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Aristotle's *Nous poiêtikos*: Another Modest Proposal

The title of this speech deliberately refers to the article by Victor Caston, *Aristotle's Two Intellects: A Modest Proposal*¹, because after 23 centuries of debate on the subject it would be too presumptuous to believe that it is possible to resolve definitively the problem of what Aristotle meant by «active intellect». I have to remark, however, that Caston's proposal is not quite new, because essentially it reproduces the interpretation of the first great commentator of Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, who identified the active intellect mentioned by Aristotle in his *De anima* with the divine intellect². Today this interpretation seems to be the most credited among scholars, because it has been resumed by two of the major contemporary specialists in Aristotle, Michael Frede and Myles Burnyeat³, while Thomas Aquinas' interpretation – following which the active intellect would be a part, or a faculty, of the human soul, which therefore would warrant immortality – continues to be defended⁴.

My «modest proposal» would like to be, perhaps immodestly, a new one too, not in the sense that it has never been considered by any of the innumerable commentators on Aristotle's text, but in the sense that it – although it was taken in consideration, but then rejected by two of the greatest of them, i. e. Themistius and the same Thomas Aquinas – would find decisive support in a passage of the famous chapter of *De anima* dedicated to the active intellect, to which the necessary attention has never been paid until now. I quote, for our convenience, the beginning of the chapter where Aristotle introduces the distinction between the two intellects, in the last edition by Sir David Ross, which is still the most authoritative:

Ἐπεὶ δ' [ὥσπερ] ἐν ἀπάσῃ τῇ φύσει ἐστὶ [τι] τὸ μὲν ὕλη (10)
ἐκάστω γένει (τοῦτο δὲ ὁ πάντα δυνάμει ἐκεῖνα), ἕτερον δὲ
τὸ αἴτιον καὶ ποιητικόν, τῷ ποιεῖν πάντα, οἷον ἡ τέχνη
πρὸς τὴν ὕλην πέπονθεν, ἀνάγκη καὶ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ὑπάρχειν
ταύτας τὰς διαφοράς· καὶ ἔστιν ὁ μὲν τοιοῦτος νοῦς τῷ πάντα
γίνεσθαι, ὁ δὲ τῷ πάντα ποιεῖν, ὡς ἕξις τις, οἷον τὸ φῶς· (15)
τρόπον γάρ τινα καὶ τὸ φῶς ποιεῖ τὰ δυνάμει ὄντα χρώ-
ματα ἐνεργεῖα χρώματα.

¹ «Phronesis», 44, 1999, pp. 199-227. Obviously this title has nothing to do with the famous satire of Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal*, Dublin 1729, which proposes to resolve the problem of the excessive increase in the Irish population by giving rich people the children of poor people to eat.

² Alexandri Aphrodisiensis *De anima* in Id., *Scripta minora*, ed. I. Bruns, Berlin, Reimer, 1887, p. 88, 16-89, 22.

³ M. Frede, *La théorie aristotélicienne de l'intellect agent*, in G. Romeyer-Dherbey (dir.), *Corps et âme. Sur le De anima d'Aristote*, études réunies par C. Viano, Paris, Vrin, 1996, pp. 377-390; M. Burnyeat, *Aristotle's Divine Intellect*, The Aquinas Lecture, Milwaukee, Marquette Univ. Press, 2008.

⁴ Cfr. L. Gerson, *The Unity of Intellect in Aristotle's De anima*, «Phronesis», 49, 2004, pp. 348-373.

We could adopt the translation by D.W. Hamlyn, without taking into account the most invasive interventions of the editor at the line 430 a 10, for which we follow the unanimous text of the manuscripts:

«Since just as in the whole of nature there is something which is matter to each kind of thing (and this is what is potentially all of them), while on the other hand there is something else which is their cause and is productive by producing them all – these being related as an art to his material – so there must also be these differences in the soul. And there is an intellect which is of this kind by becoming all things, and there is another which is so by producing all things, as a kind of habit, like light, does; for in a way light too makes colours which are potential into actual colours»⁵.

