thurathen*), i.e. from outside the body of the female by means of the male semen.[6] Aristotle here seems to call intellect 'divine' because it does not share its actuality with any corporeal actuality (*sômatikê energeia*).[7] The vegetative, sensitive and intellectual powers of the soul are first present in potentiality in the embryo and develop over time.

(2) Aristotle also refers to the active intellect as divine in *De anima* III.5 430a23.[8] Aristotle's choice of vocabulary in *DA* III.5 has been taken as a clear reference to the nature and characteristics of the divine act of intellection of *Metaphysics* XII. The so-called active, or productive, intellect (*poiêtikos nous*) is called separable or separate (*chôristos*) and separated (*chôristheis*), impassible (*apathês*), unmixed (*amigês*), essentially an actuality (*têi ousiai energeia*), immortal (*athanaton*) and eternal (*aidion*), and (by implication) it thinks always. This description of intellect, which indeed has strong echoes in *Metaph*. XII.7–9,[9] may suggest that Aristotle means to *identify* the active intellect with the divine Intellect. Alternatively, the text may indicate the correspondences between the divine act of intellection of *Metaph*. XII and the state of a human soul that desires to make itself as similar to it as possible.[10]

## 2. Alexander on intellect

Alexander of Aphrodisias was the main teacher of Peripatetic philosophy in the Athens of his day. He held the chair of Aristotelianism, one of the four chairs established by Marcus Aurelius in Athens in 176 AD.[11] Alexander's *De fato* is

dedicated to the emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla, which fixes the only available date for his professional activity between 198–209 AD. The other Athenian chairs were given to Stoic, Platonic, and Epicurean philosophers.[12] In this context polemics are bound to be strong. Indeed, in Alexander's works we find many explicit and implicit instances of criticism of rival schools – also in his theory of intellect. At the same time Alexander addresses a diverse Peripatetic tradition, which started with Theophrastus, and was revived in the 1st century AD after Andronicus newly brought Aristotle's works into circulation.[13] Just like Middle Platonists tended to rewrite Plato's philosophy in dogmatic and systematic terms after what they considered the outrage of the skeptical Academy, so Alexander aimed at presenting Peripatetic thought as a coherent whole that was a match for the Stoics and Platonists in all philosophical issues of his time. Fate, determinism and human responsibility get special treatment in *De fato*; in *De mixtione* the Aristotelian doctrine of mixture is pitted against the Stoic theory of the complete fusion of bodies (*krasis*) that supported the pervasive influence of the Stoic god on matter; *De providentia* (transmitted in Arabic) deals with the issue of divine providence. All of these issues were hotly debated in Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic philosophy, but had not yet been dealt with by Aristotle at any great length. Hence Alexander had to update his Aristotelianism by collecting relevant texts from the Aristotelian corpus, and sometimes by extrapolating from scraps of Aristotelian doctrine. Some of his predecessors in the Peripatetic tradition interpreted Aristotle in ways that gave Platonists or Stoics grounds for critique of Aristotelian philosophy – at least according to Alexander. Hence we also find him attacking older Peripatetic views as part of his philosophical enterprise.

Alexander's *De anima*, which is not a commentary but a reworking of Aristotelian psychology in Alexander's own voice (though closely modeled on Aristotle's work of the same name), shows how Peripatetic psychology is nothing but a special application of Peripatetic physics, and culminates in describing the role of a divine Intellect that resides beyond the physical realm, and was treated by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* XII.

What follows is my paraphrase of Alexander's discussion of Aristotle's *DA* III.5 as described in *DA* 80.16–91.6, which stays close to Alexander's text in order and wording. In this way I hope to bring out what I take to be crucial aspects of Alexander's argument some of which have not always received the attention they deserve in existing scholarship.[14]

1 Alexander explains that the rational soul is a power (*dunamis*) that is more perfect than, and comprises, the powers of the irrational soul to which it constitutes a kind of addition. That this power is twofold follows from the difference among its objects: one rational power deals with the practical, which is subject to generation and capable of coming to be in different ways, and is called opiniative and deliberative; the other rational power deals with what is eternal and necessary, and is called scientific and theoretical. A human being does not immediately (at birth) have either of these *in actuality*, she possesses

only a potentiality (*dunamis*) and fitness (*epitêdeiotês*) for receiving these actualities through instruction and habituation. The practical disposition, which deals with more useful and familiar objects, is acquired first, the theoretical follows later. (80.16–81.22)

2 This twofold potential intellect is called material or natural intellect (*hulikos*, *phusikos nous*), and is present in all non-impaired human beings, albeit in different degrees: some have more talent than others. The intellect-in-actuality that comes to be later is the form (*eidos*), disposition (*hexis*), fulfillment (*entelecheia*) or perfection (*teleiôsis*) of the material intellect. It is present only in those people who have been sufficiently trained and instructed, who are called noble (*spoudaios*). Of course all human beings naturally develop the actuality of intellect up to a certain point, since all human beings naturally acquire universal concepts (e.g. 'the colour white') by the familiar process of concept formation from particular perceptions, via imagination and memory, to experience and the grasp of the universal.[15] This is properly called the common intellect (*koinos nous*). Putting similar things together (*tôn homoiôn sunthesis*), as in the grasp of the universal through the similarity of particulars, viz. intellection (*noêsis*), is the work of intellect. (81.22–83.13)

