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## The Human and Mortal Agent Intellect of Aristotle's De Anima

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The Human and Mortal Agent Intellect of Aristotle's *De Anima*

by

Dessire Lopez Jimenez

Under the Direction of Tim O'Keefe, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2024

## ABSTRACT

In *De Anima* III.5, Aristotle draws a distinction between a passive intellect and an agent intellect, distinction which has led post-Aristotelian scholars to propose two different interpretations on the nature of latter. The first interpretation claims that the agent intellect is Aristotle's god, while the other one claims that the agent intellect is the immortal aspect of one single human intellect composed of the agent and passive intellects.

The project of the thesis is to show the limitations of these two views to then propose an interpretation of *DA* III.4-5 based on Aristotle's hylomorphic scheme of explanation. The key aim of this manuscript is to shed light on the functions that the passive and agent intellects have as two aspects of a single human intellect and how they interact to bring about intellectual activity.

INDEX WORDS: Aristotle, Soul, Agent Intellect, Passive Intellect, God, Immortality

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2024

The Human and Mortal Agent Intellect of Aristotle's *De Anima*

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August 2024

## DEDICATION

I am dedicating this thesis to three beloved people who have supported me and all my efforts to accomplish my goals during the past two years, no matter how hard the journey got at times.

First, to my father, Aldo, who through his words and his way of living his life, reminded me of the value of courage and endurance. Thank you, dad, you have always been my hero and role model, and I am pleased to now be able to finally tell you: “I made it. I swam across that big wave.”

Next, my mother, Magda, who never ceased to believe in me and who, I know, will never do. Thank you, mom, that little girl in whom you always saw something special accomplished one of her goals. You and I have always walked the path together and you understand what this manuscript means to me more than anyone else does.

Last but not least, I am dedicating this thesis to my sister and best friend, Aimee, who always reminded me who I really am. Thank you, little sister, this manuscript would not have been produced if it weren't for your care, love, and support. I hope this accomplishment serves as a model for you to keep working on attaining your goals. I will always believe in you.

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I am also grateful to my friends and their willingness to have countless long and short conversations on the subject matter of my thesis. I greatly appreciate the time you took to listen to me and comment on my thoughts regarding such an obscure –and sometimes tedious– topic within the *Corpus Aristotelicum*.

Lastly, I would like to emphasize my great appreciation for my family’s moral support, love, and care during the process of writing this manuscript.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In *De Anima* III.5,<sup>1</sup> Aristotle draws a distinction between an intellect characterized by its capacity to become all things, which has been historically referred to as the 'passive intellect,' and an intellect characterized as that which produces all things, which has been historically called the 'agent intellect.'<sup>2</sup> This distinction has led post-Aristotelian interpreters to propose two different interpretations on the agent intellect that face pressing limitations. The first interpretation claims that the agent intellect is Aristotle's god –motivated by the fact that the agent intellect is ascribed the attributes of the god Aristotle depicts in *Metaphysics* Λ–; while the other one claims that the agent intellect is the immortal aspect of one single human intellect composed of the agent and passive intellects –motivated by Aristotle's assertion that the agent intellect is deathless and everlasting by the end of *DA* III. 5.

The project of the thesis is to propose an interpretation that employs Aristotle's hylomorphic scheme of explanation to make sense of his discussion on the intellect in *DA* III.4-5, and, more especially, shed light on the functions that the passive and agent intellects have as two aspects of a single human intellect and how they interact to bring about intellectual activity. The interpretation that I hereby propose is also meant to be an interpretative option that solves the limitations of the two proposals previously mentioned. The interpretation that posits that the agent intellect is the Aristotelian god faces two main limitations. The first one is textual: the agent intellect is never explicitly said to be god and there is no textual indication in *DA* III.5 that god is being referenced. The second, on the other hand, is explanatory: equating the agent intellect to the god does not explain Aristotle's claim that the intellect "thinks through itself" (III.4 429b5-10).

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<sup>1</sup> From now on, *DA*.

<sup>2</sup> *De Anima* 430a10-15. This paper cites Christopher Shields' translation for the Clarendon Aristotle Series, with slight modifications to the translation of essential terms. The Greek original forms of some terms will be provided in the citations if relevant. Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Christopher Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

The second interpretation, that is, the one that posits that the agent intellect is the immortal aspect of a human intellect composed of a passive and an active aspect faces the limitation of introducing an incongruity within Aristotle's doctrine of the soul, which is said to be a principle of movement for living organisms that perishes upon the death of the body.

I will start by connecting the discussion of Aristotle's characterization of the intellect as such, or, as I will call it throughout the thesis, the 'intellect *simpliciter*' of *DA* III.4, with the distinction between passive and agent intellect presented in III.5. I will argue that Aristotle introduces this famous distinction to expand on his proposal in III.4 and provide an account of the human intellect and how intellectual activity is brought about in detail. For this purpose, he uses a hylomorphic account, which proposes that the basic explanatory elements of all things are matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*). The hylomorphic scheme of explanation is the account he employs throughout *DA* to explain the relationship between body and soul in the living composite, as well as the relationship between perceptual organs and perception. Given Aristotle's use of his hylomorphic framework in *DA*, it makes sense to believe that the intellect *simpliciter* in III.4 would also be explained in hylomorphic terms, that is as a composite of an aspect that serves the function of the form, the agent intellect, and an aspect that serves the function of matter, the passive intellect. I will show that, if we understand the distinction between passive and agent intellect in the framework of hylomorphism, we can reject the claim that the agent intellect is god and the claim that the agent intellect is an immortal part of humans that separates from the passive intellect upon the death of the human body. I will lay out and examine the *techne-nous* analogy in *DA* III.5 430a10-13 and the light analogy in *DA* III.5 430a15-17 to advance my hylomorphic reading on the Aristotelian intellect.