I would like to make the following remarks about this passage. 1) There is no doubt that Aristotle is speaking here about two intellects, distinguishing them on the basis of his well known distinction, present in the whole nature, between matter, or potency, and efficient cause, already “in act”, the distinction by which the two intellects have been called respectively material, or potential, intellect, and agent, or active, intellect. 2) Aristotle says that the two intellects are «in the soul», which does not necessarily mean that they are in the soul of the single human individual, as Thomas Aquinas interpreted⁶, but can mean, as Caston has shown, that they are in the sphere of the human soul, conceived as analogous to the sphere of nature⁷, i. e. at the level of the human soul in general. 3) The active intellect is compared with art, i. e. with one of those which in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are called «dianoetic habits», i. e. «the habits by virtue of which the soul knows truth by way of affirmation or denial»: art (*technê*), knowledge (*epistêmê*), practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), philosophical wisdom (*sophia*), intellect (*nous*)⁸, only two of which are the famous «dianoetic virtues», i. e. practical wisdom and philosophical wisdom, as «excellences» respectively of practical reason and theoretical reason. 4) The active intellect is compared with the light, which is said to be «a kind of habit» (*hexis tis*). 5) Neither art nor light are subjects, i. e. substances, but they are just «habits», i. e. properties, respectively of the artist and of the transparent mean (the *diaphanes*)⁹. 6) The «producing», attributed to the active intellect, is not producing from nothing, but making something pass from potency to act, like making art, which works on matter, making it into a work of art, and making light, which works on potential colours, making them actual colours.

⁵ Cfr. Aristotle, *De anima*, Edited, with Introduction and Commentary, by sir David Ross, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961, III 5, 430 a 10-17 (Ross published an earlier edition in the «Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis»: Aristotelis *De anima*, recognovit brevique adnotatione instruxit W.D. Ross, Oxonii 1956); Aristotle's *De anima*, Books II, III, Translated with Introduction and Notes by D.W. Hamlyn, Clarendon Aristotle Series, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968 (I changed only, for *hexis*, «disposition» in «habit»).

⁶ S. Thomae Aquinatis *In Aristotelis librum de anima commentarium*, ed. A.M. Pirotta, Turin, Marietti, 1959, lib. III, lectio 10, c. 736.

⁷ Caston, *art. cit.*, pp. 205-207.

⁸ Aristot. *Eth. Nic.* VI 3, 1139 b 14-16.

⁹ Aristot. *De an.* II 7, 418 b 19-20.

But we now come to the section containing the passage which is, in my opinion, decisive to understanding the nature of the active intellect. I quote it again in Ross's edition.

καὶ οὗτος ὁ νοῦς χωριστὸς καὶ ἀπαθὴς καὶ ἀμιγής, τῇ οὐσίᾳ ὦν ἐνέργεια· ἀεὶ γὰρ τιμιώτερον τὸ ποιοῦν τοῦ πάσχοντος καὶ ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς ὕλης. [τὸ δ' αὐτό ἐστὶν ἢ κατ' ἐνέργειαν ἐπιστήμη τῶ πράγματι· ἢ δὲ (20) κατὰ δύναμιν χρόνῳ προτέρα ἐν τῷ ἐνί, ὅλως δὲ οὐδὲ χρόνῳ, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὅτε μὲν νοεῖ ὅτε δ' οὐ νοεῖ.]

We could translate this in the following way, by ignoring the interventions of the editor, but respecting the text of the manuscripts.

«And this intellect is separable, impassible and unmixed, being in its essence actuality¹⁰, for that which acts is always superior to that which is affected, and the principle to the matter. Actual knowledge is identical with its object, potential knowledge is prior in time in the individual, but in general is not prior even in time, and it is not the case that it sometimes thinks and sometimes does not think»¹¹.

