



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Alexander of Aphrodisias on concepts

Haas, F.A.J. de; Betegh, G.; Tsouna, V.

Citation

Haas, F. A. J. de. (2024). Alexander of Aphrodisias on concepts. In G. Betegh & V. Tsouna (Eds.), *Conceptualising concepts in Greek philosophy* (pp. 368-383). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781009369596.019

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4020572>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

*Alexander of Aphrodisias on Concepts**Frans A.J. de Haas*

The numerous works transmitted under the name of Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 200 CE) show a rich vocabulary denoting concepts, thoughts, and universals,¹ and an equally rich collection of verbs denoting the human activities of abstracting or constructing concepts, whether they be simple (individual, genus, species) or complex (definitions, propositions). Within the confines of this chapter, I would like to focus on a number of interesting occurrences of the terms *ennoia* and *noēma* in Alexander's texts. I shall deal with Alexander's interrelated views of concept formation as the development of potential intellect, divine intellect in us as *noēma*, *ennoiai* as concepts under construction, and human intellect as a unity of concepts.

Alexander not only draws on Aristotle's works and the Aristotelian tradition, but also on centuries of polemics against Aristotle by the Stoics and Platonists, which have led to new ways of engaging with Aristotle's legacy. Often terms of Stoic or Platonist origin have become part of the common parlance in the philosophical debates of the first centuries of our era. One example that we shall come across below is the use of 'common notions' as starting points of valid arguments, which Alexander believes is in perfect agreement with Aristotelian dialectic. When Alexander elaborates on the extent of the human capacity to acquire some universal concepts by nature, and others by teaching and study, he always intends to confirm the Aristotelian rejection of innate knowledge.

1 Concept Formation as the Development of Potential Intellect

The diversity of concepts in Alexander is closely tied to the stages of the process of concept formation, and the degrees in which people differ as far

¹ One term does *not* play a role in Alexander's own thought: *ennoēma* occurs only in Alex., in *Top.* 359.13–16 where it echoes the Early Stoic notion of a 'figment of the mind' (cf. Diog. Laert. 7.61.1–3); cf. LS 30C and D with commentary.

as the actualisation of their common natural capacity for reason is concerned. Hence we need to look for concepts in Alexander's discussion of the development of the human intellect.

Aristotle's distinction between different types of potentiality and actuality in *De anima* 2.5 constitutes Alexander's frame of reference.² Aristotle distinguished between the potentiality to gain knowledge, which all human beings have in common (let us call this first potentiality);³ it is actualised each time a piece of knowledge is acquired (first actuality). This disposition that is the possession of knowledge comprises at the same time a new, second, potentiality to access this knowledge at will and apply it in new episodes of thought (which will each be instances of second actuality). One of Aristotle's examples is the acquisition of knowledge of grammar (first actuality), which is applied by the grammarian each time he is contemplating a particular letter alpha (second actuality).⁴

The difference between the two processes of actualisation is that the first is a real alteration that consists of 'repeated transitions from one state to its opposite under instruction' (417a31–32). The previous state of potentiality, viz. lack of knowledge, is replaced by the corresponding actuality, viz. the possession of knowledge. The second process of actualisation is not an ordinary alteration, but rather 'a preservation of what is potentially such by the actuality', and 'a development towards itself and actuality'.⁵ No matter how often we use the knowledge we possess, the second potentiality for applying knowledge remains unaffected. A person who is a knower in this second sense of potentiality is able to think whenever she wishes.⁶

This framework found full application in Alexander's discussion of the development of intellect in *De anima* 80.20–91.6.⁷ In Alexander's vocabulary, the development of intellect (*nous*) starts from the innate natural or material intellect, which is the typically human capacity (*epitēdeiotēs*) for knowledge.⁸ All human beings are born with this capacity, but people are more or less well endowed for developing it successfully.⁹ Alexander first explains that intellectual dispositions and

² See esp. Arist., *De an.* 2.5, 417a22–b16; 417b29–418a6. Cf. Burnyeat 2002 and De Haas 2018a.

³ Cf. Arist., *De an.* 2.5, 417a27: 'his kind or matter is such and such'. The numbering of first and second potentiality and actuality is not in Aristotle or Alexander but is used in later ancient commentators. I adopt their numbering for convenience.

⁴ Cf. Arist., *De an.* 2.5, 417a25–29.

⁵ Arist., *De an.* 2.5, 417a32–b12, esp. 417b3–5: τὸ δὲ σωτηρία μᾶλλον ὑπὸ τοῦ ἐντελέχεια ὄντος τοῦ δυνάμει ὄντος καὶ ὁμοίου οὕτως ὡς δύναμις ἔχει πρὸς ἐντελέχειαν; 417b6–7: εἰς αὐτὸ γὰρ ἡ ἐπίδοσις καὶ εἰς ἐντελέχειαν.

⁶ Arist., *De an.* 2.5, 417a27–28, b23–24; 3.4, 429b6–9.

⁷ See also T2 below.