3 Intellect does not receive the forms in the way matter receives affective qualities, i.e. in a merely passive way. Even in perception, which occurs by means of qualitative bodily affections, the activity of perceiving as such (*to aisthanesthai*) is not ordinary passion (*paschein*), but discrimination (*krinein*). Intellect, also a discriminative power though one which (unlike perception) does not need the help of a bodily organ to grasp its objects, separates and grasps only forms, apart from their material circumstances. (83.13–84.14)

4 Since intellect can grasp everything that way and separates objects of sense from their concomitant material attributes, it cannot be any of the things it can think. It merely is the potentiality or fitness to receive all forms, like a writing tablet without writing on it, or rather like the lack of writing on such a tablet. In this analogy the writing tablet is the soul, whereas the lack of writing in it, or the fitness to be inscribed, is the material intellect. While the soul can be said to 'suffer' when written upon, the fitness does not suffer anything – precisely because it is nothing in actuality. In this way the description 'place of forms' for the soul turns out to be quite apt if people were to take their cue from the potentiality of intellect, and use it *pars pro toto* for the entire soul. (84.14–85.10)

5 The dispositional intellect (*nous hôs hexis*) is the form and perfection of the material intellect. The disposition comes to be in the material intellect through (*ek*) the grasp of the universal, or – what is in a way the same thing – through separating the forms from matter. Seeing the common feature in particulars, intellect grasps the form apart from the matter that differentiates the particulars. The disposition comes to be in intellect at the point of the transition (*metabasis*) away from the continuous actuality concerning sensibles, when it obtains from them a kind of theoretical view of the universal, which is

called object of thought (*noêma kai ennoia*) right from the start. When this[16] has become fuller (*pleonasan*), varied (*poikilon*) and versatile (*polutropon*) to the extent that it can do this [i.e. obtain a theoretical view of the universal] also without the perceptible substrate, *then* it is intellect. From that moment onwards intellect-in-disposition can be active through itself (*di' autou*), no longer through an actuality concerning sensibles. At this point the intellect is like a knower who is in the middle state between being a potential knower, and a knower who exercises his knowledge. He is the thoughts stored away together and resting. When active, this disposition becomes intellect in actuality (*ho kat'energeian nous*). (85.10–86.6)

6 Because intellect does not need the service of the body, it remains impassive when confronted with perceptibles, and because in a sense it has practised this attitude with respect to sensibles, it is better prepared to deal with its own actualities. Hence it is not at all affected by more or less thinkable objects, in the way that perception is affected by e.g. the lingering effects of strong sense impressions. (86.6–14)

7 In virtue of the fact that dispositional intellect primarily becomes what it thinks, it can think itself because it becomes that which it thinks. Before actual thinking that which thinks and that which is thought are opposed to each other as relatives, but this opposition ceases to be when they are in actuality and become one. Such identity is not possible in perception because it discerns (*kritikê*) sensibles as composites of form in matter, even though perception does not receive the form as matter does. The difference in sensible objects between e.g. bronze and the essence of bronze requires different modes of cognition: perception for the composite particular, intellect for the universal such-and-such, or *logos*, according to which the particulars are the same. (86.14–87.23)

8 If there are forms that exist by nature without any matter, these are intelligible in the proper sense of the word and are such in actuality without the help of something that thinks them. Given the identity of intellect and object, such a matterless form will be intellect in the proper sense of the word; it will never need to *become* intellect as enmattered forms do, and it will *not* be fully identical to forms which it thinks when dealing with forms and essences that exist as enmattered, which are therefore not themselves intellects outside of thinking.[17] On the same principle *our* intellect will become matterless forms when it thinks them, even though these will be the same whether our intellect thinks them or not. (87.24–88.16)

9 If we return now to the wording of *DA* III.5 it is clear that in the realm of composite nature something is matter in that chosen domain (*genos*), viz. that which is in potentiality everything in that domain. There is also something that is productive of the generation in matter of those things it is receptive of, in the same way as art (*technê*) possesses the explanation (*aitia*) of the form coming to be in the matter. Since in all instances that which is something most of all (*malista*) and in the proper sense of the word (*kuriôs*) is also

responsible for others being such, this will also apply in the case of intellect. That which is productive is the form that is intelligible properly and most of all. This is plausible from an analogy with light, which is itself the most sensible object, as well as responsible for the sensibility of all other sensibles; and with the primary good, which is responsible for the goodness of all other good things.[18] Hence that which is by nature intelligible is the productive intellect (*poiêtikos nous*) without which nothing else would become an intelligible. (88.17–89.8)