The intellect, which is said to be «separable, impassible and unmixed», is clearly the active intellect, which is superior to the passive intellect because it is the efficient cause of the latter. In the most ancient manuscripts this intellect is said to be «in act» (dative), whilst in the modern editions, which are based on the Neoplatonic commentaries, it is said to be «act» (nominative). In any case, even if we read «act», it has to be, as Burnyeat has observed, what Aristotle calls «first actuality», comparing it with knowledge (*epistêmê*), i. e. with a habit, a possession, with the actual possession of a capacity, as it is just knowledge. This is different from what Scholasticism called «second act», i. e. the exercise of this capacity, which is indicated by Aristotle, in the case of knowledge, as the *theôrein*, i. e. as the application of knowledge, for instance, in the case of geometry, the demonstration of a theorem¹².

The lines which follow, «actual knowledge is identical to its object, potential knowledge is prior in time in the individual, but in general is not prior even in time», are put by Ross, in his second edition, between square brackets, i. e. they are expunged because they are repeated at the beginning of chapter 7 (431 a 1-3) and because, following Ross, «here they seriously interfere with the course of the thought»¹³. Now, the fact that two lines are repeated neither means that they are

¹⁰ The most part of the manuscripts, included E (*Parisinus graecus* 1853), which is the most ancient and reliable of all, has ἐνεργεία (dative), which Torstrik (*Aristotelis De anima libri tres*, rec. A. Torstrik, Berolini 1862), on the basis of the commentary by the neoplatonist Simplicius, has corrected in ἐνέργεια (nominative). The dative, therefore, would be more exact, as it was shown by S. Fazzo, *Mover as «pure act» or Mover in act? Around the Mystery of a subscript iota*, in C. Horn (ed.), *Aristotle, Metaphysics Lambda – New Interpretations*, Stuttgart, Steiner Verlag (forthcoming).

¹¹ Aristot. *De an.* III 5, 430 a 17-22.

¹² For the comparison of the first act with the knowledge, cfr. *De an.* II 1, 412 a 10-11. Cfr. Also Burnyeat, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-23.

¹³ Aristotle, *De anima* cit., p. 296. As it is remarked by Movia, in Aristotele, *L'anima*, traduzione, introduzione e commento di G. Movia, Naples, Loffredo, 1979, p. 380, these lines have been expunged from ch. 5 also by Kampe, Theiler, Hamlyn and Düring.

not a part of the text, nor that, if they have to be expunged, they have to be expunged from here rather than from the beginning of chapter 7. That they interfere with the course of the thought here, is Ross's opinion. He does not see their function, which on the contrary – as I will attempt to show – is decisive to understanding the sense of the discourse. Aristotle, in fact, has just distinguished between potential and actual intellect, and soon after he distinguishes between potential and actual knowledge, putting the active, or actual, intellect near to actual knowledge, which are both habits of the soul, evidently in order to stress that, what holds for actual knowledge, holds for the actual intellect too. This is confirmed by the fact that Ross's interpretation has been refuted, with convincing reasons, by other scholars¹⁴ and the passage has been kept by other preceding and subsequent editors¹⁵.

Now, Aristotle affirms that actual knowledge is identical to its object, an affirmation which is confirmed both by a preceding passage of *De anima*, where Aristotle says that theoretical knowledge and the knowable object (*to epistêton*) are the same¹⁶, and by a passage of *Metaphysics*, where he says that in the productive sciences (i. e. in the arts) knowledge is the object, i. e. the substance in the sense of essence, taken without matter, while in the theoretical sciences knowledge is the object, because this is the definition or the act of thinking¹⁷. Besides, in the same passage of *Metaphysics* the same identity, which has been affirmed between knowledge and its object, is also affirmed between the intellect and its object, by the following words: «as the object of the intellect (*to noumenon*) and the intellect (*ho nous*) are not different in the case of things that have no matter, they will be the same, and the intellection will be one with the object of the intellect»¹⁸.

