

A Comparative Study of the Relationship between the Material Intellect and the Active Intellect from the Perspective of Averroes and Al-Farabi

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Abstract

The relationship between the material intellect and the active intellect is an important issue in the realm of epistemology in Islamic philosophy. The aim of the present study is to compare the views of Averroes and Al-Farabi in this regard. Reviewing their theories, this study shows that both the mentioned philosophers agree upon the fact that the Active Intellect exists apart from human soul and acts as a creator of forms, but as for the relationship between the Material Intellect and the Active Intellect, there is disagreement between Averroes and Al-Farabi. Averroes believes that in some aspects both of them are the same yet they are different in some other aspects, namely regarding their acts they are different because the active intellect acts as creator of forms while the material intellect is just receiver of the forms. Nevertheless, they are the same, since the material intellect achieves perfection through the active intellect, whereas in Al-Farabi's opinion, ontologically speaking; the material intellect and the active intellect are different in their existence. The material intellect in al-Farabi's perspective is one of the stages of human intellect that is inherent in human soul, whereas the active intellect is an immaterial substance that exists apart from human soul.

Keywords: the active intellect, the material intellect, soul, Averroes, al-Farabi

Introduction:

Intellection from the perspective of Averroes is an important and yet controversial field of his thought. In this respect he follows the Aristotelian tradition. But sometimes, the intellectual system in which he was grown up, led him to the perversion from Aristotelian thought. Averroes' views on intellect can be sought in the two most influential of his works namely "Talkhis Kitab al-Nafs" (Middle Commentary on De anima) and "al-sharh al-Kabir li kitab al-nafs li Arastu" (Long Commentary on De anima). In his book entitled "al-sharh al-Kabir li kitab al-nafs li Arastu" (Long Commentary on De anima) Averroes gives brief and somewhat ambiguous and detailed explanations on the nature of the active and the material intellect (HasanFathi, 2012).

The fundamental question here is that how is the relationship between the material intellect and the active intellect and how these two are related to human soul? In other words, Is intellect inherent in human soul or is it out of the soul? Since Averroes' and Al-farabi's position on these subjects is ambiguous so answering these questions might not be easy. Averroes' position on these issues is ambiguous. Their views on this issue are derived from the Aristotle's theories; this ambiguity comes from the intricacies in Aristotle's opinion in this regard. In his books "Metaphysics", "The History of Animals" and "On the soul" Aristotle has presented his views on this respect. Aristotle's controversial remarks about intellect are due to his different approaches to the intellect in his writings. In his books entitled "The History of Animals", "Metaphysics", "Physics", "On Generation and Corruption" and "Nicomachean Ethics" Aristotle Ultimately, explores intellect with different new approaches and characteristic. "There is no certain aspect of his philosophy, more controversial than his attitude toward intellect."

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(Gallop, 1999) For example some traits which previously were absolutely attributed to Intellect now he attributes them to the active Intellect (Aristotle, 1999). In the same section Aristotle poses newer features which he did not previously mentioned (Aristotle, 1999). One of these features is that this intellect always thinks. Another trait which in Aristotle's view is exclusively attributed to the active intellect is immortality of this kind of intellect.

The relationship between the active and the material intellect from Averroes' perspective

Regarding the relationship of the material intellect with the active intellect, Averroes believes that in some aspects both of them are the same yet they are different in some other aspects. Regarding their acts they are different because the act of the active intellect is creation but the material intellect acts as a receiver of the forms. Nevertheless, they are the same, since the material intellect achieves perfection through the active intellect. On the other hand, he says "The external intellect which is connected to us has two faculties; the active and the material intellect (Averroes, 2001). Here it is evident that from Averroes' perspective intellect is inherently and practically independent from the body and is located beyond the human soul. This includes both the active and the material intellect.

Considering the different functions of both the active and the material intellect, Averroes deems both of them as the two aspects of one single intellect. Sometimes he mentions the separation of them from the soul and sometimes presents them as faculties which exist in the soul as non-material beings (HasanFathi, 2012). Following Aristotle's theory, Averroes likens the function of the active intellect to light. As the light actualizes the potential colors and prepares them to be seen. Also the active intellect actualizes the potential intelligible (HasanFathi, 2012).

Then Averroes deals with the important subject of relationship between the material intellect and the active intellect. In this regard, he says: the relationship of the active intellect with the material intellect is like the relationship of light with a transparent object. As light is the perfection of physical objects; the active intellect is the perfection of material intellect as well. The material intellect perceives intelligible to the extent that are made perfect and clear by the active intellect. Therefore the active intellect actualizes the potential concepts; in a way that the material intellect can perceive them. So is the relationship of the material intellect with the active intellect (HasanFathi, 2012).