⁸ Cf. Tuominen 2010a. ⁹ Alex., *De an.* 81.26–28.

activities, though based on this natural capacity, do not develop naturally (unlike for instance the innate capacity for walking which does develop naturally in everyone). Hence, he claims that intellectual dispositions and activities are not found in everyone but only in trained and educated people, as the distribution of scientific knowledge shows. He even goes as far as to claim that only the noble, well-educated, and virtuous person (*spoudaios*) has intellect (*nous*).¹⁰ I take this emphasis on capacity, and on the relatively rare actualisation of that capacity, as part of Alexander's anti-Platonic stance. The intellectual disposition that is knowledge is not only acquired, and hence not an innate disposition, but also acquired by training and education which is successful only in a limited number of people, rendering the disposition even rarer. But does this really mean that the majority of the population does not develop intellect and has no proper concepts at all, or is Alexander here raising the bar for intellectual success too high?

Our worry increases when Alexander tells us that the rational capacity of the soul is twofold. On the one hand it has the capacity to deal with practical items that come to be and can be otherwise; they are objects of reason's powers of opinion and deliberation; from it the so-called opinative and deliberative, intellect (*doxastikos kai bouleutikos nous*) develops, which will become the principle of action when wish and desire accompany its objects. On the other hand the rational soul has the capacity to deal with eternal and necessary items that always remain the same, which are objects of reason's power of understanding (*epistēmē*) and contemplation (*theōria*), and will give rise to the so-called theoretical and scientific intellect (*theōrētikos kai epistēmonikos nous*).¹¹ The practical intellect will develop first because the activities concerning its objects are more familiar to us.¹² At a later stage, as the result of teaching and training, the true form and actuality of the material intellect comes to be – which is then called the intellect-in-disposition (*kata hexin nous*).¹³ Consequently, if the common run of men do not achieve the full state of *nous* they will have neither practical nor theoretical knowledge, but even

¹⁰ Alex., *De an.* 81.26–82.11.

¹¹ Alex., *De an.* 80.24–81.13; cf. 82.16–19; 29.22–30.2; in *Metaph.* 145.6–19; 183.8–13; cf. *Eth. Probl.* 150.23–151.5. For a similar division of labour between theoretical and practical reason in Aristotle, see e.g., *De an.* 3.9, 432b26–433a6; *Eth. Nic.* 6.2 1139a27–31; *Metaph.* α.1 993b20–23; ε.2, 1025b18–28.

¹² The development of the two powers of intellect thus itself exhibits the Aristotelian principle that knowledge moves from what is more familiar to us, to what is more familiar by nature.

¹³ Alex., *De an.* 81.25–26, 82.1–5.

if they acquire some knowledge, they may acquire only practical and not theoretical knowledge.

Fortunately, Alexander immediately corrects himself on this score: rather, all unimpaired human beings have a share of intellect, albeit up to a certain level. For, contrary to what we were led to expect, it is *by nature* that they proceed to comprehension of the universal (*tou katholou perilepsis*) and cognition by synthesis (*kata sunthesin gnōsis*) of at least *some* things. This disposition Alexander calls the *common intellect*,¹⁴ that is, the disposition of intellect that all people have in common. Apparently, a state that deserves the name of intellect is marked by the grasp of a universal which is the result of an act of synthesis that constitutes this intellect.

We get further reassurance, and more information on the formation of universal concepts, when Alexander proceeds to tell us that the daily teaching needed to acquire the disposition consists in ordinary sense perception,¹⁵ which, we may surmise, is accessible to all. According to the well-known Aristotelian sequence, perception tends to give rise to imagination and memory until, through experience, the transition (*metabasis*) from 'this particular' to 'such-and-such a universal' takes place.¹⁶ This comprehension and grasp of the universal is based on the likeness between particulars, and is therefore the synthesis of like things (*tōn homoiōn sunthesis*). Alexander emphatically calls this comprehension and synthesis 'intellection' (*noēsis*), and 'the proper task of intellect' (*ergon ēdē nou*).¹⁷

Here we find the most striking characteristic of Alexander's theory: the formation of a concept *is* the first actuality of human potential intellect. Alexander further explains that the comprehension of perceptible forms is in a way the same as their separation, by intellect, from each and every material condition in which they may exist.¹⁸ For, since individual human

¹⁴ This is Alexander's original interpretation of 'the common' (*tou koinou*) found in Arist., *De an.* 1.4, 408b24–29, which found its way into later discussions of intellect; see e.g. De Haas 2018b: 115–16 on Themistius. Modern commentators take it as a reference to the perishable *compound* of soul and body (*to koinon*), which is held responsible for emotions, desires, and memory. Alexander takes it as a reference to a common intellect (*koinos sc. nous*).

¹⁵ Alex., *De an.* 82.21–22.

¹⁶ Cf. Arist., *An. post.* 2.19 and *Ph.* 1.1, see below p. 377–378 For *metabasis* cf. e.g., *An. post.* 2.13, 97b29. There is no indication here that a more advanced state of intellect (e.g., the so-called active intellect) is needed to facilitate this natural transition, which would defeat Aristotle's line of argument in *An. post.* 2.19.

¹⁷ Alex., *De an.* 82.19–83.13. On the relation between likeness and the grasp of universals cf. e.g., Alex., *De an.* 77.2–5; in *Metaph.* 5.8–9, in *Top.* 529.14–17. For Aristotle, see e.g., *An. post.* 2.14, 97b7–13, 33–37; *Top.* 8.8, 160a36–39.