10 In addition, if this intellect would be the first cause and principle of being for everything, it would be productive also in the sense of being responsible for the existence (*einai*) of all things known.[19] Such intellect is separate, impassible, unmixed, by itself: all because it exists apart from matter. As actuality and form without potentiality, it is immortal. Such Aristotle has shown the first cause to be.[20] Therefore this intellect is more valuable than the material intellect in us, as the active is more valuable than the passive, and that which is without matter is more valuable than that which comprises matter. When our intellect thinks it, it somehow becomes it and makes itself like it. We may recall that enmattered forms, as well as mathematical objects gained by abstraction, obtain their existence *qua* objects of thought and intellects only while they are being thought by our intellect; these intellects perish as such when they are separated from the intellect that thinks them. Not so the incorruptible intellect that comes to be in an intellect that thinks it as a true 'intellect from outside': whereas all objects of thought come from outside and *become* intellects only when thought, only this intellect comes to be in us from outside *as already an intellect* and remains incorruptible even when removed from our thinking. What is more, the intellect in activity that thinks it, becomes like it. The 'intellect from outside' is neither our material intellect which is the power of the soul in us [and therefore not 'from outside'], nor the disposition in accordance with which the intellect in potentiality thinks both that intellect from outside along with everything else [for this disposition is perishable], nor is the thought (*noêma*) of it imperishable *qua* thought because it is thought by us mortals at a given point in time. So if anyone cares to have something divine in themselves, they should set out to be able to think something like this too. (89.9–91.6)

Through this dense and intricate argument Alexander has conceived a single continuous account that combines all keywords from *De anima* III.4–8 and incorporates the intellect from outside and the divine intellect in creative ways.

The *material* intellect is part of our natural make-up as a potentiality or rather fitness of our souls to receive forms.[21] As such this natural ability is not nothing. It develops naturally into the *common* intellect in all people. Its potentiality for *all* things is required because our intellect can think literally everything by becoming the forms it thinks. The potential intellect *becomes the object of thought* by the familiar process of concept formation, which relies on its *discriminative* power.

By means of this power it *separates forms* from all matter, also from the matter that still clings to forms as they are perceived in sense perception.[22] By continuous activity concerning perceptions the potential intellect develops itself to the point of *completion*, or *perfection*, such that it cannot only separate a universal from sensible particulars repeatedly, or even continuously, but can also think of this universal without having recourse to perceptions any longer. At this point it has become *dispositional intellect*, is capable of thinking at will, and of thinking itself as having become the dematerialized form it is thinking. Since the intellect can think at will only *after* it has reached the state of perfection that is dispositional intellect, this cannot be the efficient cause of the development.[23] We are to understand that the discriminating power of the material intellect, by which it separates forms from matter, amounts to the same thing as its receptivity for forms (which thereby gains significance). The productive intellect is not naturally cognate, nor is it involved in any kind of mixture. Alexander employs a long and at times repetitive argument to stress that in intellection the intellect *is* its objects, and its objects *are* thereby intellects. Most objects of our intellection are enmattered forms (perceptible or otherwise) which our intellect has separated from matter.[24] Our intellect only becomes identical with *part* of what these themselves are (viz. it leaves out their being enmattered), and they perish as objects and intellects when our intellection ceases.

Interestingly, Alexander then contrasts enmattered forms with matterless forms (in the plural) which are by nature intelligible objects and (thereby) intellects. These must be unaffected by our thinking them, and for this reason they are worthy of all attributes that Aristotle ascribed to the first cause, the primary Intellect of *Metaph*. XII. If in every domain the most prominent representative of the type is somehow responsible for the lesser representatives belonging to the type, this first intellect, which is at the same time the first object of intellection (first for itself *qua* intellect), should be responsible for the fact that all other objects of thought and intellects are such. In addition, since, according to Alexander, we are dealing here with the Intellect of *Metaph*. XII, which is the first cause of the universe, one might add that it is also responsible for the *existence* of all objects of thought as such. From this one may infer, with *Mantissa* 111,27–112,5, that the productive intellect cooperates with our own intellect, in the sense that it is responsible even for the potential objects of intellect.

The general physics expounded in the first pages of Alexander's *De anima* (2,10–11,13) helps to provide a general framework for the terminology employed in the context of intellect. According to Alexander, all physical forms come to be 'over and above' (*epi*) suitable mixtures of corporeal elements. This does not mean they are identical with the ratio of the mixture (as in the much denounced *harmonia* theory of soul); they are rather like health, which is not a characteristic of any of the bodily constituents, but the result of their mixture. It would be wrong to suppose that such additional characteristics were somehow the subject of the changes that lead to their appearance, nor are they present from the start to determine these changes. It is rather that, once they have appeared, they exist as