But what, in the case of theoretical sciences, is the object of knowledge? Take as an example geometry, which Aristotle often refers to as knowledge *par excellence* in the *Posterior Analytics*, i. e. in the treatise devoted to expounding his theory of knowledge. In Greece at the time of Aristotle, geometry had reached the status of true scientific knowledge, being born from the first theorems about triangles discovered by Thales and Pythagoras and having attained its perfection, as an axiomatic-deductive system, in the Academy of Plato, which Aristotle frequented for 20 years. Well, knowledge for Aristotle is, as is known, a «demonstrative habit»¹⁹, i. e. it is essentially the capacity to demonstrate, and the object of the demonstrations, in the case of geometry, are the

¹⁴ Cfr. Movia, *loc. cit.*; H. Seidl, *Der Begriff des Intellekts bei Aristoteles im philosophischen Zusammenhang seiner Hauptschriften*, Meisenheim a. G., Hain, 1971, p. 120 f.; and C. Lefèvre, *Sur l'évolution d'Aristote en psychologie* Louvain, Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1972, p. 273.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *De anima*, with Translation, Introduction and Notes by R.D. Hicks, Cambridge 1907 (reprinted Amsterdam 1965); Aristote, *De l'âme*, texte établi par A. Jannone, traduction et notes de E. Barbotin, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1989.

¹⁶ Aristot. *De an.* III 4, 430 a 4-5.

¹⁷ Aristot. *Metaph.* XII 9, 1075 a 1-3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

¹⁹ Aristot. *Eth. Nic.* VI 3, 1139 b 31.

theorems, for instance the theorem following which the sum of the angles of the triangle is two right angles, often quoted by Aristotle²⁰. Therefore the object of geometry is constituted by the theorems, which are objects without matter, about which there is a perfect identity between the knowledge and its object, in the sense that geometry is nothing else than the sum of the theorems which are demonstrated by it.

And what is the object of the intellect? Both in the *Posterior Analytics*, the treatise devoted to the theory of knowledge, and in the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, devoted to the illustration of the «dianoetic habits», the intellect is presented by Aristotle as the habit of the principles²¹, and the principles are the principles of the sciences, from which the sciences do the respective demonstrations. Again in the *Posterior Analytics* the principles of the sciences are divided into principles which are proper to a single science and principles which are common to more sciences or to all the sciences. The proper principles include the assumptions of the existence of the objects of a science and their definitions, while the common principles are the axioms²². As examples of principles which are proper to a single science, Aristotle indicates the definition of the «unity» in the case of arithmetic and the definition of «right» and of «triangle» in the case of geometry, while as examples of common principles he quotes «if equals are taken from equals, the remainders are equal»²³, which is common to all mathematical sciences, or «it is not possible to affirm and deny at the same time», i. e. the principle of non-contradiction, and «everything is affirmed or denied truly», i. e. the principle of the third excluded²⁴, which are common to all sciences. If the intellect too, like knowledge, is identical to its object, and therefore if knowledge is nothing more than the sum of the theorems that it demonstrates, then the intellect is nothing more than the sum of the principles which are proper or common to the various sciences, i. e. the possession of such principles.

Now, in the passage of the *De anima* quoted above, the passage that Ross proposes to expunge, Aristotle affirms that in the single individual (*en hení*) potential knowledge is prior in time to actual knowledge, while in general (*haplós*) it is not prior even in time, therefore in time too the actual knowledge precedes the potential knowledge. This means that in the single individual there is previous potential knowledge, i. e. the capacity to learn knowledge, and then actual knowledge, i. e. the capacity to demonstrate the theorems, which is a «first act», that the individual has learnt and that he can exercise whenever he demonstrates a theorem, which is a «second act». But «in general» actual knowledge, which is identical to its object, like all of the theorems of geometry, exists in

²⁰ See the word *trigonon* in H. Bonitz, *Index aristotelicus*, Berlin, Reimer, 1870 (repr. Graz 1955).

²¹ Aristot. *An. post.* II 19, 100 b 12; *Eth. Nic.* VI 6, 1141 a 7-8.

²² *Ibid.*, I 2, 72 a 14-24.

²³ *Ibid.*, I 10, 76 a 30-b 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11, 77 a 10, 22.

time too before the single individual learns it, for instance in the treatises of geometry, in those *Elements* of which a famous exemplar is due to Euclides, thanks to which we speak of «Euclidean geometry», but of which at the time of Aristotle many exemplars did exist, for instance the *Elements* by Hippocrates of Chios (fifth century B.C.), or by Teudios of Magnesia (fourth century B.C.) and by a certain Leon (V-IV cent. B.C.)²⁵.