¹⁸ Alex., *De an.* 84.6–9; 85.10–14. Here the question arises, which intellect is responsible for this separation: the potential intellect, or the active intellect to which the later tradition ascribes this responsibility. Arist., *An. post.* 2.19, 100b4–5 has perception produce the universal, not *nous*; Alex.,

beings differ from each other by material conditions, the form without these material conditions is the common, or universal, human being. She who grasps what is common in particulars will by that very activity grasp the form without matter and constitute dispositional intellect.¹⁹

One might wonder why Alexander first suggests that dispositional intellect can only be acquired by the happy philosophical few and then becomes more liberal in allowing intellect to all because of day-to-day sense perception. The explanation lies in the gradual differentiation of intellectual states: strictly speaking *nous* in its most comprehensive sense demands all of common, opinative and deliberative, theoretical and scientific *nous*. This makes it less likely that large numbers of people will reach the full disposition of *nous*. At the same time, everyone's gradual progression through the different kinds of *nous* opens up the possibility of some degree of intellectual actualisation for all human beings, which does justice to their natural capacity and confirms the general applicability of Aristotelian psychological theory.

2 Divine Intellect in Us as *noēma*

There is a strong polemical purpose to Alexander's discussion of intellect. Against Platonist opponents, Alexander establishes the Aristotelian stance that no knowledge of any kind is innate, and that the acquisition of all knowledge depends on a natural capacity that is the same for all people. Against Stoic opponents, Alexander provides an Aristotelian psychological alternative for both the perfection of the Stoic sage, and the progress of prospective sages. In addition, he rejects all dependence of human reason on divine reason working in us as the leading part of our soul.²⁰ That is why Alexander claims, in a striking passage to which we shall turn next, that the first principle is in us merely as a temporary object of our thinking.

Alexander explains that the first cause or divine intellect is unlike immanent forms that need abstraction in order to be intelligised as such. The separate divine intellect is always thinking in actuality and identical with its own thought, independently of our thinking. So when we think about this highest principle it enters our intellect without needing to be abstracted by us, as the imperishable intellect it already is. By contrast,

De an. 91.5–6 regards the divine intellect merely as a possible *object* of our thinking, not as the cause of its disposition, see the [next section](#). For the debate in Alexander's time see De Haas 2020.

¹⁹ Alex., *De an.* 85.10–20.

²⁰ Following common parlance, though, Alexander does not hesitate to speak of the rational soul as ἡγεμονικόν, e.g., *De an.* 76.10–11, 98.24–25.

enmattered forms merely *become* objects of thought, and thereby intellect, *as long as* they are objects of our knowledge and thinking.

Alexander derives the identity of objects of thought and intellect from Aristotle's discussion of the question, raised in *De anima* 3.4, whether *nous* is itself intelligible (*noēton*).²¹ This is true for Aristotle because in the case of things without matter (i.e., intellect and immaterial forms) 'that which thinks and that which is thought are the same, for theoretical knowledge and what is known in this way are the same.'²² In this sense Aristotle is ready to call intellect the 'form of forms' (432a2). Enmattered things are only potentially objects of thought and therefore not intellects.²³

On the basis of these texts Alexander feels free to emphasise that forms of perceptibles become *intellects* – but only when they are thought, because they need the act of intellection in order to be separated from their matter.²⁴ By contrast, the first cause which is the divine active intellect does not need us to be thought: it is always thinking itself already.²⁵ What is more, dispositional intellect can think on its own, and handle intelligible forms, and can therefore also think itself, be it only accidentally because it is primarily concerned with the forms it thinks.²⁶

Alexander uses this doctrine to address three different interpretations of the divine intellect in us:

[T1] So such is the imperishable intellect in us that is being thought – because there is an intellect in us that is separable and imperishable, which Aristotle also says is 'from outside', an external intellect that comes to be in us²⁷ – but it is not the power of the soul in us, nor a disposition in virtue of which the potential intellect thinks other things as well as it. Nor is the concept as a concept imperishable by being thought then [i.e., at the time we are thinking it]. Hence, those who are interested in having something

²¹ Arist., *De an.* 3.4, 429b26: εἰ νοητὸς καὶ αὐτός; For a sober analysis of the ensuing argument and its problems see Shields 2016: 308–11.

²² Arist., *De an.* 3.4, 430a3–5: ἐπὶ μὲν γὰρ τῶν ἀνευ ὕλης τὸ αὐτὸ ἐστὶ τὸ νοοῦν καὶ τὸ νοούμενον· ἡ γὰρ ἐπιστήμη ἡ θεωρητικὴ καὶ τὸ οὕτως ἐπιστητὸν τὸ αὐτὸ ἐστίν; cf. *De an.* 3.8, 431b22–23; *Metaph.* Λ.7, 1072b21–23. As Alexander saw, both passages point to such identity already at the stage of the possession of knowledge, or first actuality, although the further question of why god always thinks, and humans only intermittently (430a5–6, cf. *Metaph.* Λ.7, 1072b15–16, 25), seems to extend this feature to second actuality (which, as we have seen, preserves the disposition of knowledge). Cf. *De an.* 3.4, 429a27–29; 3.7, 431b17.

