

Avicenna's Agent Intellect as a Completing Cause

Abstract

Avicenna says that intellectual cognition involves the emanation of an intelligible form by the 'agent intellect' upon the human mind. This paper argues that in order to understand why he says this, we need to think of intellectual cognition as a special case of a much more general phenomenon. More specifically, Avicenna's introduction of an agent intellect will be shown to be a natural consequence of certain assumptions about the temporality, the completion, and the teleology of the causal processes by which things acquire forms.

Keywords: Agent Intellect, Giver of Forms, Abstraction, Emanation, Avicenna

1. Introductory

As a rule, says Avicenna, our grasp of intelligible forms involves two things. First, we subject sense data to a process of abstraction. Second, an abstract form is emanated upon us by a separate intellectual substance, which he calls the "agent intellect" (*al-ʿaql al-faʿāl*). He writes:

... if the intellectual faculty peruses the particulars in the imagination and the light of the Agent Intellect, which we have mentioned, shines in us, they become denuded from matter and its attachments, and are then imprinted in the rational soul, ... in the sense that perusing them prepares the soul for having that which is abstract emanate on it from the Agent Intellect.¹

Likewise, Avicenna says that when a new substance comes to be, certain processes prepare a portion of matter for the reception of a substantial form, which is then emanated upon this matter by a separate intellectual substance, called the "giver of forms" (*wāhib aṣ-ṣuwar*). He writes:

¹ *Psychology* V 5 (1), p. 235,2-8, tr. Marmura / Black. Many thanks to Deborah Black for her generous permission to use this translation. See the bibliography for the abbreviated titles of Avicenna's works.

And it is of the nature of matter when prepared with a complete preparation for a form that it attains this form from the giver of forms to matter and accepts it.²

There has been some debate in recent Avicenna scholarship about the role of abstraction and emanation in the first of these two scenarios (cf. Alpina 2021, p. 131-38). Although real progress has been made, a satisfactory account can only be found by looking at the more general phenomenon of which intellectual cognition and substantial generation are special cases. More specifically, it will be argued that Avicenna's introduction of an agent intellect and a giver of forms is motivated by key elements of his theory of form acquisition and causation. We will begin with a very brief sketch of the debate on abstraction vs. emanation, then roughly outline Avicenna's distinction between preparing and completing causes, and briefly review a couple of cases. Then we will turn to a survey of potential reasons for introducing an agent intellect or a giver of forms and end with a detailed discussion of Avicenna's most fundamental metaphysical motivation for distinguishing between preparing and completing causes of form acquisition.

² *On Generation and Corruption* 14, p. 190,13-15, tr. Richardson 2008, p. 101.