If we apply this discourse to the intellect – as it is right to do, because Aristotle introduces it soon after having said that the actual intellect is separable, impassible and unmixed –, what emerges is that in the single individual the potential intellect precedes in time the actual intellect, but «in general», i. e. outside the single individual, the actual intellect, i. e. the habit of principles, the whole of the principles of the sciences, precedes the potential intellect not only in rank, because it is superior, but also in time, because it is the cause which makes the potential intellect pass from potency to actuality. Moreover the treatises which were entitled *Elements*, quoted above, included not only the theorems of geometry, but also and first of all the principles of this science, i. e. – as it results from the Euclides' *Elements* – the definitions, the axioms and the postulates. In fact such principles, as Aristotle himself says, were called «elements» in the Academy of Plato²⁶. And the principles which are common to all sciences, i. e. the principle of non-contradiction and that of the third excluded, which Aristotle formulates and defends in book IV of *Metaphysics*, even existed earlier, because we can find them in Plato's dialogues, and for some scholars even in Parmenides' poem, and there is no doubt that Aristotle himself considered them a patrimony of the whole of mankind, eternally existing «in the soul» of the latter – not only, therefore, in the soul of the individual – because for him mankind, like every other kind of living being, and like the whole universe, had an eternal existence.

Concerning this intellect, or concerning this actual knowledge, which precedes potential knowledge in time, it makes no sense to say that «it sometimes thinks and sometimes does not think», as Aristotle affirms in the last line of the passage quoted above, not because it is always thinking, as all the commentators have always believed, but simply because it does not think, i. e. it is not a mind, it is not a thinking subject, it is not an individual, but it is a habit, i. e. a possession of truths, a patrimony of knowledge belonging eternally, as Aristotle believes, to the whole of humanity. On the other hand Aristotle affirms that «about unchangeable things there can be no error in respect of time (*kata to pote*)» and as an example of these unchangeable things he indicates the triangle, of which it is not possible to say that «at one time its angles are equal to two right angles

²⁵ Cfr. Procli Diadochi *In primum Euclidis Elementorum librum commentarii*, ed. G. Friedlein, Leipzig, Teubner, 1873 (repr. Hildesheim, Olms, 1992), I, 66-67.

²⁶ Cfr. Aristot. *Metaph.* V 3, 1014 a 36-b 2.

and at another time they are not», for that would imply change²⁷. The misunderstanding which many commentators, in my opinion, have fallen into, from Alexander onwards, is to have believed that the active intellect is a mind, i. e. a thinking subject, while Aristotle says many times that it is neither the intellect, nor the soul, which thinks, but it is the man who thinks by means of the soul²⁸, because thinking is not an affection of the intellect, but it is an affection of the individual who possesses it, as he possesses it²⁹.

Speaking again about this actual intellect, Aristotle continues and concludes the chapter at issue of *De anima* by saying:

χωρισθεὶς δ' ἔστι μόνον
τοῦθ' ὅπερ ἔστί, καὶ τοῦτο μόνον ἀθάνατον καὶ αἰδίου (οὐ
μνημονεύομεν δέ, ὅτι τοῦτο μὲν ἀπαθές, ὁ δὲ παθητικὸς
νοῦς φθαρτός)· καὶ ἄνευ τούτου οὐθὲν νοεῖ.

We could translate:

«In separation it is just what it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal (but we do not remember, because this is unaffected, whereas the passive intellect is perishable), and without this nothing thinks»³⁰.

Here the word *khôristheis* does not have a temporal meaning, as Caston has rightly shown³¹, i. e. it does not mean that the active intellect during a human being's life is not separate from the human individual and then, at death, it separates itself from this, as some interpreters claim³²: it means «considered in itself», i. e. not as possessed by the soul, but «in general», like the actual knowledge of which Aristotle has just spoken. Indeed, it is also separate from the individual, from every individual, because – as the actual science, following what Aristotle has just said, also precedes the potential science in time – it precedes the potential intellect in time, i. e. it does already exist, even before making the intellect of the single individual pass from potency to actuality. Aristotle, in fact, says not only that it is «immortal», i. e. capable of existing after death, but also that it is «eternal», i. e. existing in every time, in spite of Thomas Aquinas' attempt to interpret the word «eternal» not as «what has ever been and will ever be», but only as «what will ever be»³³.