²³ Arist., *De an.* 3.4, 430a6–8: ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἔχουσιν ὕλην δυνάμει ἕκαστον ἐστὶ τῶν νοητῶν. ὥστ' ἐκεῖνοις μὲν οὐχ ὑπάρχει νοῦς (ἀνευ γὰρ ὕλης δύναμις ὁ νοῦς τῶν τοιούτων).

²⁴ Alex., *De an.* 87.24–88.2. ²⁵ Alex., *De an.* 88.2–16; 89.21–91.6.

²⁶ Alex., *De an.* 86.14–23.

²⁷ Bruns excises the parenthesis, but on this interpretation it is understandable as it stands.

divine in themselves should make provisions for being able to understand something of this sort, too. (Alex., *De an.* 90.23–91.6)²⁸

Alexander here clearly addresses three ways in which the divine intellect may be thought to be present in us: (1) as ‘intellect from outside’; (2) as constituting the power of the soul; and (3) as the disposition in virtue of which we do all our thinking, including our thinking of the divine intellect. The first (1) represents Alexander’s reading of Aristotle’s ‘intellect from outside’ (*nous thurathen*) in *Gen. an.* 2.3:²⁹ according to Alexander this phrase may be used to refer to the divine intellect, but it is not a part or power of our soul from our inception, but enters us merely every time we think about it. The same formulation is found in *Mantissa* 2 (also known as *De intellectu*) that discusses different interpretations of the productive intellect of *De an.* 3.5, which Alexander also identified with the divine intellect.³⁰ The author of *Mantissa* 2 claims, if it were part of us from our inception this would amount to the Stoic absurdity that the highest principle would be present in the basest things, and it would exercise providence everywhere.³¹ Hence Alexander’s claim that divine intellect is in us merely temporarily as a *noëma* has a clear polemical aim.

We may surmise that the second and third options not only rule out an identification of divine intellect with Alexander’s potential and dispositional intellect respectively. The second option (2) may also be taken to refer to the presence of the Stoic divine *logos* in us constituting all of our rational capacities, whereas option (3) rejects not only innate knowledge, but also an alternative construal of the active intellect of *De anima* 3.5 that is also discussed, and rejected, in *Mantissa* 2. The rejected view is that

²⁸ Alex., *De an.* 90.23–91.6: ὁ οὖν νοούμενος ἀφθαρτος ἐν ἡμῖν νοῦς οὗτός ἐστιν, [ὅτι χωριστός τε ἐν ἡμῖν καὶ ἀφθαρτος νοῦς, ὃν καὶ θύραθεν Ἀριστοτέλης λέγει, νοῦς ὁ ἔξωθεν γινόμενος ἐν ἡμῖν,] ἀλλ’ οὐχ ἡ δύναμις τῆς ἐν ἡμῖν ψυχῆς, οὐδὲ ἡ ἔξις, καθ’ ἣν ἔξιν ὁ δυνάμει νοῦς τὰ τε ἄλλα καὶ τοῦτον νοεῖ. ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ τὸ νόημα ὡς νόημα ἀφθαρτον διὰ τὸ νοούμενον τότε. διὸ οἷς μέλει τοῦ ἔχειν τι θεῖον ἐν αὐτοῖς, τούτοις προνοητέον τοῦ δύνασθαι νοεῖν τι καὶ τοιοῦτον. Cf. n. 18 above.

²⁹ In *Gen. an.* 2.3, 736b27–29 Aristotle claims that intellect enters the human embryo ‘from outside’ (θύραθεν), that is, from outside the body of the female by means of the male semen. Aristotle there seems to call intellect ‘divine’ because it does not share its actuality with any corporeal actuality (σωματική ἐνέργεια). The vegetative, sensitive and intellectual powers of the soul are first present in potentiality in the embryo and develop over time.

³⁰ *Mantissa* 2, 108.22–28: ‘It is the intellect said to be ‘from outside’, the productive [intellect], not being a part or power of our soul, but coming to be in us from outside, whenever we think of it, if indeed thought comes about in the apprehending of the form, and (if indeed) it is itself immaterial form, never being accompanied by matter nor being separated from matter when it is thought. Being like this it is, reasonably, separate from us, since its being intellect does not come about in its being thought by us, but it is such in its own nature, being in actuality both intellect and intelligible’ (trans. Sharples 2004).

³¹ *Mantissa* 2, 113.12–18.

divine intellect seizes our potential intellect as an instrument, and thereby controls our thinking. This is undesirable for many reasons, including the fact that thinking would no longer be up to us, which would jeopardise our freedom of judgement.³²

These complicated discussions need not further detain us here, as long as we realise that Alexander is taking a stand in this debate when he allows the presence of the divine intellect in us as *noēma* as the *only*, harmless, way the divine intellect is in us. Alexander adds that, in general, an object of thought does not become imperishable by being thought at a particular time,³³ so the fact that the divine intellect becomes a *noēma* of ours does not render it imperishable – it already is so itself, in the same way that it is already intellect and its own object of thought regardless of our thinking it.

The conclusion of passage **T1** strongly confirms Alexander's developmental view: the only way we can get the divine in us is by developing our own potential intellect in such a way that we become capable of thinking it! The polemical significance of this passage is further indication that, in general, Alexander's treatment of concepts will have to be read against the background of contemporary philosophical debates.