Following Aristotle, Averroes after expressing the relationship between the material and active intellect distinguishes the active intellect from the material intellect. The active intellect is pure actuality and actualizes all concepts and forms while none of these features exist in the material intellect (HasanFathi, 2012). Averroes believes in the strong connection between the active and the material intellect and believes that, as the passive intellect can be actualized through the active intellect, the active intellect also through actualizing the material intellect is manifested in the universe.

He believes that the active intellect and theoretical thinking of human being intersect at a common place in the material intellect and the active intellect through theoretical intelligible makes connection with us (Averroes, 2001). Thus the active intellect in Averroes' perspective in some aspects is separated from the material intellect and yet in some other aspects is connected to it.

After expressing the relationship between the active intellect and the material intellect, He says: eternity and immortality is just for human species, immortality exists but there is no individual immortality, He argues that Aristotle's definition of the soul indicates not all parts of the soul but some part of it, is connected to body. For some reasons, Averroes believes in unity of immortal soul or intellect. The Main reason is that considering the diversity of souls, leads to an infinite number of actual existent which is impossible (Averroes, 2006). Immateriality of the active intellect and its divine nature are principles which he has tried to prove in his book entitled "al-sharh al-Kabir li kitab al-nafs li Arastu" (Long Commentary on De anima).

The relationship between the active and the material intellect from the perspective of al-Farabi

In his article entitled "Maani al-aql" (Meanings of intellect), al-Farabi divides intellect into four types which are as follows: the material intellect (al-aql bi al-quwwa), the actual intellect ('aql bi-al-fi'l), the acquired intellect (al-'aql al-mustafad), and the active intellect (al-aql al-faal) (Al-Farabi, 1890). The material intellect is pure potentiality and does not have any form; like dough, which can receive any form. At the first stage of perception, when a form in material intellect comes into existence, concerning that particular form, material intellect develops into actual Intellect. However compared with other forms it remains potential. Perceiving all forms, material intellect, compared to those forms gradually turns into actual intellect. In the next stage, actual intellect can also perceive non-material (Mujarrad) forms thus, at this stage it is called acquired intellect.

The first to be perceived at this stage is the active intellect, which is immaterial. The role of active intellect is to contribute to human intellect to develop from material intellect to actual and acquired intellect (Radfar, 2009). In Al-Farabi's perspective, the active and the acquired intellects resemble each other, except that in the stage of acquired intellect; forms of beings from the lowest to the highest can be achieved respectively. But in contrast to the acquired intellect, in the stage of active intellect the order of the forms is Vice versa, that is, in this stage forms of beings from the highest to the lowest one can be achieved. The active intellect does not abstract material forms from material objects but rather these forms eternally exist in it. (Zandi&Poustini, 2014)

It is worth mentioning that in Al-Farabi's opinion, the active intellect is not one of the Levels human intellects, but rather it is an immaterial substance which exists out of the human soul. The active intellect's duty is to bring human to the highest levels of perfection, which is dedicated to only human being. The active intellect serves as human's servant who both actualizes the potentiality of rational faculty in human beings and makes other objects as actual intelligible to human mind and due to it, one achieves actual intellect and eventual prosperity (al-Farabi, 1964). Al-Farabi likens the role of the active intellect in the perfection of rational soul, to the sun which by shining on objects makes them visible for man. As the eyes potentially have the power of vision and the sun by its shining actualizes the eyes' potential vision, the active intellect is the same, that is, rational soul is potentially capable to perceive intelligible and the active intellect actualizes that potentiality (al-Farabi, 1964).

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to compare Averroes' and al-Farabi's final views on the relationship between the active and the material intellect, and their relationship with human soul. This study showed that both the mentioned philosophers agree upon the fact that the active intellect's duty is to bring human soul and intellect to the highest levels of perfection, which is dedicated to human being. Averroes believes in the strong relationship between the active and the material intellect and believes that as the material intellect can be actualized through the active intellect, the active intellect also through actualizing the material intellect is manifested in the universe. From Averroes' viewpoint, intellect is inherently and practically independent from the body and is located beyond the human soul. This includes both the active and the material intellects, but in Al-Farabi's opinion, the active intellect is not one of the Levels human intellect, but rather it is an immaterial substance which exists apart from the human soul. The active intellect's duty is to bring human soul to the highest levels of perfection.

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