For this reason the subsequent sentence, «we do not remember», does not mean – as all the commentators, since Themistius, have believed – that after death we do not remember what we

²⁷ *Metaph.* IX 10, 1052 a 4-7.

²⁸ Aristot. *De an.* I 4, 408 b 13-15

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 408 b 24-27.

³⁰ *Ibid.* III 5, 430 a 22-25 (translation by Hamlyn with some modifications).

³¹ Caston, *art. cit.*, p. 208.

³² Cfr. J. Rist, *Notes on Aristotle's De anima 3.5*, «Classical Philology», 61, 1966, pp. 8-20.

³³ Thom. Aq., *op. cit.*, c. 743: *dicitur autem perpetua [haec pars animae], non quod semper fuerit, sed quod semper erit.*

learnt during our life³⁴, but it means that in this life we do not remember the content of the active intellect, which has always existed and therefore also before our birth, because our intellect, i. e. the passive one, is not eternal, but perishable, and therefore it did not live before our birth so as to learn principles and then remember them. In this sentence there is – as it has been shown – an implicit argument against the Platonic conception of knowledge as reminiscence³⁵, because for Aristotle our intellect, which is a potential one, learns principles by induction, i. e. starting from experience, through the «phantasm»³⁶, or through dialectic discussion, starting from the *endoxa*, i. e. from the opinions which everybody shares³⁷. When our intellect, through induction, discussions and research, arrives at the discovery of principles, which are in the active intellect, it becomes, so to say, lit up, as if by a light, and it learns them, by passing to actuality, i. e. becoming itself an actual intellect.

Finally, the last sentence of the passage, «without this nothing thinks», can be understood only if we mean «thinking» (*noein*) not as a simple mental representation, i. e. as having something in mind, because, in order to do this, we don't need to resort to the active intellect. Here «thinking» has to be understood in the strong sense of the achieving the proper function of the *nous*, i. e. understanding principles, knowing the essence, the causes, the explanations of things. This has been shown efficaciously by Burnyeat, for whom this «thinking» is «a rare achievement», as the discovery of the genetic code can be for a specialist of genetics³⁸. Besides, Aristotle himself affirms that a magnitude and what it is to be a magnitude (i. e. the essence of magnitude) are different, and water and what it is to be water, flesh and what it is to be flesh, and that we catch by the senses magnitude, water and flesh, whilst, in order to catch the essence of water or the essence of flesh, we need a different faculty, i. e. just the intellect³⁹. Here the «essences» are not meant as unchangeable entities like the Platonic Ideas, but as the definitions, i. e. the «formulas», like the chemical formula of water or the genetic code of an animal. And the verb *noein*, instead of being translated as «thinking», as we do usually, ought to be translated as «understanding» or «comprehending», analogously as they do in German, where the intellect is called *Verstand*, or as some philosophers (e. g. Locke and Hume) did in English, where they called it «the Understanding», from the verb «to understand».

In conclusion the active intellect, if explained on the basis of the passage which Ross and others have attempted to expunge from chapter 5 of book III of *De anima*, is neither the individual

³⁴ Them., *In libros Aristotelis De anima paraphrasis*, ed. R. Heinze, Berlin 1899 (CAG 5,3), 101, 1-2; Thom. Aq., *op. cit.*, c. 744.

³⁵ F. Fronterotta, Οὐ μνημονεύομεν δέ ... *Aristot. De anima Γ 5. 430 a 23-5*, «Elenchos», 28, 2007, pp. 79-104.

³⁶ Aristot. *An. post.* II 19, 110 b 3-5.

³⁷ Aristot. *Top.* I 2, 101 b 1-4.

³⁸ Burnyeat, *op. cit.*, pp. 18 e 24-25.