long as the required mixture, or fitness, is sustained. Alexander is emphatic that at higher levels than mixtures of the elements a 'mixture' is in fact a form-matter composite. A new form comes to be over and above a given form-matter composite when the latter has reached its perfection, or culmination (*teleiôtes*). In the development of an embryo to a full-fledged adult member of the species leading a full life, the succession of powers of the soul from vegetative and reproductive, via perceptive, to rational is to be regarded as a series of ever more complex *culminations* of underlying form-matter composites which have reached a suitable state. It will now be clear that the succession of intellects is to be regarded as a similar series: from material intellect, through disposition and (first) actuality to the (second) actuality of our thinking the forms we know, culminating in the thought of the divine productive intellect as object of thought in our soul in the (second) actuality of our thinking it. Therefore Alexander emphasizes that while material intellect is with us from birth, it needs a process of concept formation (present in all humans), and further training and instruction (which not everyone will have access to), to reach a state of perfection in dealing with perceptions that gives rise to a new form: intellect-in-disposition, which has capabilities the previous state did not have. It can think about universals apart from perceptions, at will, and it can think itself. Alexander ends our section with the paradoxical exhortation that if someone wants to have the divine within him, he should try, in this life, to think the first principle. This can only imply that we do *not* need to think this principle in order to think universal forms in everyday life, or even as first object of thought to reach the dispositional stage or acquire the power of abstraction. Its significance is indirect: just like light, itself supremely visible, also renders colours visible just by being there; so the first principle, itself supremely intelligible and intelligized by itself *qua* intellect, renders all objects of intellection intelligible, just by being there, even if it happens not to be thought by our intellect at every point in time.

## 3. John Philoponus on intellect

John Philoponus has left us, in the Latin of William van Moerbeke, a commentary on *De anima* 3.4–8, here referred to as *De Intellectu* (*DI*). Since this is a running commentary in the style of the Alexandrian school, it does not provide the kind of carefully crafted continuous argument we found in Alexander's *De anima*. However, from over a dozen critical references to Alexander's *De anima* it is clear that Philoponus has written this part of his commentary with Alexander as his main opponent in mind. In his *De anima* commentary on books I and II preserved in Greek, Philoponus' attitude to Alexander is more relaxed. He often refers to Alexander approvingly, and in one case he even advises the reader to look for Alexander's comments for more details.[25] There is, however, one issue on which he takes a stand against Alexander both in *In De anima* and in *De Intellectu*: the immortality of the human intellect. We shall turn to his attack on Alexander in a moment.[26] Let us first sketch Philoponus' own philosophy of intellect.

As a pupil of Ammonius, Philoponus has a thoroughly Neoplatonic outlook on human psychology. He concedes that the human intellect is a part of the human soul. There is no other way to explain Aristotle's careful comparison between sensation and intellect *in the same living being* (*DI* 2,23). However, he mitigates the meaning of 'part': it only makes sense to speak of parts in the sense of falling under the extension of the same term, 'soul', since he believes that intellect is in fact a separate kind of soul, a substance of its own (*DI* 2,33–3,53). As such, our intellect exists in three modes of being: (i) in potentiality (in children), (ii) in disposition (possessing but not using knowledge, as in a sleeping geometer, or in someone not displaying his knowledge) and (iii) in actuality, having its operations already on display so that it can become active by its own agency – this is the ratiocinative intellect, which does not know everything at once, and so still exhibits a movement from one argument to the next, which implies that it has its own type of potentiality.[27] At *In DA* 2.12–15 Philoponus adds that only a fully purified human intellect, which can operate without sense-perception and imagination and has reached the most perfect disposition, 'gets to know the intelligible objects by straightforward apprehension in a way that is superior to demonstration'.

There is another, contemplative intellect, different from these modes of intellect, which lacks potentiality altogether. From this intellect, which all people call immortal, the potential intellect derives the principles of the sciences. Some people recognize this intellect in Aristotle's text where he speaks of an intellect that is separate, impassible and unmixed (*DI* 3,55–4,69). Philoponus does not, as will be clear from the sequel. Philoponus is convinced that Aristotle also knew of the universal and creative intellect, 'but it perfects our intellect as the sun is said to generate men: it is a cause at a higher level, not an embedded cause'.[28]

However, according to Philoponus everyone – including Aristotle – believes that the human intellect is an immortal, rational substance, separable, unaffected and not mixed with the body.[29] Hence, the soul does not need to develop its rational powers by means of a process of growth and development. As an immortal substance that becomes lodged in a human body the intellect need only go through various stages of so-called learning, which has become necessary as the result of the delirium, or alienation, that the soul experienced when descending into the body. For Philoponus holds that our rational soul already possesses – as joined with its own substance – the *logoi* of everything, the 'shadows of the Forms'.[30] After all, the human soul is an image of the Demiurgic Intellect. Learning is therefore recollection: teachers do not put knowledge into us, but remove the obstacles, the ashes that hide the spark, so that we may become aware of its presence. Perception provides the imagination with images that trigger our intellect. We instantly recognize which opponent in a debate is right because their discussions arouse our innate knowledge (*in DA* 4,32–5,14).

In this context, the first potentiality of knowledge turns out to be a 'reduced actuality' of formal principles already actually present from birth.[31] When Aristotle calls the soul a writing tablet without writing on it, Philoponus explains, he does so because of 'the holding down of cognition by the passions which makes

it *seem* as if it did not have forms at all' (*DI* 39,16–18, my emphasis). Aristotle already recognized the latitude in potentiality in terms of distance from it actualization proper: a sleeping geometer, or a drunk geometer, indeed, the ingredients in a mixture, are all further or nearer to actualization proper.[32]

Philoponus also acknowledges a distinction between the solid (perceptible) body and the pneumatic body. He believes that the rational part of the soul can exist apart from both, and is therefore immortal, whereas the non-rational part of the soul can be separated from the solid body but is inseparable from the pneumatic body and perishes along with it. He interprets Aristotle's discussion of the separation of soul from body in these terms (*In DA* 9,3–12,9).