After presenting my exegesis of *DA* III.4-5 in light of Aristotle's hylomorphism, I will reject the interpretation that claims that the agent intellect is the god's while the passive intellect is human and the interpretation that claims that the agent intellect is the immortal part of a single human intellect, and explain how my appeal to hylomorphism helps solving the limitations that each of these views run into.

## 2 THE PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION ON THE INTELLECT AND ARISTOTLE'S HYLOMORPHISM

After presenting his account of perception and imagination, Aristotle begins to discuss his views on the human intellect in *DA* III.4. He states his project regarding the intellect at the start of chapter four: to consider whether the intellect is separable in magnitude –or number– or only in account by distinguishing its differentia and how thinking occurs (429a10-13).<sup>3</sup> What does considering whether the intellect is separable in magnitude or in account mean? A thing is separable in magnitude from another thing when it is something other than the other thing numerically speaking, that is, when its existence is not dependent on the other thing, whose existence, at the same time, is independent from the first thing. For instance, Callias and Socrates are both men, but they are separate in number as they are two individuals who exist independently from one another. On the other hand, a thing is separable from another thing only in account when one of the things does not have independent existence in respect to the other thing but it is distinguishable from it for explanatory purposes. For example, body, as the matter in the living composite, and soul, as the form in the living composite, do not have independent existence of their own –they cannot exist separately– but are two distinct explanatory elements that account for the living composite. The discussion about the intellect's separability in magnitude or in account will allow Aristotle to ponder whether the intellect has independent existence in respect to the other psychic faculties –nutrition and perception–, and whether it has independent existence in respect to the living composite as a whole. In order to figure out whether the intellect is separable

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<sup>3</sup> While Barnes has a slightly different translation of this passage, Lawson-Tancred's translation coincides with Shield's: "Now as to that part of the soul by which it has both cognition and understanding, whether this be separate or not indeed spatially separate but conceptually so, we must consider what its characteristic features are and how thinking occurs at any time." Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. H. Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin Classics, 1986).

in number or in account, Aristotle lays out its characteristics to explain how intellectual activity takes place.

The intellect he discusses initially is what I call ‘intellect *simpliciter*,’ which means an intellect without any identified constituent parts. He defines and characterizes the intellect *simpliciter* as: “[t]hat part of the soul which is called intellect (and by intellect I mean that by which the soul thinks and conceives) is in actuality none of the things which are before it thinks. They speak well, further, who say that the soul is a place of forms –except that it is neither the whole soul but rather the noetic soul, nor the forms in actuality, but rather in potentiality” (*DA* 429a22-28).<sup>4</sup> Aristotle's hylomorphism and the concepts of matter and form, potentiality and actuality, are essential for understanding his depiction of the intellect *simpliciter* in *DA* 429a22-28 and subsequently the passive and active intellects he introduces in *DA* III.5. Hylomorphism, as presented in the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*, explains all things by breaking them down into their two basic constituents: matter and form. This explanation is used to understand a thing's essence and its potential for change and actualization.

Matter and form are linked to the notions of potentiality and actuality. Potentiality refers to a thing's capacity to be in a more perfect state, while actuality is the realization of that potential. To be in a more perfect state, that thing actualizes its capacity and becomes fully realized. Put differently, a thing changes from a previous state that had the potential for a greater degree of realization to a state in which that greater degree of realization is actualized. For example, an acorn has the potentiality to become an oak tree, and as it grows and changes, it actualizes that potential and ultimately becomes an oak tree. Matter is the constituent with the potential to be in a more

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added.

perfect state, while form allows for the actualization of that state. The matter of an object is informed by its form, which determines its development and ultimate realization, such as becoming an oak tree. Matter is not only the potentiality to become something more perfected, but also, in its primary sense, a substrate that lacks essential properties and is receptive to the form, which is also the essence of a thing.<sup>5</sup> In the example of the oak tree seed, the seed's matter is informed by the form of oak tree, which, insofar as it is the essence of the seed, determines its development and ultimate stage of realization, that is, becoming an oak tree.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to *DA* 429a22-28, what does Aristotle mean when he claims that the intellect is the none of the things that exist before it thinks and that it is not forms in actuality but in potentiality? The very first thing that this passage indicates is that there is potentiality in the intellect, which means that it has the capacity to change to a better state upon actualization. If the intellect has the potential to be the forms and potentiality is a thing's capacity to be in a more perfect state when actualized, then being the forms in actuality would be the intellect's more perfect state.

Aristotle also claims that the intellect is none of the things that exist before it thinks. Since the intellect is defined as the capacity of thought and all thought is thought of *something* or some *content*, the claim that the intellect is none of the things that exists means that, before it thinks, it is devoid of the content of the thought. If the intellect is none of the things which exist before it thinks, then, when it thinks, it becomes the things that exist, or, put differently, it acquires some content. The question that immediately arises is what Aristotle means by 'the things that exist' and that the intellect thinks as its contents.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Metaphysics* Θ, Z.7-9.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Metaphysics* 1050a 9-17; *Physics* 193b1 7-18. Cf. John M. Rist, "Some Aspects of Aristotelian Teleology," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 96 (1965): 337-349.

In *Posterior Analytics* 99b35-100a17, Aristotle discusses the acquisition of universals through perception. Universals come to be in the soul when an individual perceives a particular thing, for instance, a man named Callias, and abstracts the universal that that particular thing instantiates, for instance, 'man' in Callias the individual. Aristotle uses the term universals to refer to the forms. When the intellect acquires its contents, it acquires the forms or universals of the immediate particulars or the physically existing things that surround an individual. The forms are 'the things that exist' that come to be in the intellect by abstraction from the particulars. This coming to be in the intellect of the forms is what Aristotle talks about when he claims that the intellect becomes the things that exist. It is not the case that a person's intellect, upon receiving the form of man from their perception of Callias, becomes Callias the man, nor is it the case that their intellect becomes, in a literal sense, the form of man. Instead, the intellect acquires the form of man, which comes to be in it as its content.