³⁹ Aristot. *De an.* III 4, 429 b 10-18.

human intellect, as Themistius claimed previously and Thomas Aquinas later, because the individual human intellect is potency and passes from potency to actuality, whilst the active intellect is already always in actuality, and because the individual human intellect, i. e. the passive intellect, is perishable, whilst the active intellect is eternal. But it is neither the divine intellect, as Alexander of Aphrodisias claimed, followed in the Renaissance by Pomponazzi and today by Frede, Caston and Burnyeat, because for Aristotle the divine intellect is the unmoved mover, i. e. a substance, which thinks, i. e. it is a thinking subject, a mind, not a habit, i. e. a system of truths⁴⁰, and it does not intervene in human activities, except for cases of exceptional chance⁴¹. It is a human intellect, because the principles of the sciences are discovered – *discovered*, not invented – by human beings. For this reason in the *De anima* this intellect is also said to be «in the soul», which means in the human world, and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* it is put among the five habits by which the soul, nay the human being, knows the truth. But this habit is not into the single individual (*en hení*), to whom the potential intellect belongs, because it is in the human soul «in general» (*holós*), i. e. into the soul, so to say, of mankind: it is the patrimony of eternal truths that humanity has gradually discovered and that it will continue to discover, a patrimony that, once learnt by the single individual, becomes the actual intellect of the individual, i. e. the acquired intellect.

Curiously, Themistius and Thomas Aquinas, both using the distinction made for the first time by Alexander of Aphrodisias of three intellects – i. e. the potential intellect, the actual intellect and the «intellect as a habit», where the latter should be the result of the action of the active on the potential intellect⁴² – take in consideration the hypothesis that the active intellect is the habit of the principles, but, for different reasons, they refute it. Themistius says explicitly that:

«On the basis of the same [Aristotle's] statements it is justifiable to be puzzled too at those who believed that according to Aristotle this productive intellect is either the first god, or is identical to the premises, and to the bodies of knowledge derived from the premises (*tas prôtaseis kai tas ex autôn epistêmas*), which are subsequently present in us»⁴³.

⁴⁰ For this reason I do not understand how Burnyeat, who nevertheless rightly considers the active intellect «a part and a pinnacle of a whole explanatory system» (*op. cit.*, p. 37), or «the system of absolutely correct concepts» (p. 41), can afterwards, only because of its eternity, identify it with «the deity» or «the divine intellect». Evidently the metaphor of light evokes for him the Idea of Good, which Plato in the *Republic* compares with the Sun, but which – unlike Aristotle's unmoved mover – is not a thinking subject, but a thought object, not a *nous*, but a *noeton*.

⁴¹ Caston, in order to confirm his identification of the active intellect with God, quotes *Eth. Eud.* VIII 2, 1248 a 18-22, where Aristotle says that the principle of movement, in the soul as in the whole universe, is «god» (*art. cit.*, pp. 222-223). But Caston does not take account of the fact that here Aristotle is explaining not the normal human intellection, but some deliberations of particularly fortunate men, and that in any case he declares this «god» superior not only to the «knowledge» (*epistêmê*), but also to the intellect itself (*nous*) (1248 a 28-29), as all editors recognise, therefore it cannot be an intellect, although a divine one. My impression is that here Aristotle refers to the common conception of divinity, not to his own doctrine of the unmoved mover.

⁴² Alex. Aphrod., *op. cit.*, 83,10-88,15.

⁴³ Them., *op. cit.*, 102, 30-33.

His allusion refers, in the first part, to Alexander and, in the second part, to unknown people, but evidently to some commentators who identified the active intellect with the habit of principles. These people, following Themistius,

«have gone completely deaf, and do not even hear the Philosopher crying aloud that this intellect is divine, impassible, and has its activity identical to its essence, and that this alone is immortal, eternal and separate»⁴⁴.

And Thomas Aquinas:

«Some people said that the active intellect is identical to the intellect which is the habit of the principles. This cannot be true, because the intellect, which is the habit of the principles, presupposes some things which are already actually understood, i. e. the terms of the principles, by the understanding of which we know the principles; in this way it should follow that the active intellect should not make all things actually intelligible, as here the Philosopher says»⁴⁵.