3 *Ennoia* and *noēma* as Concepts under Construction

In a crucial passage in *De anima* Alexander carefully links two keywords in his vocabulary of concepts, *ennoia* en *noēma*, to one of the stages of intellectual development:

T2 [1] This particular kind of disposition [i.e., the disposition and perfection of the material intellect] initially comes to be in the [material] intellect in virtue of a transition from the continuous activity involving perceptibles, when [the intellect] acquires from them a kind of theoretical vision, as it were, of the universal (*katholou*). [2] This [universal] is at first called an object of thought (*noēma*) and a concept (*ennoia*), but as it increases and becomes complex and diversified, so that it becomes able to produce this apart from its perceptual basis, it is eventually called intellect (*nous*). [3] For whenever through continuous activities it becomes dispositional in such a way that it is able to engage in the remaining activity on its own, at that stage the understanding comes into being which is described as a disposition [4] and is analogous to the knower intermediate between the person

³² See *Mantissa* 2, 112.5–113.24 labelled C1 (theory) and C2 (criticism) in Sharples 2004: 38ff. For more details concerning this ancient discussion, see De Haas 2020: section 3.

³³ Note the underlying tension between something *becoming* imperishable, and hence *eternal*, by being thought *at a particular time*.

who is said to be a knower in virtue of a capacity and the person who is active with respect to knowledge: he surpasses the person who knows potentially to the same extent that he is inferior to the person who is active with respect to knowledge. [5] When this disposition is active, it becomes the intellect in activity (*ho kat'energeian nous*). For the dispositional understanding is in a certain way the concepts (*noēmata*) that have been stored and accumulated and are at rest. (Alex., *De an.* 85.20–86.6, my numbering)³⁴

This text raises a number of interesting issues concerning the status and role of concepts. In section [1] the relation between the disposition of intellect and the grasp of universals is stated once more. The difference between the prior and posterior states of intellect, it is now revealed, rests on their (lack of) independence from continuous activity concerning sensibles. In [2] this universal is ‘initially’ said to be called *noēma* and *ennoia*, but both grammatically and ontologically transforms into *nous* once it can ‘produce this’, that is, acquire a theoretical grasp of the universal, without further recourse to perception.

Alexander also indicates *how* the initial universal becomes independent from sense perception, and he does so by a rather unusual series of terms: it ‘increases and becomes complex and diversified’ (πλεονάσαν δὲ καὶ ποικίλον καὶ πολύτροπον γινόμενον).³⁵ Presumably the continuous influx of perceptions continues to enrich the first universal to such extent that it reaches a threshold beyond which it can activate itself, without being dependent on sense perception; at that moment it comes to be *nous*. This independence recalls the state of the knower in Aristotle, who is capable of ‘being actual through himself’,³⁶ to which section [4] alludes when it locates disposition in the middle between capacity and full actualisation. The use or application of knowledge is the further actuality

³⁴ Alex., *De an.* 85.20–86.6: [1] ἐγγίνεται δὲ ἡ τοιαύτη ἕξις τῷ νῷ τὴν ἀρχὴν κατὰ μετάβασιν ἀπὸ τῆς περὶ τὰ αἰσθητὰ συνεχοῦς ἐνεργείας ὥσπερ ὅψιν τινὰ ἀπ’ αὐτὴν λαμβάνοντος τοῦ καθόλου θεωρητικῆς, [2] ὁ κατ’ ἀρχᾶς μὲν νόημα καὶ ἐννοία καλεῖται, πλεονάσαν δὲ καὶ ποικίλον καὶ πολύτροπον γινόμενον, ὡς δύνασθαι καὶ χωρὶς τῆς αἰσθητικῆς ὑποβάθρας ποιεῖν τοῦτο, νοῦς ἤδη. [3] ὅταν γὰρ ἐν ἕξει γένηται διὰ τὰς συνεχεῖς ἐνεργείας τοιαύτη, ὡς δι’ αὐτοῦ λοιπὸν ἐνεργεῖν δύνασθαι, τότε ὁ ὡς ἕξις καλούμενος νοῦς γίνεται, [4] ἀνάλογον ὧν τῶν ἐπιστήμωνι, ὅς τοι τε κατὰ δύναμιν ἐπιστήμονος λεγομένου καὶ τοῦ κατ’ ἐπιστήμην ἐνεργοῦντός ἐστι μεταξύ, ὅσον ἀπολείπεσθαι δοκεῖ τοῦ κατὰ τὴν ἐπιστήμην ἐνεργοῦντος, τοσοῦτον πλεονεκτῶν τὸν κατὰ δύναμιν ἐπιστήμονα. [5] ἐνεργοῦσα δὲ ἦδε ἡ ἕξις ὁ κατ’ ἐνεργείαν γίνεται νοῦς. ὁ γὰρ κατὰ ξὺν νοῦς ἀποκείμενός πῶς ἐστὶν ἄθροα καὶ ἡρεμοῦντα τὰ νοήματα. The text is literally reproduced in Ps-Alex., in *Metaph.* 697.28–39 (*ad Metaph.* Λ.8, 1072b14).

³⁵ I have not been able to find relevant parallels for this concatenation of terms, but cf. Alex., *De an.* 7.23, 8.10 for ποικίλος as referring to the complexity of forms of higher compounds, and *De an.* 11.2–5 for the complexity of the underlying matter of higher compounds.