Philoponus' Neoplatonic background thus demands that the human rational soul is immortal. Hence he regards it as a grave mistake on the part of Alexander to have claimed that the human intellect, and thereby the entire human soul, is mortal.

It is a striking feature of Philoponus' polemics that he uses (his interpretation of) Aristotle's text in *De anima* III.4–8 to refute Alexander, thus showing over and over again that the famous commentator got his Aristotle wrong. Philoponus is right to point out that Alexander could only consider the human soul mortal after disconnecting the active intellect, which Aristotle called immortal, from the human soul altogether – by identifying it with the divine intellect. Thus the connection between *DA* III.5 and *Metaph*. XII becomes the centre of Philoponus' attack. And yet, for Philoponus, too, there is no doubt that a higher divine Intellect has an important role in the explanation of the creation of the sensible world, the descent of human souls and the *logoi* they possess in their intellects. The point is not that human rationality depends on a divine intellect one way or another, but that Alexander's construal of this dependence leads him to calling the human intellect mortal. Nor is it the issue that the intellect in potentiality is perfected by another intellect which is in actuality. But according to Philoponus this is the intellect that is *in the teacher*, which is *external to* and *other than* the intellect which is perfected.[33]

Three passages in *DI* are particularly helpful to understand the substance of Philoponus' attack.

1 Right at the start of *De intellectu*, commenting on the first lines of *DA* III.4, 429a10–11, Philoponus notes[34] that Alexander 'wishes to drag Aristotle over to his opinion' by claiming that Aristotle's phrase 'the part of the soul by which the soul gets to know things and is prudent' refers to the creative intellect (*de conditore intellectu*), or the First Cause. For Philoponus this is 'not an intelligent suggestion', because (i) there is no need to *argue* that the creative intellect is immortal, separate etc.; (ii) in *DA* 408b18–20 Aristotle stated that the intellect comes to be in us and is not destroyed, and if it would be, only by old age – which makes no sense regarding the creative intellect; (iii) it would be irrational to say that the intellect in actuality, which is the culmination of our potential intellect, is not our own; and (iv) in *DA* 411b18–19 Aristotle

wonders what part of the body intellect might hold together, which again shows he cannot be thinking of the creative intellect.

2 In his comments on *DA* 431a16–17 'therefore the soul never thinks without an image' Philoponus notes[35] that Alexander 'tries very hard to prove' from this phrase that our intellect is mortal. For if intellection never happens without an image, which is based on sense perception, which is not immortal, then neither is intellect.[36] This would mean that the entire soul is mortal, which is why Aristotle is saying here that *the soul* never thinks without an image.

Philoponus opposes this argument in two ways: (i) this passage is about the deliberating soul (431a14 *dianoêtikê psuchê*) which Aristotle suggested earlier (408b13–15) to be a capacity of the whole animal rather than the intellect alone. Elsewhere[37] Philoponus explains at more length that, indeed, deliberation is imperfect intellect, viz. intellect in so far as it is impeded by the body. Hence it may involve the use of images. (ii) Since the context speaks of seeking or avoiding good and bad (431a15–16), the topic is clearly practical deliberation; but it should not be surprising that intellect has to be involved with images in practical deliberation which deals with particulars. Surely, images are not necessary when the intellect is thinking about mathematics, logical conversions or intelligibles. Hence, Alexander's argument to prove the mortality of the soul fails.

3 The most elaborate discussion of the status of intellect in actuality is found in the *theoria* to *De anima* III.5, *In DA* 42,91–54,84.[38] Philoponus notes that all interpreters agree that the intellect in potentiality is ours. However, there is a dispute about the intellect in actuality, in which four different positions can be discerned. Since this survey conveniently maps the larger part of the ancient discussion, as well as significant parts of the modern discussion about *DA* III.5, it is worthwhile to set out the arguments for comparison.

(i) The intellect in actuality is the divine and creative intellect, because our intellect is not in essence actuality (430a18), nor does it make everything (430a12), nor does it understand always (430a22). Our intellect in potentiality is perfected by an intellect in actuality which is universal and external. This corresponds to Alexander's position.

Philoponus offers his full array of arguments against Alexander, including the ones rehearsed in the context of *DA* III.4 (see section 1 above):

- why raise the question of separability at all if the creative intellect is at stake?
- how will the creative intellect ever enter our soul from outside?
- how can the creative intellect be included in the definition of soul as actuality of an instrumental body (412b5–6)?
- in Aristotle's phrases 'knowledge in actuality is identical with the thing known; knowledge in potentiality is temporally prior in the individual' (430a19–21) the term 'knowledge' must refer to intellect in actuality, which is identical with intelligibles. But it would

be unreasonable to imply that the creative intellect is temporally posterior or comes to be in individuals at all.
- it would be unreasonable to announce a discussion about soul (430a13), and then switch to the divine and transcendent intellect which is the business of a theologian.