As I claimed above, the intellect is in a more perfect state when it is the forms or, more strictly speaking, when its potential to acquire the forms is actualized by the acquisition of the forms, as discussed in *Posterior Analytics*. But there is another stage of potentiality becoming actuality in the activity of thinking. This other stage occurs when the intellect, after it has acquired a form, thinks about or contemplates that form instead of only passively having the form imprinted on it. For instance, the intellect actualizes its potential to *acquire* the form of man when the form of man is abstracted from the particular Callias, and it actualizes its potential to *actively think* the form when, for instance, the intellect thinks about what it means to be a man. When the intellect actualizes its potentiality to think a form, going beyond the passive reception of it, is when the intellect attains its more perfect state.

What needs to occur in the intellect so that it thinks and becomes the forms in actuality? Is there any external force that acts upon the intellect to actualize its capacity to think the forms or is it the intellect itself, by its own means, which actualizes its capacity? I propose that *DA* III. 5 is meant to provide the answer to these two questions by means of presenting the passive and agent intellects as two distinct aspects within the intellect *simpliciter* and ascribe the attributes used to characterize the intellect *simpliciter* in III.4 to its passive and agent aspects to explain how thinking occurs.

Aristotle opens *DA* III.5 by observing that “[s]ince in all nature there is something which is the matter for each kind of thing (and this is what is all things in potentiality), while something else is their cause, i.e. the productive one, because of its producing them all as falls to a craft in relation to the matter, *it is necessary that these differences be present in the soul*”(430a10-14).<sup>7</sup> Since Aristotle introduces the passive and agent intellects immediately after this passage, it is clear that the differences present in the soul must pertain to the noetic part of the soul or intellect and not the soul as a whole, which also shows that the intellects introduced in *DA* III.5 are present in the noetic soul or intellect discussed in the previous chapter. In this passage, the differences present in the intellect are matter and a productive cause, which Aristotle compares to the productive power of a craft in relation to the matter it employs to create its characteristic product. I refer to this comparison as the ‘*techne-nous* analogy.’

The passage that immediately follows the *techne-nous* analogy sheds light on how these differences are particularly instantiated in the intellect: “And there is one sort of [intellect] by coming to be all things, and another sort of producing them all, as a kind of positive state like light.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 430a10-14. Emphasis added. In Lawson-Tancred’s version: “Now in all nature there is for each genus something that is its matter (and it is this that is all those things in potentiality), and something that is their cause, productive of them in virtue of bringing them all about –as, for instance, a skill stands towards the matter it uses.”



For in a certain way, light makes colours which are in potentiality, colours in actuality” (430a14-17). The “sort of intellect by coming to be all things” or “the intellect characterized by the capacity to become all things”<sup>8</sup> has been historically called ‘passive intellect’ –by virtue of the passive intellect (*nous pathetikos*) that is explicitly mentioned by the end of *DA* III.5–;<sup>9</sup> while the sort of intellect that produces all things, in contrast to the passive intellect, has been called ‘agent –or active– intellect’ (*nous poietikos*). A second analogy is introduced in this passage, namely, that the agent intellect, produces all things like light turns colors in potentiality into colors in actuality. I will call this analogy the ‘light analogy’.

After the two analogies, Aristotle further depicts the agent intellect:

“And this [intellect] is separate and unaffected and unmixed, being in its essence actuality. For what acts is always superior to what is affected, as too the first principle is to the matter.

Knowledge in actuality is the same as the thing, though in an individual knowledge in potentiality is prior in time, though generally it is not prior in time.<sup>10</sup>

But it is not the case that it [thinks] and sometimes it does not. And having been separated, this alone is just what it is, and this alone is deathless and everlasting, though we do not remember, because this is unaffected, whereas passive [intellect] is perishable. And without this, nothing [intellects]” (*DA* III.5 430a18-25).

This passage points out five crucial things: First, that ‘this intellect’ –which, given that it is introduced immediately after the mention of the agent intellect, must refer to the agent intellect

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<sup>8</sup> Lawson-Tancred’s translation

<sup>9</sup> *DA* 430a24.

<sup>10</sup> Shields identifies that this section of the passage, 430a20-22, reoccurs at 431a1-3, where he believes makes better sense. In *DA* III.7 431a1-3, Aristotle more explicitly talks about the potentialities and actualities in perception and then moves on to talk about *phantasia* and the noetic soul. Cf. Shields, *Aristotle. De Anima*, 77 (f.n. 49).

itself— is separate, unaffected, unmixed—, and in essence actuality or activity. Second, that, since the agent intellect is in essence actuality or activity, it is superior to what is passive or affected — the passive intellect. Third, that the agent intellect always thinks, for it is not the case that it sometimes thinks and sometimes does not. Fourth, that the agent intellect is deathless and everlasting, in contrast to the passive intellect, which is perishable. Finally, that without the agent intellect ‘nothing intellects.’

All these attributes ascribed to the agent intellect motivated commentators and interpreters from different eras, like Alexander of Aphrodisias, Averroes, Burnyeat, and Caston to believe that the agent intellect corresponds with the divine intellect of the god that Aristotle introduces in *Metaphysics* Λ, which is separate, unmixed, in essence perpetual intellectual activity, and eternal, and therefore actually separate from the passive intellect, which they understand to be the human intellect. It has also led scholars like John Rist and Lloyd P. Gerson, who insist that the passive and agent intellect are two parts of one single human intellect, to believe that the agent intellect is separable, deathless and everlasting because it is the immortal part of human beings, which, contrary to the passive intellect that perishes, survives the death of the human composite.<sup>11</sup>

I claim that these two interpretations fail to capture the dynamics between the passive and agent intellects that Aristotle aims to convey as a more elaborate explanation of how thinking occurs, which is the project that he sets in the opening paragraph of III.4. I will examine the *technous* analogy and the light analogy and what they tell us about the relationship between the passive

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima*, trans. Richard C. Taylor and Thérèse-Anne Druart (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009); Myles Burnyeat, *Aristotle's Divine Intellect* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008); Victor Caston, “Aristotle’s Two Intellects: A Modest Proposal,” *Phronesis* 44, no. 3 (1999): 199-227; John M. Rist, “Notes on *De Anima* 3.5,” *Classical Philology*, 61 (1966): 8-20; Lloyd P. Gerson, “The Unity of Intellect in Aristotle’s *De Anima*,” *Phronesis* 49, no. 4 (2004): 348-373. It is worth noting that this list is not exhaustive. There are Aristotelian commentators and interpreters from all eras that have defended these interpretations. I refer to these particular authors since they offer famous and archetypical explanations and arguments to defend their views.

and agent intellects using Aristotle's hylomorphic scheme. This scheme of explanation, as I noted before, will also allow us to understand *DA* III.5 430a18-25, reject the two interpretations that I laid out above, and solve their limitations.