³⁶ Cf. n. 6.

for which the dispositional intellect (not the material intellect) holds the potentiality. This second actuality is indicated in section [5], as the next stage of the development of the material intellect: intellect-in-actuality (*kat'energeian nous*).

In this passage **T2** Alexander's wording is again strongly reminiscent of Aristotle, now of a famous text in which Aristotle discusses the development of a universal concept in the soul, and at the same time levels criticism against Platonic innate knowledge, *Posterior Analytics* 2.19:³⁷

T3 So from perception there comes memory, as we call it, and from memory (when it occurs often in connection with the same thing), experience; for memories that are many in number form a single experience. And from experience, or from the whole universal that has come to rest in the soul (the one apart from the many, whatever is one and the same in all those things), there comes a principle of skill (*technē*) and of knowledge (*epistēmē*).

Thus the states neither belong in us in a determinate form, nor come about from other states that are more cognitive; but they come about from perception – as in a battle when a rout occurs, if one man makes a stand another does and then another, until the original line-up³⁸ is reached. And the soul is such as to be capable of undergoing this. (100a3–14) (trans. *ROT*)

Like Alexander, Aristotle here stresses how the repetitive input of perceptions yields memory and experience from which the universal 'one over many' comes to be in the soul. This universal is what is the same in the many particulars. Aristotle thus firmly replaces Plato's 'one over many' Forms with properties common to sensible particulars.³⁹ As the text continues, Aristotle covers the same ground again in different terms, and speaks of a 'first universal in the soul' (100a16). In the same way, when for instance a concept of human being has arisen, further perceptual encounters with human beings and other animals will cause the grasp of the higher universal 'animal' (100b1–5).⁴⁰ Just as in Alexander, these 'first' universals

³⁷ See the chapters by McKirahan and Johansen in this volume for more details on this Aristotelian text and its parallels in the Aristotelian corpus.

³⁸ Reading ἀρχήν; Barnes *ROT* reads ἀλκήν 'a position of strength'.

³⁹ This approach constitutes the backbone of Alexander's theory of universals as individual natures which happen to deserve the label 'universal' when the mind cognises them after abstraction from their accompanying material conditions, and finds they are, or can be, common to more than one individual. For the problems involved in the interpretation of this theory see e.g., Tweedale 1984, Sharples 2005, Sirkel 2011.

⁴⁰ Arist., *Ph.* 1.1 184a21–b14 describes the same process in terms of analysing initial complex wholes (συγκεχυμένα, καθόλου) into elements (στοιχεῖα). Cf. Bolton 1991. On the confusion between the different notions of καθόλου in the ancient commentary tradition, see De Haas 2002.

come to be by continuous input from the senses. Although Aristotle does not explicitly link this discussion to the state of first actuality we saw in *De anima* 2.5, Alexander has every right to do so. What is more, we can regard Alexander's exposition as an attempt to clarify the natural process that Aristotle merely hints at by saying 'the soul is such as to be capable of undergoing this' (100a13–14). Finally, Aristotle calls the universal 'a principle of craft and knowledge' (100a8) and ends *Posterior Analytics* 2.19 by identifying the principle of knowledge as *nous* (100b15). In this Aristotelian chapter, then, we find all the materials that Alexander worked into a unified account in his own *De anima*.⁴¹

Unlike Aristotle, though, in *De anima* Alexander does not emphasise the role of memory or experience as intermediate stages.⁴² For him acquiring a universal concept is a process of actualisation of the potential intellect which ultimately receives it as its form and culmination (*teleiōsis*).⁴³ Hence, I presume, Alexander has no choice but to locate the process of enrichment of the universal in the potential intellect, not (with Aristotle) in the soul at large.

In **T2** from Alexander's *De anima* we have seen a striking transformation by which a rich and complete concept turns intellect, and thereby constitutes the disposition and completion of the material intellect. But what does this mean for the 'early' underdeveloped stages that are called *noēma* or *ennoia*, but not yet *nous*? Are they real concepts, or are they merely insufficiently independent from sense perception to qualify as intellect?

A survey of occurrences of *ennoia* in Alexander suggests that, indeed, *ennoia* is used in contexts that stress both the close connection of *ennoia* with sense perception, and the potential to be developed into more reliable knowledge. The first set of texts concerns the phrase 'common notions' (*koinai ennoiai*) in Alexander. Within the confines of this chapter, I only wish to point out that the important role of 'common *ennoiai*' in

⁴¹ Sextus Empiricus *M.* 7.216–226 provides a report of the same process, ascribed to Theophrastus and other Peripatetics. The similarities and dissimilarities in wording between the two accounts may suggest that Alexander was using and improving upon such Peripatetic material.

⁴² Alexander duly mentions these stages in his commentary on *Metaph.* A.1, in *Metaph.* Γ.13ff, following Aristotle, but he does not go into any detail about the underlying mechanism. On the limited role of memory in Alexander see further below p. 381–382. For the significance of memory in Aristotle, see Johansen in this volume.

⁴³ For concept formation as a hylomorphic process in Alexander, and a more detailed analysis of **T2**, see further De Haas 2023.