(ii) The intellect in actuality is not the creative intellect but an angelic or demonic intellect placed directly above ours in the hierarchy, which irradiates our human souls. Hence, the reference to light (430a15–16), which is also intermediate between its source, the sun (the creative intellect) and the illuminated objects (our souls). This position is attributed to Marinus, the pupil of Proclus (Pseudo-Philop. 535,5).

Philoponus rejects this interpretation because it does not match all of Aristotle's descriptions either; for instance, it would be odd to ask about this intellect whether it is separate. Interestingly, Philoponus also rejects the possibility that our intellect would transcend its own substance to become identical with such a higher intellect: 'For every substance has [only] a certain perfection attaining to it.[39] Just as a non-rational soul would never come to be of the same dignity as a rational one, so our intellect would never be the equal of those kinds which are above it. Hence Aristotle will not be speaking of any other intellect superior to us'.[40] Aristotle is made to adhere to the rules of Neoplatonic metaphysics.

(iii) The intellect in actuality does not transcend us, but we have two different intellects in us, one in potentiality, which is always in us, and another one in actuality, which enters from the outside (*qui actu de foris ingredi*, a reference to *GA* II.3 *thurathen* discussed previously). This view is attributed to 'some ostensible Platonists' (Plotinus in Pseudo-Philop. 535,8), who inferred as much from Plato's use of the term 'change' in cognition.[41] Against this position Philoponus argues that it would be odd that we would not notice the presence of an intellect in actuality in us, and that our intellect falls back into potentiality e.g. when asleep or in a stupor.

(iv) The intellect in actuality is the human intellect which is identical with the intellect in potentiality when it has reached perfection. Philoponus subscribes to this interpretation, which Pseudo-Philop. 535,13 attributes to Plutarch (of Athens).

Philoponus' own argument rests on an analogy with all natural cases of potentiality that are led to actuality by another instance of the same species previously in potentiality, but now in actuality: a man, or a vine in potentiality becomes a man, or a vine in actuality by another man, or vine in actuality (which in their turn were in potentiality before). The latter clause rules out that 'the maker' is something that was never in potentiality before, such as the creative intellect. The intellect in actuality that leads our intellect in potentiality to actuality is . . . the intellect of a

teacher, viz. another intellect that is in another soul, but the same in *species*.[42] At *In DA* 306,24–307,5 Philoponus argues that once the state of disposition has been reached, for instance due to the agency of a teacher, the pupil's intellect in actuality can activate itself without needing anything from outside (*exôthen*), contrary to sense perception that relies on external perceptibles. Although this is an Aristotelian commonplace, for Philoponus such statements seem to take on the force of a denial of the need for an intellect in actuality that enters from outside (*thurathen*) to bring the intellect in potentiality to perfection: 'therefore the intellect does not need something that perfects it from the outside'.[43] In addition, Philoponus adduces a whole series of quotes from Aristotle to corroborate his conviction that Aristotle intends *our* intellect to be unmixed, pure, separate and immortal.[44]

The more difficult passages that figured in Alexander's argument are also confronted head-on.[45]

Our intellect 'makes all things' (430a12) not because it produces the substance of all things, but because it makes our intellect in potentiality come to be receptive of all things, just as the intellect in potentiality becomes all things, not literally, but by receiving the forms of all things. Philoponus rightly claims that Alexander will agree that our intellect does not really make *all* things in this sense: intellects that are by nature intelligible need not be made actually intelligible by us at all, only material forms.

Our intellects are 'always understanding' from a cosmic point of view: in the universe as a whole (430a21 *holôs*) there are always intellects in actuality next to intellects in potentiality. The words 'it understands always' are applied to all and to the pool of souls in the whole universe, not because each person on his own understands always.[46]

Our intellect is 'in essence actuality' in the sense that essence is always defined by referring to something's actuality, and by what is most honourable in it (430a17–19). In the case of intellect, its essence lies in its actuality. This is precisely what Plato taught us when he indicated that we should free the immortal soul from the incrustations of the passions to see its splendour, just as we should remove the incrustations from the sea-god Glaucus (*Rep*. 10, 611C–D). Since our soul attains things that are wholly separate, it must be separate from all body. And 'It is a direct consequence of this that it is immortal' (*DI* 54,77). Harmonization is near: 'Therefore Plato taught that the soul's substance is characterised according to its highest operations, and Aristotle now brings out the consequences in saying that the intellect is in substance actuality' (*DI* 54,81–84).

It will be clear that Philoponus' reading of Aristotle is heavily influenced by Neoplatonic metaphysics and tends to be equally creative as Alexander's reading in making individual phrases in Aristotle's text support his overall view. They both impress by the sheer knowledge of the Aristotelian corpus at their disposal. But there is much at stake here: if our rational soul is inseparable from the body it must be perishable. If not only Plato but also Aristotle tell us that our rational soul is a separate substance associated with the body, its immortality is confirmed.