### 3 THE *TECHNE-NOUS* ANALOGY IN LIGHT OF HYLOMORPHISM

To better understand the *techne-nous* analogy by itself, we need to turn to *Metaphysics* 1033b2-22, which discusses production or making (*poiesis*) in the *technai*. Crafts “stand towards the matter they use”<sup>12</sup> and shape it, making its potentiality into something in actuality. According to Aristotle, making (*poiein*) implies a substrate that is made into a particular thing or product by an agent. A shoemaker, for instance, uses leather and thread as substrates to make a pair of shoes. In terms of matter and form, the shoemaker embeds the form of shoe into the matter of leather and thread to generate an actual shoe, a product. Analogously, the shoemaker actualizes the potentiality of the leather and thread to become a shoe.

The *techne-nous* analogy in *DA* III.5 430a10-14, along with the concept of *poiesis* and its substrate in *Metaphysics*, allows us to set forth the following: (i) there is something in the noetic soul that is akin to matter in potentiality and akin to a substrate that is made into a particular thing by an efficient cause; and (ii) there is another distinct something in the noetic soul that is akin to the productive or efficient cause which actualizes the matter-like intellect to bring about a product, akin to how crafts operate with the matter they employ.

The introduction of the passive and agent intellects after the analogy tells us what those distinct parts in the noetic soul are and allow us to answer the two questions that arise from Aristotle’s depiction of the human intellect *simpliciter* in *DA* III.4, namely, (1) what needs to occur in the human intellect to become the forms in actuality and engage in active thought? and (2) is there any external force that acts upon it to actualize its capacity or is it the intellect itself, by its own means, which actualizes its own capacity?

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<sup>12</sup> Lawson-Tancred’s translation.

In the *techne-nous* analogy, that which plays the role of matter, because of its potentiality to become all things, which is what characterizes matter, is the passive intellect. On the other hand, that which plays the role of the productive or efficient cause is the agent intellect, characterized by its ability to produce all things. These two intellects, the passive and the active, are presented after Aristotle claims that matter and the productive cause are present in the soul, which leads us to believe that the passive-agent intellect distinction can only occur *in* the soul.

We can understand, more specifically, the passive-agent intellect distinction occurs in the human soul if we pay close attention to Aristotle's project in *DA*. At the beginning of the treatise, in 402a6, Aristotle claims that the "soul is a sort of first principle of animals," that is, the animating principle of living composites made of body and soul. As he adds more details to his investigation and presents the psychic hierarchy, he proposes human beings as the most complex animals insofar as they possess all three psychic faculties in the hierarchy –the vegetative, perceptive, and intellectual capacities or parts of the soul. Since Aristotle's project is framed by the investigation on the soul of living organisms, among which the human beings are the most complex, and since there is no prior introduction of the intellectual activity of the god, there are no reasons to suppose that the aim of *DA* III.5 is to present Aristotle's views on first philosophy or theology, as the proponents of the interpretation that identify the agent intellect with god claim. On the contrary, since *DA* III.5 offers a distinction of two intellectual aspects *in* the soul that is not yet present in III.4 –where Aristotle proposes his account of the human intellect *simpliciter*–, that is, the passive intellect that, given its matter-like potentiality (III.4) has the capacity to become all things (III.5) and the agent intellect that is separable, unmixed, and unaffected (III.4<sup>13</sup> and III.5) and capable of

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<sup>13</sup> Aristotle uses these terms to characterize the intellect *simpliciter* in III.4, where he claims that "it is necessary... that [the intellect] be unaffected...[and] that it be unmixed" and that "it is separate" (429a15-429b5). The fact that he ascribes these characteristics to both the intellect *simpliciter* and the agent intellect allows us to draw an identity between the agent intellect and At least one aspect of the intellect *simpliciter* that is not yet made distinct in *DA* III.4.

producing all things (III.5), it is more plausible to believe that III.5 is a further elaboration of the intellect presented in III.4. If this is the case, then both passive and agent intellect are simultaneously present in the human noetic soul, which indicates that it is the human intellect itself, by means of the roles that the agent and passive intellect play, that actualizes its capacity to think.

This conclusion leads us to the question that arises from the discussion on the intellect in *DA* III.4: what needs to occur in the human intellect so that it thinks and becomes the forms in actuality?

To be able to answer that question given the *techne-nous* analogy and the distinction between active and passive intellect, we need to establish more substantial connections between *DA* III.4 and III. 5. More specifically, we need to connect both the passive and agent intellects with the characteristics of the intellect *simpliciter* that Aristotle lays out in III.4.

Let's start by connecting the intellect depicted as 'the place of forms', which is one of the attributes ascribed to the intellect in III.4, and the passive intellect in III.5 using the concept of matter in Aristotle's hylomorphism. Given that matter is that which has the potential to become all things<sup>14</sup> and is receptive to the forms that actualize its potentiality,<sup>15</sup> the intellect that receives the forms as 'the place of all forms' in passage 429a22-28 is analogous to the matter that Aristotle describes in his account of substance.<sup>16</sup> Since the passive intellect of chapter five shares the same capacity to become all things as matter does, it is reasonable to identify the intellect depiction as 'the place of forms' with the passive aspect of the intellect.