Alexander confirms and reinforces the connection of *ennoia* in general with the common intellect.⁴⁴

In his *De mixtione*, Alexander does not get tired of scolding the Stoics, who are his opponents in that treatise, for blatantly ignoring ‘the notions of all people’,⁴⁵ also called ‘natural notions’ or ‘common notions’.⁴⁶ He is referring to the Stoic theory of complete fusion (*krasis*) which implies that one body can go through another body, and that two bodies can be in the same place. All people clearly hold the opposite of both of these claims. What is more, Alexander believes we have received such common notions from nature as the principles of knowledge.⁴⁷ These common notions partly constitute the prior knowledge from which teaching and learning proceed.⁴⁸ Aristotle often starts his investigations from such common notions. As Alexander puts it: ‘It is Aristotle’s practice, in every inquiry, to use the common and natural *ennoiai* of mankind as starting-points for what he himself is proving.’⁴⁹ Here Aristotle’s *endoxa* as principles of dialectic are subsumed under the heading of common notions as preliminary concepts. Such formulations clearly suggest that at least in some contexts the concepts held by all the people, that is, the concepts that constitute the common intellect, are to be taken seriously only at the beginning of an inquiry, when first establishing a theory. For polemical reasons, it remains important for Alexander that the common notions are not natural in the sense of Platonic innate knowledge, but a common state of intellect *naturally acquired* from sense perception during life and *weaker* than fully developed dispositional intellect that constitutes knowledge. In this light we have to read the statement in the *Ethical Questions* that people who act wrongly but are not completely corrupted still know what is right and wrong *because* they still preserve these common notions, for which nature is responsible.⁵⁰ This also implies that such people still know that they are acting wrongly, and that they can improve themselves, even

⁴⁴ For common intellect, see above p. 371 with n. 14. The use of common notions in Alexander’s epistemology raises more questions than I can discuss here. See further De Haas 2021. On common notions in Hellenistic philosophy and beyond, see e.g., Todd 1973, Brittain 2005.

⁴⁵ Alex., *Mixt.* 213.10: τὰς ὁπάντων ἐννοίας.

⁴⁶ Alex., *Mixt.* 218.11–18: αἱ κοιναὶ ἐννοιαί, φυσικὴ ἐννοία. ⁴⁷ Alex., in *Metaph.* 9.22–23.

⁴⁸ Alex., in *Metaph.* 130.4–8; cf 317.32–35.

⁴⁹ Alex., in *Metaph.* 9.19–20. This is how Aristotle proceeds in the first chapters of *Metaph.* A: ‘Since, then, wisdom is, according to the common *ennoia* about it, knowledge of the principles and causes . . . (in *Metaph.* 8.24–25; trans. Dooley)

⁵⁰ ‘The reason why [those who act wrongly] do have this conception (*prolēpsis*) of bad things, and understand what they are like, is first of all nature; for those who have not yet been completely corrupted, but retain the common and natural *ennoiai*, do not lack understanding of better things’ (*Eth. Probl.* 9, 129.8–11).

though they have never proceeded to having full-fledged concepts of right and wrong that have become part of their practical *nous*.

A further set of occurrences of *ennoia* in Alexander also speak of a concept that has been derived from sense perception, and represents a first, or preliminary stage of knowledge:⁵¹

T4 Indeed, as Plato says, it is through this sense [i.e., sight] that ‘we procured philosophy’ (*Tim.* 47B). For when we fix our gaze on the heavens and contemplate their order and ineffable beauty, we arrive at the *ennoia* of the one who fashioned them (the Demiurge). (*in Metaph.* 1.17–20; trans. Dooley)

It is clear that the apprehensions by means of <sight and hearing> and differentiations in the things which they apprehend <are> origins of both action and inquiry. Clearly the differentiations in visibles led us to an *ennoia* of light and darkness, i.e. of day and night, beginning from which we investigated the things able to cause them ... (*in Sens.* 11.3–8; trans. Towey)

Indeed, the entire passage *in Sens.* 11.1–12.5 specifies numerous cases of perception that have led to new concepts or the awareness (*epinoia*) of new things. The passage also consistently differentiates between contributions to practical and/or theoretical insight, respectively, and thus echoes the twofold human capacity of reason we saw earlier. It seems to be no accident, then, that *ennoia* is one of the names Alexander reserves for a first concept that is still close to the sense perceptions from which it has come to be, and still open to further development, in order to reach a more precise definition, or a causal explanation.

4 Intellect as Unity of Concepts

The term *noēma* in conjunction with *ennoia* (as in our text above) turns out to be rare.⁵² *Noēma* mostly refers to a thought which is the object of an act of thinking or knowledge, and is usually conceived of as present in the soul without specific reference to an as yet imperfect concept.

In this respect the last sentence of section [5] of our passage T2 provides us with an interesting clue about *noēmata* as concepts that is worth quoting again:

⁵¹ Translators tend to use ‘notion’ or ‘conception’ to render *ennoia* in these cases.

⁵² The only parallels are *Quaest.* 1.8, 59.17–22 and 2.14 *passim* where *noēmata* and *koina* occur together as the concern of definitions. Hence, I suspect that in T2 we can interpret καὶ in Alex., *De an.* 85.23 νόημα καὶ ἐννοία as exegetical, viz. ‘an object of thought in the sense of *ennoia*’.