Now it is evident that both Themistius and Thomas Aquinas believe that the intellect as habit is exclusively the intellect which is in the individual, once the latter has learnt the intelligible objects. Themistius in fact excludes its identification with the active intellect, because this is divine and immortal, believing evidently that the intellect as habit is neither divine nor immortal, and therefore that it is identical to the intellect of a single individual. Thomas affirms that the intellect as habit presupposes some things already actually understood, i. e. that it presupposes a previous understanding, which cannot become except that in the single individual. This remark is true, but neither Themistius nor Thomas account for the passage that Ross would like to expunge, and that on the contrary they read in Aristotle's text, following which the actual intellect, like actual knowledge, is preceded by the potency only in the single individual, whereas «in general» it precedes the potential intellect in time too, i. e. it is already existing, it is eternal.

A friend of mine, to whom I have previewed the content of this presentation, has found that my «modest proposal» looks like the interpretation of the active intellect given by Averroes. Now, it is true that, following my proposal, the active intellect, as universal habit of the principles, is neither the divine intellect, as Alexander claimed, nor the intellect of the individual human being, as Themistius and Thomas Aquinas claimed, therefore it can look like the universal active intellect of which Averroes speaks. But the universal habit of principles is different from the active intellect admitted by Averroes, because this latter, as it is known, though not being the divine intellect, i. e. the first unmoved mover, is nevertheless in any case a separate substance, the lowest one in the hierarchy of the separate substances, i. e. of the unmoved movers of the heavens (the intellect of the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-35 (translation by R.B. Todd, in Themistius, *On Aristotle's On the Soul*, London, Duckworth, 1996).

⁴⁵ Thom. Aq., *op. cit.*, c. 729: *Quidam posuerunt intellectum agentem idem esse cum intellectu qui est habitus principiorum. Quod esse non potest: quia intellectus, qui est habitus principiorum, praesupponit aliqua iam intellecta in actu: scilicet terminos principiorum, per quorum intelligentiam cognoscimus principia: et sic sequeretur, quod intellectus agens non faceret omnia intelligibilia in actu, ut hic philosophus dicit.*

sphere of the Moon?); and even the reason by which Averroes considers it, together with the passive intellect, as a unique separate substance, is just the fact that, if it were in each single individual, it would be an individual form, i. e. something that for Averroes is an absurdity⁴⁶.

If I had to hazard a comparison with some theory shared by other philosophers, I should compare the active intellect, meant by Aristotle as the universal habit of principles, to the «world 3» of which Karl Popper speaks, that is neither the world constituted by physical objects (world 1), nor the world constituted by our states of consciousness, i. e. by mental objects (world 2), but it is the world of the «objective contents of thought», i. e. of scientific and poetic thoughts and of works of art⁴⁷. Nevertheless, on this subject too, there is a difference, because the universal habit of principles, of which Aristotle speaks, does not include the sciences and the arts, which however for Aristotle too are universal habits, but he includes only the principles of theses, i. e. those which make intelligible the contents of all the sciences and all the arts. In any case the comparison with the «world 3» is useful, because it permits an understanding of how human learning is universal, i. e. it exists independently from the fact of being contained in the mind of a single individual, so that individuals devoted to scientific research have learned it first of all by reading the treatises to which it has been consigned, i. e. that which we call the bibliography, presupposed by every research. Besides it continues, luckily, to exist also after the death of the individual, and it even continues to increase, not in the sense that new truths are invented, but in the sense that new truths are discovered more and more by single individuals, and what was believed to be a truth before, is more and more corrected and integrated, or even abandoned as a non-truth. For this reason the research that they do is a «scientific research», i. e. a research of knowledge.

⁴⁶ Averrois Cordubensis *Commentarium magnum in Aristotelis De anima librum*, ed. F. Stuart Crawford, Cambridge, MA, Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953, Book 3, ch. 19.

⁴⁷ K.R. Popper and J. C. Eccles, *The Self and its Brain*, Berlin, Springer International, 1977.