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<sup>14</sup> *Physics* 185b12-13.

<sup>15</sup> *Cf. Metaphysics* Z 7-9.

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Polansky, *Aristotle's De Anima* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 460.

Like matter, the passive intellect can receive the forms and is them potentially. The passive intellect receives these forms as if they were to be written on a tablet that was previously blank.<sup>17</sup> The reception of these forms would actualize the passive intellect's potentiality to acquire the forms, enabling it to transit from “none of the things that exist” to “becoming all the things that exist” in actuality, where the things that exist are the forms –or the essences –of things. However, the comparison with matter doesn't fully explain how the passive intellect actualizes its potentiality to take hold of the forms or how actual intellectual activity takes place. To explain the passive intellect's potential to be informed and how thinking occurs, we need something capable of actualizing the potentiality of receiving the forms that the passive intellect possesses and the potentiality to engage in active thinking. This is when the agent intellect as depicted in the *technous* analogy comes in.

As the analogy suggests, matter needs a productive or efficient cause to actualize its potentiality. Since the agent intellect is characterized by its productive capacity,<sup>18</sup> it can act like the productive or efficient cause of the receptive passive intellect. As I noted before, *technai* need a matter or a substrate that is acted upon by a craftsman, who actualizes the matter's or substrate's potentiality to become a resulting product, which is the creation (*poiesis*) of the craft.

It is worth noting that *technai* involve more than a craftsman and matter alone. Craftsmen possess an expertise that enables them to make matter into a particular something, which, as I previously explained, is the resulting product of the practicing of the *techne*. A shoemaker, for instance, possesses the expertise of making shoes, and when he has the leather and thread materials to exercise his craft, he uses his expertise to turn the materials into a pair of shoes, which is the

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<sup>17</sup> *De Anima* 430a1-4.

<sup>18</sup> *De Anima* 430a14-16.

resulting products of his practice. In terms of matter and form, the shoemaker embeds the form of shoe into the leather matter to generate an actual shoe.

When it comes to the intellect, the agent intellect acts like the shoemaker who possesses expertise when it actualizes the matter-like passive intellect. Since the agent intellect is the efficient cause of the passive, the agent intellect cannot be the resulting product, for if it were, it would be both the cause and the effect of its doing, which, given the context, is unfeasible. The case of the shoemaker can help clarify this. The shoemaker, who is the productive cause of the piece of leather, acts upon it and produces a shoe. This resulting product of the productive cause –the shoe– is something other than the shoemaker. If the agent intellect is like the craftsman in *technai*, when it acts upon the matter-like passive intellect, it necessarily brings about a product that is other than itself.

In *technai*, then, we have the productive or efficient cause embodied by the craftsman, which corresponds to the agent intellect; the matter, which corresponds to the passive intellect, and two other elements: the expertise that the craftsman possesses and the resulting product. This raises two additional questions to be addressed: (i) what would be analogous to the expertise of the craftsman in the agent intellect? and (ii) what is the resulting product of the agent intellect acting upon the passive?

To answer the first question, I will turn to hylomorphism again. It has been established that the passive intellect is the matter in potentiality that is actualized by the agent intellect. Now, how exactly does the agent intellect actualize the passive?

From the hylomorphic scheme of explanation we know that potentiality is a thing's capacity to be in a more perfect state. What determines what the more perfect state of a thing would be is that thing's form. As I explained with the example of the acorn, the form of oak tree embedded



in that acorn determines the particular actualizations that it will go through given the proper conditions for its growth. It is by virtue of the oak tree form that the matter in the acorn can actualize its potentiality to become an oak tree.

From III.4, we inferred that the intellect changes to a better state when it is the forms of external objects –or acquires them– and then thinks or contemplates. The *techne-nous* analogy establishes that the agent intellect is the productive or efficient cause, but it does not establish that it is the form of the matter-like passive intellect. Playing the role of the productive or efficient cause simply suggests that the agent intellect acts upon the passive, but it does not tell us anything about the particular set of actualizations that the passive intellect can have and how they take place. If the passive intellect is the matter, then it needs a form that determines the actualizations that it will go through to be in a more perfect state, that is, to acquire the forms and then think. The agent intellect seems to be the only alternative to serve that function. A comparable case can help clarify this. The form of oak tree embedded in the acorn determines that the acorn will be fully realized when it becomes an actual oak and not, let’s say, a willow tree. It should be the same for the passive intellect: it needs the agent intellect as the form that determines the passive intellect’s fully realized state. In a similar fashion, the human soul, as the form in the living composite, determines the set of actualizations that the overall composite undergoes, like the growth of the body and the development of the faculties that are proper to human individuals. Given this, the agent intellect, as the form, determines the actualizations of the passive intellect, namely, the acquisition, on the first hand, and contemplation, on the second hand.

A shoemaker that transforms the leather and thread into shoes determines the specific way in which the matter is actualized by expertise, by being able to embed the form of shoe into the matter. Similarly, the agent intellect actualizes the passive by serving the function of its form,

which allows it to determine the actualities that will be realized in the passive, of which acquisition is the first, and, in doing so, it also plays the role of the productive or efficient cause that sets the passive intellect into motion. The remark that the agent intellect is the efficient cause needs further elaboration, for it explains how actual thinking or contemplation takes place.

The agent intellect is the form of intellect as a whole or intellect *simpliciter*, which is a capacity whose essence is to engage in intellectual activity. For any activity to be performed, two elements need to be at place: the element that acts upon and the element that is acted upon. For example, for shoemaking to occur, the shoemaker needs to act upon the leather and the thread, which are set into motion and changed into a shoe. The relationship between soul and body can also help clarify how the agent intellect is the form and the efficient cause of the passive. As we know, the soul is the form to the body in the living composite. Since a living composite is, by definition, an animated composite, the notion of soul, as the form, is meant to be that which allows for movement in a living composite. In that sense, the soul is the efficient cause of the body, which is the part of the living composite that is animated by the soul.