T5 When this disposition is active, it becomes the intellect-in-activity. For the dispositional intellect is in a certain way the concepts (*noēmata*) that have been stored and accumulated and are at rest. (Alex., *De an.* 86.4–6)⁵³

This sentence further explores the fact that a properly developed concept reaches independence as *nous*. Through the process of concept formation numerous concepts will turn intellect. Does this mean that our material intellect gets actualised into numerous dispositional intellects? Alexander allows that in one sense the completed soul that has acquired dispositional intellect ‘is everything’ because through the combination of sense perception and intellection together the soul can assimilate itself to all forms successively.⁵⁴ Here he affirms that the concepts that come to rest and are in a way stored in intellect, together constitute a *single* dispositional intellect, which is the (single) form of the material intellect.⁵⁵ So in order to constitute intellect, the concepts not only need to have become independent from sense perception, but Alexander also believes them to have become a unified whole, a single intellectual disposition. Knowledge (*epistēmē*) is not only the possession of a single universal concept, but also the body of knowledge as a whole. For this reason, too, all concepts *together* make up the single dispositional intellect as a single ‘form of forms’.⁵⁶

One might wonder where the reference to storage (*apokeimena*) of concepts in intellect leaves the role of memory. It is striking that in Alexander’s writings memory barely plays a role and mostly occurs in passages commenting on Aristotelian texts; memory is mentioned only three times in Alexander’s *De anima*.⁵⁷ Judging from the *Topics* commentary Alexander has perhaps taken to heart the anti-Platonic lesson of Aristotle’s *Topics* 2.4, 111b24–31: knowing is not having remembered, and learning is not remembering, because remembering concerns only the past, whereas knowledge covers past, present and future. After all, the astronomer can predict a future eclipse.⁵⁸ Moreover, knowledge and memory cannot be the same thing, because knowledge is a disposition, whereas memory (*mnēmē*) is merely the activity of recalling.⁵⁹ Also in our text, memory represents a stage of development *before* craft and knowledge

⁵³ Alex., *De an.* 86.4–6: [5] ἐνεργοῦσα δὲ ἦδε ἡ ἔξις ὁ κατ’ ἐνέργειαν γίνεται νοῦς, ὁ γὰρ κατὰ ἔξιν νοῦς ἀποκείμενός πῶς ἐστὶν ἀθρόα καὶ ἡρεμοῦντα τὰ νοήματα.

⁵⁴ Alex., *De an.* 91.18–24.

⁵⁵ Cf. n. 35.

⁵⁶ See Arist., *De an.* 3.8, 432a2, with p. 373 above.

⁵⁷ See Alex., *De an.* 68.20, 69.19 (in the context of *phantasia*), and in our text *De an.* 83.6 as part of the sequence from perception to knowledge.

⁵⁸ Alex., in *Top.* 167.12–18.

⁵⁹ Alex., in *Top.* 344.19–21.

and is superseded by the disposition of knowledge as the actualisation, or form, of potential intellect.

In this context it seems relevant that Galen reports about Chrysippus that the latter considered reason (*logos*) as 'the collection of certain concepts and conceptions' (*ennoion tinon kai prolēpseon athroisma*).⁶⁰ Sextus has preserved Chrysippus' definition of craft as 'a system and collection of conceptions' (*sustēma kai athroisma katalēpseon*).⁶¹ I guess that Alexander was keen to seize the opportunity for pointing out that by Aristotelian standards knowledge, which is dispositional intellect, is by definition a unified storehouse of concepts.

5 Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have explored four interrelated issues that led Alexander of Aphrodisias to discuss concepts. In his hands the familiar Aristotelian process of concept formation becomes the development of human potential intellect towards its form and culmination. If we develop our potential well, even forms such as the divine productive intellect can come to be a *noēma* in our thinking – that is indeed the *only* way in which the divine intellect is related to our thinking according to Alexander. More mundane enmattered forms need to be abstracted from sensible objects by a long process that starts with an initial universal concept that gets enriched by continuous sense perception until it turns into intellect. This intellect-in-disposition can from that moment onwards employ the concept with which it is identical, without having recourse to sense perception. Alexander's favourite term for such concepts under construction seems to have been *ennoia*, as I have illustrated from his regular use of this term for concepts in their capacity of being derived from sense perception, as well as serving as starting points for further investigation and explanation, *koinai ennoiai* included. For Alexander the intellect-in-disposition consists of all completed universal concepts unified in a single whole. It can thus literally be understood as the 'form of forms' (Arist. *De an.* 432a2), that is, the form and culmination of the human potential intellect consisting of many completed concepts. The intellect-in-disposition can wield its concepts whenever it wishes, and will thus each time bring its second potentiality to the final stage of intellect-in-actuality.

⁶⁰ Gal., *Plac. Hipp. et Plat.* 5.3 (160) p. 421 M = SVF 2.841, 23–24.

⁶¹ Sext., *M.* 7.372 = SVF 2.56.

We have also seen that, while exploring these creative avenues in the interpretation of Aristotle's texts, Alexander is continuously criticising and rejecting rival views, be they Peripatetic, Platonist, or Stoic. In this way he remained concerned to show that Aristotelian philosophy as he understood it was capable of solving the philosophical issues of his time.