In the preceding pages I have opposed Alexander's ingenious reading of Aristotle's theory of intellect to Philoponus' theory of intellect. In structure they have much in common: both accept that our rational powers somehow depend on a higher intellect, and both accept a development through various stages of potentiality to actuality. Alexander, however, concluded from Aristotle's texts that the productive intellect in *DA* III.5 could only be the divine creative intellect he found in *Metaph*. XII, thereby robbing our individual intellects from their culmination. What remains for us is intellect in disposition, that has gained its knowledge through sense perception, and by that dependence shows its irreparable connection to our mortal body. Philoponus, who takes his starting-point from the Platonic immortality of our rational soul, reinterprets the notions of separation, potentiality, actuality, and essence involved in Aristotle's psychology so as to preserve our personal intellect's immortality. After the long tradition of anti-Alexandrian and anti-Averroist polemics in the line of Philoponus, by all defenders of the immortality of the soul, Platonists, Muslims, Jews and Christians alike, we have somewhat lost sight of the fact that Alexander was not interested in the (im)mortality of our souls at all. He aimed at bringing Aristotle's *De anima* in line with the principles of Aristotle's general physics and biology, as well as came up with an intriguing evolution of powers of the soul and their respective potentialities and actualities. For what it is worth, it seems to me that our age feels more comfortable again with the project of Alexander.

## Notes

1 See John Sisko's chapter in this volume for a survey of the problems involved.
2 Alex. *DA* 80.16–91.6 (Bruns 1887). For translations and commentaries see Fotinis (1979), Accattino and Donini (1996), Bergeron and Dufour (2008). A new English translation by Victor Caston, who has already published a translation of Alex. *DA* 1.1–46.19 (2012), is in preparation.
3 Alex. *Mant*. § 2, 106,18–113.24 (Bruns 1887). For translations and commentaries see Fotinis (1979) 137–153, Schroeder and Todd (1990), Accattino (2005), Sharples (2004a), (2008). See Sharples (2004b) for the meaning and modern origin of the title *Mantissa*. *Mantissa* § 2 reports various views that helped shape Alexander's own, with Alexander's more considered responses to them.
4 See Lautner (1992), who proposes a younger member of Philoponus' school as the author, and Charlton (1999), pp. 1–10, who opts for Stephanus.
5 The Latin text was edited in Verbeke (1966), translation in Charlton (1999) with emendations to the Latin by Bossier.
6 For discussion of this difficult passage, see e.g. Charlton (1987), pp. 411–416, Caston (1999), pp. 215–216.
7 Aristotle famously hints that intellect may be independent from the body in *DA* I.4 408b18–19, 29; II.1 413a3–7; II.2 413b24–27 and III.7 431b17–19, but also concludes in *DA* III.7 431a14–14 and 431b2–4 that discursive human thinking (*dianoêtikê*) cannot do without *phantasmata* that result from sense perception – for which human intellect would need the body for its actualization after all.
8 Cf *DA* II.3 415a11–12.
9 See Caston (1999) 211–212 for a full comparison (from which Caston concludes that the active intellect in Aristotle is identical with Aristotle's God).

10 Cf Arist. *EN* 1177b31–34.
11 See Chaniotis (2004) for epigraphic evidence that locates Alexander in Athens, with Sharples (2005) on its implications.
12 It is not clear who were Alexander's contemporaries in the other chairs during his period of office. Taurus and Atticus may have held the Platonic chair in the decades before Alexander was appointed.
13 See Barnes (1997) for a critical assessment of fact and fiction surrounding the editorial work of Andronicus.
14 I wish to acknowledge my debt to the detailed and perceptive studies listed in the bibliography. This is not the place, however, to record each and every detail of agreement and disagreement with previous scholarship, so I shall simply present my own reading here. Nor is this the place to defend any particular interpretation of Aristotle's seminal texts. The informed reader will recognize that I find much of value in the work of Charlton, Sharples, Caston, Wedin and Diamond.
15 Here Alexander closely follows Arist. *Anal.Post*. II.19.
16 I.e. the *noêma*. The Greek is tortuous, but seems to turn on the identification, already at this stage, of the thought and the intellect, as will come out further on, 86.14ff.
17 Thus the relation of an intellect by nature to the enmattered intelligible forms it thinks, is analogous to the relation of actual perception to enmattered sensible forms it perceives.
18 Given Alexander's propensity to argue against Platonism, we should not ascribe a kind of participation theory to Alexander here. Rather, he draws on Aristotle's famous theory of 'focal meaning' which holds that things that are identified as 'good' or 'healthy' in various senses of these words are all united by reference to a single item like goodness or health. This is not just a linguistic issue since the teleological structure of the universe can be held responsible for this type of coherence.
19 One is reminded of Plato's analogy of the Good and the sun in *Rep*. VI: the Good is responsible for both the existence and the intelligibility of intelligibles (both Forms and mathematical objects), as the sun is responsible for both the existence and the perceptibility of perceptibles. I believe these echoes are not a source of inspiration for Alexander, but part of an anti-Platonic refutation, since he will be offering a different explanation of the significance of the productive intellect in the universe.
20 Here the transition from *DA* III.5 to *Metaph*. XII is complete, and no longer phrased as a conditional as in 89.9.
21 Cf. Arist. *Anal.Post*. II.19, 100a13–14: 'soul is such that it can undergo this'.
22 Note that the soul does not need the divine intellect to acquire the power of abstraction: for Alexander the discriminative power, viz. its receptive power under a different description, is responsible for the separation of forms from matter.
23 One might think that the intelligible objects are the efficient cause of intellection, but they are only actually intelligible in the act of thought, and powerless when still in potentiality.
24 *Mantissa* 107.21–24 elaborates on this aspect by emphasizing that in this sense our intellects are themselves productive and like artisans, in imitation of the primary productive intellect. See further De Haas (forthcoming 2018).
25 See e.g. *In DA* 35,10; 43,10; 151,32; 160,8; 182,11; 216,9; 237,17; 361,5; he refers the reader to Alexander's comments at 118,25–28.
26 See *In DA* 10,1–3; 21,21–23; 159,1–29; 194,12; 200,3; 261,11–262,4; for *DI* see below.
27 So Arist. *DA* III.4, 429b8.
28 *DI* 51,6–10; cf. Arist. *Phys*. 194b13. Here for once I modify Charlton's translation 'not part of the causal chain' for *incoordinatam causam*. I suspect this phrase reflects something like *akatatetagmenon aition*, a cause that is not embedded in the horizontal causal nexus of the sublunary realm.