The passive and agent intellect interact serving the functions of matter and form correspondingly, and, also, the agent intellect acts upon the passive as its efficient cause, like the shoemaker in shoemaking and like the soul in the animation of the body in the living composite. What results from the agent intellect acting upon the passive? Like Averroes, I believe that the resulting product of this interaction is an intellect in act,<sup>19</sup> that is, intellect engaged in intellectual activity or intellect that *thinks*. The passive intellect –passively, like matter– acquires the forms external to it while the agent intellect actively constitutes them into objects of thought or proper

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<sup>19</sup> Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima* III 18.

contents internal to the intellect as a whole after the acquisition.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that, given that Aristotle's account of the intellect is based on his hylomorphism, passive intellect and agent intellect are not separable in number, as he entertains as one of the possibilities at the beginning of III.4, for they are not entities that have existence of their own, but only separable in account or, to put it differently, for the sake of providing an explanation. The matter and form of the oak tree are not independent from one another: one distinguishes them for the sake of accounting for the oak tree itself. Similarly, the agent and passive intellect are not actually separable, for they co-exist. However, the intellect –and its aspects– does something that the oak tree does not, which is to engage in an activity. Explaining the passive and agent intellects in terms of matter and form of the intellect *simpliciter* allows for understanding the role each of them play, but it does not provide an explanation as to how thinking occurs. To be able to account for that, Aristotle makes use of the *techne-nous* analogy, where the role of the agent intellect as a productive or efficient cause is added to the account.

From III.4 we also know that the intellect *simpliciter* thinks when, after receiving the forms of the external objects upon abstraction, turns them into objects of thought. The receptive capacity is what characterizes the passive intellect, which is acted upon by the agent. For thinking to occur, the passive intellect needs to receive the forms of external objects and be set into motion by the agent. As I said, the agent intellect plays the role of the productive or efficient cause. But what

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth clarifying that it is the agent intellect, and not the external forms that come to be in the passive, is what acts like the efficient cause. In the case of the shoemaking craft, the shoemaker is the efficient cause of matter, while the form of shoe is what is embedded into the latter. When it comes to the intellect, understanding the agent intellect as the form of the passive *and* as its efficient cause can be confusing because we have forms serving different functions. On the one hand, and as stated above, the agent intellect is the form to the matter-like passive intellect, and, as I explain later, I believe Aristotle posits it as such for explanatory purposes. On the other hand, we have the external forms that the passive intellect receives given its passive nature. These forms are not efficient causes of the passive intellect but what will come to be the content of intellectual activity.

does playing that role entail? The second analogy that I aim to explore proposes an answer to this question.

#### **4 THE LIGHT ANALOGY AND THE CAPACITY TO ‘THINK THROUGH ITSELF’**

When Aristotle characterizes the agent intellect as that which produces all things, he employs the analogy of the light to further explain himself. According to him, the agent intellect brings about all things "as a kind of positive state (*hexis*) like light. For in a certain way, light makes colours which are in potentiality colours in actuality" (*DA III.5 430a15-17*). What the light illustration attempts to convey is that light enables vision to see potential colors as actual colors without producing the colors on the surfaces of the physical objects. Rather, light brings about the colors as objects of the visual capacity without light being itself a color. The same, then, must occur with the intellect and its objects of thought. We know that the passive intellect, because of its matter-like potentiality, is able to receive the forms upon their abstraction from the composites. The passive intellect's reception of the forms, however, is not sufficient for intellectual activity to be actualized. For intellectual activity to occur, the forms must become objects of thought of an intellect that is actively thinking them. Because the nature of the passive intellect is receptivity and potentiality, it cannot turn the forms it takes in into objects of thought and is limited to only receiving them, very much like the surface of a physical object that, according to Aristotle's light analogy, has their potential colors made into actual colors by light in visual perception.

The forms that the passive intellect received can only become objects of thought when the agent intellect acts upon the passive intellect that received them and actualizes them as objects of thought. For a form to be an object of thought, it needs to be content of intellectual activity and not just the essence of an external existing thing. The passive intellect gets the forms of external objects, but given its receptive nature, it cannot make the forms objects of thought strictly speaking. For the forms to be made into objects of thought, an active capacity needs to act over them. This

capacity, as we have seen, is the agent intellect. How does the agent intellect turn the forms into objects of thought? The agent intellect turns the forms into the objects of intellectual activity by identifying them as something other than itself. Thought and object of thought are two distinct things, one being the activity and the other being the content of the activity. To use more contemporary language, when we think about a particular object, we know that said object is a content in our mind, not our mind itself. We know that there is a distinction between our mind and the thing that it thinks. This distinction is revealed by the awareness that our mind is something other than what is currently thinking. In a similar fashion, the intellect is something distinct from the forms it thinks, which are received by its passive aspect and made into proper objects of thought by the agent intellect, which acts upon them, initiating the intellectual activity.

This distinction can only occur if the motion that the agent intellect brings about is accompanied with the awareness of the aforementioned distinction. The active aspect of the intellect is the only candidate for generating this awareness, for it is what generates the intellectual activity and produces objects of thought from the external forms received by the passive. For instance, the intellect as a whole is only able to think of the form of man instantiated in Callias insofar as (1) that form is *in* the passive intellect and (2) it is produced in it as an object of thought by the agent aspect. The form of man in the intellect, however, can only be recognized as an object of thought or intellectual content if the intellect separates from itself the form of man that happens to be thought, that is, when the intellect recognizes that, although it contains a form, it is not itself that particular form.

The light analogy and passage 430a2-9 suggests that the agent intellect brings about the forms *qua* its objects of thought by being different from them, just like light brings about the colors *qua* objects of visual perception without being itself a color. Neither light nor agent intellect

produce the colors nor the forms, but rather actualize them as the contents of, in the case of light, visual perception; and, in the case of the agent intellect, objects of intellectual activity or the intellect in act, like the form of man present in the intellect that I mentioned in the example I provided above.

Interpreting the passive and agent intellects as two aspects of one single intellect not only allows for understanding how intellectual activity or thinking occurs, but also allows for explaining how the intellect thinks through itself.<sup>21</sup> In III.4 429b5-9, Aristotle claims that “Whenever [the intellect] *becomes each thing* in the manner in which one who knows in *actuality* is said to do so (this occurs whenever one is able to move to actuality through oneself), even then is somehow in potentiality, not, however, in the same way as before learning or discovering. And then *it is able to think through itself*”.<sup>22</sup> This passage explicitly attributes the characteristics that will later correspond the passive and active aspects of the intellect, namely, the potentiality to become each thing and the actualization of those things into objects of thought as I have previously discussed. It also introduces the relationship between intellectual activity and knowledge that Aristotle later resumes in chapter five. Here, knowing in actuality presupposes the ability to make the knowledge that one has acquired before present by one’s own means. For instance, I can actualize my knowledge of grammar by making it present in my mind when I intend to do so. Before I make my knowledge of grammar present, it is not actual but potential object of thinking because, instead of exercising it by thinking it, I am thinking of, let’s say, Callias the man. In III.4 430a20-22, Aristotle re-introduces knowledge in relation to the intellect. He claims that theoretical knowledge

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<sup>21</sup> The interpretation that holds that the agent intellect is god fails to explain this feature of human intellectual activity, for the human intellect wouldn’t generate thought through itself, that is, by its own means, if something external to it, such as god, intervenes to its aid. The interpretation that holds that the agent intellect is an immortal aspect of one human intellect is able to explain the claim that the intellect thinks through itself but runs into another substantial problem: positing an Aristotelian eschatology even when Aristotle rejects the immortality of the soul. Cf. DA I.3.

<sup>22</sup> Emphasis added.

and what is known are identical or, put differently, that knowledge *in actuality* is the same as what is known. In a previous passage from book II, when addressing perception, Aristotle claims that there is a sense in which knowers know potentially and a sense in which they know in actuality. When they know in actuality, they are contemplating “in actuality and strictly knowing” a subject.<sup>23</sup> When an individual actualizes their knowledge of grammar by themselves, their knowledge becomes identical to the subject of grammar insofar as it is the object of the individual’s activity of thinking.

The intellect *simpliciter* operates in a similar fashion. It is able to bring itself to think in actuality when its passive and agent aspects interact with each other: when the matter-like passive intellect, after receiving the forms, is set into motion by its productive cause and form, the agent intellect, which turns the forms imprinted in the passive into objects of thought. When this interaction takes place, thinking is identical with the forms that the passive aspect received but remains the separate intellect that actively thinks those forms (III. 4 429a13429b5) –just like the person whose knowledge of grammar in actuality is identical with grammar but remains the person who has that knowledge without being itself identical with it. Also, both the individual’s knowledge of grammar and the intellect *simpliciter* remain in potentiality because the knowledge of grammar that the individual exercises can expand and become more complex or can cease to be actualized in the person’s mind, just like the intellect can be currently thinking a particular form and remaining capable of thinking other forms *in the future*, being potential with respect to forms it is not currently thinking.

As I discussed, for the intellect *simpliciter* to think at any time, it needs to set itself into motion through the interaction of its two distinct aspects. Thinking can be explained by the textual

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<sup>23</sup> *De Anima* 417a22-417b1.



evidence found in *DA* and without appealing to any external entity to the human noetic soul. This is an interpretative advantage that the advocates of identifying the agent intellect with the god do not have. If the agent intellect were the god's and the passive intellect were the human's, then one would need to account for how the human intellect thinks through itself without employing more complicated explanations, more explanatory elements, and more conceptual distinctions than the ones we can actually find within the treatise.

While this is the case in respect to how the inner dynamic of the intellect *simpliciter* should be for thinking to take place, I still need to address the divine-like attributes that Aristotle ascribes to the agent intellect in 430a22-25. In the last section, I will discuss these attributes in light of the Aristotelian hylomorphism that is employed in *DA* and reject the idea that the agent intellect is divine or an immortal part of the human composite.

## **5 THE SEPARABILITY, UNAFFECTEDNESS, AND UNMIXED CHARACTER OF THE AGENT INTELLECT AND THE PERISHABLE NATURE OF THE PASSIVE**

In III.5 430a22-25, Aristotle makes the puzzling claims that the agent intellect is separate, unaffected, unmixed, actuality in essence, always thinking, deathless and everlasting, and that, without it, nothing thinks. Certainly, all these characteristics push forward the idea that the agent intellect is divine for they correspond to the god introduced in *Metaphysics* Λ.

The depiction of the agent intellect in 430a22-25 should not be understood in terms of the divine intellect, for there is evidence that allows for understanding the explanatory elements of *DA* III.5 without appealing to the god presented in the *Metaphysics*. Even though Aristotle does not explicitly state that the agent intellect is the formal counterpart of the matter-like passive intellect, and that both constitute one single human intellect, this idea naturally follows from both his *techné* analogy and his consistent use of hylomorphism in *DA*, which allows him to provide a more comprehensive psychological account and, by *DA* III.5, a more thorough explanation of the intellect *simpliciter* in III.4 –which, as I mentioned before, is ascribed the same characteristics as the passive intellect and the agent intellect– and how thinking occurs.

If the agent intellect is the form of the passive, then, like any form of a composite, it is separate from the passive in account and not in number. As the form, it remains unaffected, as forms of composites do not undergo change but rather delimit the actualizations of matter's potentialities. The form of oak tree in the acorn does not change over time, what changes over time is the acorn, the composite, that grows and develops into an oak tree given the potentiality of the acorn's matter.