29 Philop. *In DA* 10,10–11,29 quotes, in support for the fact that Aristotle holds this position, a series of Aristotelian texts: *PA* 641a17ff, 641a33ff, *GA* 736b27ff (wrongly quoted by Philoponus as also deriving from *PA*), *DA* 403a27, 413b24, 429a13, 430a22, 429a22, 429a31–b5, 430a17, 408b18, 411b18, 413b24.
30 See Tempelis (1997).
31 *DI* 39,1–18; 39,27–40,43; see De Haas (2000) for further discussion of these passages. At *DI* 16,82–96 Philoponus argues that first potentiality sits ill with Aristotle's claim that the world is eternal, and with a limited number of immortal souls – this would only work on the assumption of multiple rebirths of the same souls which makes a persistent first potentiality implausible. So either the soul is mortal and continuously generated anew (*quod non*) or the soul has the forms potentially in the second sense of potentiality listed ('as Plato said').
32 See e.g. Arist. *GA* II.1 735a8–11, *Phys*. VII.3 247b13–248a6. For its application to mixture see De Haas (1999).
33 See *In DA* 10,33–37 and p. 310–311.
34 What follows paraphrases *DI* 4,70–5,98.
35 Philop. *DI* 97,8–98,43.
36 Cf. Arist. *DA* 412b25–413a7: a part of the soul that is not the actuality of any bodily part may be separable. Although Philoponus does not invoke this text here, in his commentary *ad loc, In DA* 223,37–224,4, he is ready to infer that Aristotle wants the rational soul to be separate.
37 Cf Philop. *In DA* 155,4–35.
38 This passage is closely paralleled in the larger discussion in Pseudo-Philop. *In DA* 535,1–539,12. There the four positions Philoponus outlines in *DI* are attributed to Alexander, Marinus, Plotinus and Plutarch of Athens respectively. Philoponus follows Plutarch.
39 Following the conjecture *assectibilem* (translating *parakolouthêtiko*n) for *affectibilem* (Bossier), see Charlton (1991) p. 65, n. 17.
40 *DI* 47,9–16.
41 The statement is puzzling. Charlton (1991) 63n6 refers to *Phaedr*. 245C, *Leg*. 10, 894–896B, but notes these texts concern life rather than cognition. The reference is rather to Plotinus' application the category of motion to thought and Intellect in e.g. *Enn*. V.1.4, 36–37; V.8.4, 11–13; VI.2.4–8 (in conscious opposition to Aristotle), and VI.7.13. See Charrue (1987) 93–95 on Plotinus' reception of the second hypothesis of the Parmenides and 206–223 on *Sophist* 254D4–255C7.
42 See above p. 308.
43 *In DA* 307,4–5: *dio ou deetai ho nous exôthen tinos teleiountos*.
44 *DI* 49,55–50,81 lists *DA* 430a22; 430a19–20; 429a25–26; 411b18–19; 408b19–20; 429a15; 429a29–30; 429b4–5; *Metaph*. XII 1070a24–26 (taken to support pre-existing, simple and everlasting forms, some of which might be human intellects; cf. 1069a30–36).
45 *DI* 50,82–54,84.
46 See also *In DA* 216,28–217,7 which includes the same cosmic perspective: 'But in the whole universe the perfect might be put before the imperfect; for as I said, the introducing causes which are in perfect activity precede, and in general the creation of the whole universe ought to begin from what is perfect not from what is imperfect'. In this way, Neoplatonic causal theory is in line with Aristotle's priorities.

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