The unmixed character of the agent intellect may not be immediately accessible in the framework of hylomorphism. Passage 429a18-20 in chapter 4, however, clarifies this. In said

passage, Aristotle claims that “It is necessary... since [intellect] [thinks] all things, that it be unmixed... so that it may rule, that is, so that it may know; for the interposing of anything alien hinders and obstructs it.” The unmixed character has to do with the intellect’s capacity for knowledge, that is, for acquiring a system of forms about a particular topic. This lead us back to the agent intellect’s capacity to turn forms into objects of thought by acknowledging that the forms received by the passive intellect are something distinct from itself. To be able to do so, the agent intellect needs to remain unmixed with the forms of the external objects that are taken in by the passive. Remaining unmixed with them would not only allow it to turn them into objects of thought but also to think different forms at different times. If the agent intellect became mixed with the forms, changing objects of thought, that is, thinking different things at a time, would not be possible. Also, as the form of passive intellect in the hylomorphic scheme, it is implausible to think that it would become mixed with other forms. As the form, the agent intellect is itself the essence of the intellect. Since intellect is a psychic faculty, its essence is defined by its activity, namely, thinking. And, finally, insofar as it is the form of the intellect, the agent intellect is deathless and everlasting, not because it transcends the death of the human body, as the proponents of the immortality of the agent intellect claim, but because forms, although only separable from matter in account, always exist in the world as universals and remain unchanging and instantiated in the particulars. Interestingly enough, after the cited passage about the intellect *simpliciter* in III.4, Aristotle adds: “Consequently, its nature must be nothing other than this: that it be potential”, presenting us with the potentiality characteristic of the passive intellect with which the agent intellect interacts for thought to occur. As I claimed before, chapter 4 presents the intellect and its characteristics without distinguishing its parts, which Aristotle does in III.5.

When Aristotle claims that the agent intellect is deathless and everlasting in contrast with the passive intellect, which he claims to be perishable, he is not proposing an eschatological view of the agent intellect, which, according to such view, it would abandon the passive when the composite dies. If he were, he would be contradicting his claim that the soul is not immortal but the form of the human composite, which cannot independently subsist without its counterpart, the matter of the composite.<sup>24</sup> In fact, he is claiming, by means of his hylomorphic scheme of explanation, that the agent intellect, because it is the form of the intellect, persists in the world, that is, does not cease to exist or is deathless, and remains unchanging, lasting insofar as it is the universal form of intellect instantiated in the intellects of the particular human beings whose existence will persist in the world by means of procreation.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the passive intellect, the material aspect of the intellect, undergoes change upon the actualization of its potential by the agent intellect, and perishes in the sense that ceases to be in the previous state it was in before intellectual activity takes place. For instance, although a human living composite perishes, and with it its particular form or human soul and its particular human body, the universal form of human does not cease to exist insofar as there are other human beings whose composites instantiate it. This does not mean, however, that the particular soul of an individual is deathless, for it perishes with the body and the overall composite, but rather that the form of human, as a universal, will persist in time as long as the human kind does. In the case of the intellect, the agent intellect aspect of a given intellect will not have an eschatological destiny beyond the material world that humans

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<sup>24</sup> One could make the claim that the fact that Aristotle claims that the soul is not immortal does not necessary entail that part of it can be immortal. It is worth noting that Aristotle's distinction of the different aspects of the soul –the nutritive, perceptive, and intellective– is theoretical, for they do not possess existence of their own but only as distinguishable parts of souls. If the separability from one another of the aspects of the soul is only theoretical, and, given that Aristotle has replicated the same scheme of explanation in the entirety of *DA*, then it seems implausible to think that the agent intellect, insofar as it is an aspect of the intellect, is actually separable from the whole and has existence of its own.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Physics* 3.6, 206a25–27: “The infinite exhibits itself in different ways –in time, in the generations of man...”.

inhabit, but will be carried on as a form, the form of the intellect, as long as human intellects of particular human composites exist and continue existing over time.

A hylomorphic reading of *DA* III.4-5 not only allows us to reject the interpretations that posit the divinity of the agent intellect or its eschatological destiny, as I aimed to show in the discussion above. It also allows us to understand why the passive-agent intellect distinction needs to be made for Aristotle to provide a more thorough explanation of how intellectual activity occurs in the soul at any time.

## 6 CONCLUSION

My thesis discusses the roles of the puzzling passive and agent intellects in *DA* III.4-5 and offers an interpretation of how they interact with each other to bring about intellectual activity by means of Aristotle's hylomorphism. I proposed that the passive and agent intellect are two aspects of a single human intellect, the intellect simpliciter, whose passive aspect is equivalent to the matter and its active aspect to the form. I also employed the *techne-nous* analogy to elucidate the dynamics of these two intellectual aspects in the activity of thinking.

While the passive intellect receives forms, akin to the matter's potentiality to receive forms, the agent intellect actualizes these forms into objects of thought, bringing about intellectual activity. Drawing on hylomorphism, I argued that the agent intellect serves as the form determining the actualizations of the passive intellect and as the efficient cause of the passive intellect, akin to a craftsman that shapes matter into a product.

I turned to Aristotle's characterization of the agent intellect in the light analogy found in *DA* III.5 to suggest that it enables the intellect as a whole to turn the forms received by the passive intellect into objects of thought, which are the contents of the activity of thinking.

Finally, my thesis dispels the interpretation that Aristotle's agent intellect is the divine intellect or god and the interpretation that proposes that the agent intellect is the immortal part of the human composite. It argued that the agent intellect remains separate, unaffected, and unmixed, for it is the form of the intellect and neither god or transcendent of mortal existence.

While this thesis aimed to shed light on the passages regarding the intellect in *DA*, the obscure nature of those passages will always serve as an invitation for criticism of any offered interpretation. The invitation that I make with my proposal is to think about the passive and agent intellects from the lenses of hylomorphism, which, as we know, Aristotle was very fond of when

trying to provide detailed accounts of phenomena. Given that my reading of Aristotle's discussion on the agent intellect overcome the limitations of the divine and immortality interpretations, it is worth serious consideration.

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